

# The Death of Christian Britain

Understanding secularisation  
1800–2000

Second Edition

**Callum G. Brown**



Christianity and Society in the Modern World

# THE DEATH OF CHRISTIAN BRITAIN



## PRAISE FOR THE FIRST EDITION

‘A tremendously impressive book and wonderful social history.’

Niall Ferguson, *Start the Week, Radio 4*

‘This book should be read by anybody who cares about the future of religion. [Brown’s] statistics are convincing and disquieting. The personal testimonies he quotes are moving and revealing. He shows clearly that Christianity, as we have known it in this country, is in its death throes.’

Karen Armstrong, *The Independent*

‘A very brave, readable book, and a marvellous social history lesson . . . this is a powerful wake-up call.’

Antonia Swinson, *Scotland on Sunday*

‘Callum Brown plunges bravely into one of the most complex debates of our era in this engaging book. He does not claim that we are all atheists now, but asserts that a massive shift in our self-understanding as a nation has occurred, which has reduced Christianity to the status of an eccentric and irrelevant sub-culture in a dynamically plural society.’

Richard Holloway, former Bishop  
of Edinburgh, *The Scotsman*

‘Church leaders should not ignore this book.’

Patrick Comerford, *Irish Times*

‘A study which deserves the attention of all who are seriously concerned either with the history or with the future of British Christianity.’

David L. Edwards, *Tablet*

'*The Death of Christian Britain* is a *tour de force* in the social history of religion . . . This most provocative of historians has pulled off an extraordinary double feat. He has simultaneously rejected more strenuously than ever before the long tradition of British historiography that sought to apply the concept of secularization to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and at once reapplied the concept exclusively and dramatically to the last forty years. . . . The novelty of Brown's argument lies not only in his new chronology of secularization, but in his use of a range of evidence formerly untouched by historians.'

Jeremy Morris, *Historical Journal*

'[Callum Brown] is one of the most thought-provoking religious historians in Britain today. . . . This is a bracing book, and a stimulating read . . . a bold attempt to try to explain what happened to Christianity in our land in our lifetime, and it deserves to be taken seriously.'

Frances Knight, *Theology*

'This is one of the most entertaining, moving and stimulating works which I have read upon its subject, modern British Christianity. It has the ring of authenticity to me . . .'

Sheridan Gilley, *Reviews in History*

'This 250-page book offers a highly controversial approach to the subject of the decline of Christianity in Britain. . . . I thoroughly recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in the decline of religion in the industrialised world generally and of Christianity in particular.'

Frank Pycroft, *Catholics for a Changing Church* website

'Here is a radical and highly readable account of the fortunes of Christianity in modern Britain. . . . whether or not one agrees with Brown's conclusions, it is imperative that this highly stimulating book is read widely. I believe it shows beyond doubt that traditional ways of interpreting Victorian religiosity are in their death throes.'

Sarah Williams, *Gospel-culture.org* newsletter

' . . . this book should be read by anybody who cares about the future of religion. His statistics are convincing and disquieting. Brown argues that within a generation Christianity will merely be a minority movement . . . As we face the "death of Christian Britain" may God give us the courage to change.'

*Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Thought*

‘For anyone who is genuinely interested in the future and mission of the Christian Church at the start of the new millennium, Callum Brown’s book should be essential reading . . . this is quite simply a remarkable, courageous and deeply illuminating book. And it is so for a number of crucial reasons. First of all because Brown imagines what for many of us is the unthinkable, namely the complete eradication of the Christian faith from our contemporary social habitat if the decline in religious practice and belief continues in this country unabated into the not too distant future. Secondly because he breaks with the accepted thesis that this is due to an invidious process of secularisation that started some 200 years ago and introduces new insights from cultural theory and gender studies to throw light on the role of public religion in contemporary society. Thirdly because Brown claims, I believe quite rightly, that for too long we have accepted the analysis of social science that investigates only the roles or functions religion exercises in a democratic society.’

Colin Greene, Head of Theology and  
Public Policy at The Bible Society,  
*The Bible in Transmission*

‘This may be a text book, but it engages the mind and the soul . . . many might even take issue with the title, and refuse to read on. But to do so would be folly: a week spent immersed in Brown’s book could reap substantially more fruit than a series of revival meetings.’

Brian Draper, *Amazon.co.uk* review

‘Brown’s book is full of insight, and his appeal to the cultural forces of late modernity as a corrosive influence on religious adherence is much more nuanced than those one would normally encounter in sociological studies.’

The Revd Canon Professor Martyn Percy,  
Ripon College, *Church Times*

‘Brown’s argument is persuasive and important. As someone who was born in 1945, was sent by non-churchgoing parents to Sunday school and relentlessly bombarded by Christian narratives throughout both primary and grammar schools, who studied the Bible both at school and university and who then experienced the Sixties as an antidote to the stultifying narrow-mindedness and respectability-worship of the Fifties, I repeatedly recognise elements of his analysis as realities I have lived through.’

Richard Poole, *Planet*

‘Callum Brown has written a defining text in the debate about secularisation, and a text that every Christian leader should read, then read again.’

Crawford Gribben, *Christianity and Society*

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# THE DEATH OF CHRISTIAN BRITAIN



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1800–2000

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Callum G. Brown

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Secularisation is happening, yet secularisation theory is wrong. It is wrong for different reasons to those I suggested in my previous publications. Where before I believed that better social science would solve the problem of a theory in error, I now understand that the social science was the problem. I took the theory to be apart from the object of study; I see now it was a part of it. As a result, I apologise to my editor, Hugh McLeod, for not writing the book he first suggested in 1994. The presumptions I then held about religion, society and the nature of the social historian's craft suffered a 'reality' slip a year later when Lynn Abrams entered my home. From contesting her blessed discourses, I 'turned' (rather too violently for her liking, I suspect) to a reconception of the issues for this book. She may not have enjoyed living through this one (preferring the one on the Vikings much more), but she has been both inspiration and the post-evangelical companionate partner to it.

I have had to cross much unfamiliar, terrifying but enriching theoretical terrain in this book, and I fear that in striving for the big answer I may not have covered every nook and cranny in argument and method. Readers from diverse specialisms – from religious history, literary linguistics, oral history, women's and gender history, and cultural history – read an early draft in whole or in part in an attempt to save me from my own shortcomings. They were: Lynn Abrams (for whom this is a new duty of the domestic angel), Nigel Fabb, Matthew Hilton, Sue Morgan and Penny Summerfield. I am so incredibly indebted to each one for their frank and challenging critiques. My editor, Hugh McLeod, deserves special praise for commenting on so many drafts, correcting so many errors, and managing to be so supportive about the design despite misgivings about the argument. I am also grateful to the fruitful ideas from scholars I met on a visit to the University of Guelph, Ontario, including Elizabeth Ewan and Peter Goddard who introduced me to the work of mediaevalists and Northrop Frye respectively. I have also had most productive discussions on aspects of my interest with David Bebbington, Stewart J. Brown and Mary Heimann, and with the honours history students at Strathclyde

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University who took my Popular Culture class over ten years. I alone, of course, bear responsibility for what follows.

In conducting the research, I have been well served by libraries and librarians: Birmingham Central Library, the Harris Library in Preston, and the Stirling Council Library Headquarters where Alan Muirhead kindly guided me to their Drummond Collection. Thanks are also due to the staff at Stirling University Library for striving to meet my access needs to the nineteenth-century Drummond Collection, Peter Nockles at the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester for guidance on the Methodist collection, and the library staff of New College (Edinburgh), Glasgow, Strathclyde, Lancaster and Central Lancashire universities. I am grateful to Mr A. Halewood of Halewood & Sons Bookshop in Friargate, Preston, for indulging my notetaking from his immense collection of Victorian improving magazines. I must also thank Paul Thompson and the staff of the ESRC Qualidata Archive at the University of Essex, and Elizabeth Roberts of the Centre for North West Regional Studies at the University of Lancaster, for their permission to use oral testimony from their collections.

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Callum Brown  
September 2008

# ABBREVIATIONS



CNWRS, SA	Centre for North West Regional Studies, Sound Archive, University of Lancaster
FAM	Family Intergenerational Interviews, Qualidata Archive
FLWE	Family Life and Work Experience before 1918 Collection, Qualidata Archive
QA	Qualidata Archive, ESRC Qualitative Data Archival Resource Centre, University of Essex
SOHCA	Scottish Oral History Centre Archive, Department of History, University of Strathclyde

# NOTE ON ORAL HISTORY



The oral-history testimonies from the FAM, CNWRS and SOHCA collections bear pseudonyms in the text. At the request of the Qualidata Archive, the testimonies in the FLWE collection (of persons born in the late nineteenth century) bear the interviewees' real names. In all cases, notes provide full archival reference numbers.

And when I look at a history book and think of the imaginative effort it has taken to squeeze this oozing world between two boards and typeset, I am astonished. Perhaps the event has an unassailable truth. God saw it. God knows. But I am not God. And so when someone tells me what they heard or saw, I believe them, and I believe their friend who also saw, but not in the same way, and I can put these accounts together and I will not have a seamless wonder but a sandwich laced with mustard of my own.

Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, London, Vintage, 1991, p. 93.

## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION



This book is about the death of Christian Britain<sup>1</sup> – the demise of the nation’s core religious and moral identity. As historical changes go, this has been no lingering and drawn-out affair. It took several centuries (in what historians used to call the Dark Ages) to convert Britain to Christianity, but it has taken less than forty years for the country to forsake it. For a thousand years, Christianity penetrated deeply into the lives of the people, enduring Reformation, Enlightenment and industrial revolution by adapting to each new social and cultural context that arose. Then, really quite suddenly in 1963, something very profound ruptured the character of the nation and its people, sending organised Christianity on a downward spiral to the margins of social significance. In unprecedented numbers, the British people since the 1960s have stopped going to church, have allowed their church membership to lapse, have stopped marrying in church and have neglected to baptise their children. Meanwhile, their children, the two generations who grew to maturity in the last thirty years of the twentieth century, stopped going to Sunday school, stopped entering confirmation or communicant classes, and rarely, if ever, stepped inside a church to worship in their entire lives. The cycle of inter-generational renewal of Christian affiliation, a cycle which had for so many centuries tied the people however closely or loosely to the churches and to Christian moral benchmarks, was permanently disrupted in the ‘swinging sixties’. Since then, a formerly religious people have entirely forsaken organised Christianity in a sudden plunge into a truly secular condition.

This book sets out on an ambitious and probably controversial journey to understand what happened. It is not merely a chronicle of what befell the churches or the faith of the British people; nor is it a foray into conventional social history to seek social causes of declining popular religiosity; nor is it a sociology of modern British religion, or what’s left of it. The story being told here is not to be found in books on ‘the church in crisis’, religious history or sociology of religion. What is attempted is rather different. The aim is to look at how the British people in the past – in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries – absorbed Christianity

into their lives and then, from the 1960s, stopped doing so. The techniques deployed in this book are new, drawn from modern cultural theory, and they provide a fresh and different interpretation of what makes a society Christian in the first place and what happens when it dechristianises. The techniques allow us to revise the narrative of religious decline, or what is commonly called secularisation, and to appreciate anew its causes, nature and timing. What emerges is a story not merely of church decline, but of the end of Christianity as a means by which men and women, as individuals, construct their identities and their sense of 'self'. This breach in British history, starting in the 1960s, is something more fundamental than just 'failing churches'. What is explored and analysed is a short and sharp cultural revolution of the late twentieth century which makes the Britons of the year 2000 fundamentally different in character from those of 1950 or 1900 or 1800, or from peoples in many other countries.

There is no pleasure in proclaiming the death of Christian Britain. Some people will be able to catalogue tremendous losses – of faith, of succour in worship, of social activity in church organisations, of a sense of spirituality. There is the loss of old certainties, that fixed moral core which Britons as a whole used to recognise even when they deviated from it. Christianity was, to borrow a metaphor of one scholar, like a banister upon which a person leaned when climbing or descending stairs.<sup>2</sup> It was a fixture in our lives, conservative by instinct and little changing in nature, by which individuals knew and trusted others by their respectability in family behaviour and conformity to the Christian Sunday. On the other hand, many people will be able to identify gains from the decentring of rigid moral codes – such as increased sexual freedom and freedom for diverse sexualities, greater gender equality, and a new tolerance of religious and ethnic difference. One could say, not altogether flippantly, that the decline of Christian certainty in British society since the 1950s has meant that respectability has been supplanted by respect – in which moral criticism of difference has been replaced by toleration and greater freedom to live our lives in the way we choose.

Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Britain in the year 2000 is the recent growth of ethnic diversity, largely through immigration, and the rise of a multi-faith society in which Christianity has been joined by Islam, Hinduism and the Sikh religion, amongst others. However, what has been noticeable to all observers is that the strength of attachment to other religions in Britain has not, in the main, suffered the collapse that has afflicted the bulk of the Christian churches. In the black and Asian communities of Britain, non-Christian religions are in general thriving. Moreover, one of the few sections in our society where Christian churches are thriving is in the predominantly black communities. Yet, it must be emphasised that the haemorrhage of British Christianity has not come about as a result of competition from or conversion to other churches. No new religion,

no new credo, not even a state-sponsored secularism, has been there to displace it.

It is not especially novel to proclaim that the Christian churches are in decline in Britain. But what is new is the idea of the death of Christian Britain. To propose that this is possible, let alone happening or happened, will be disturbing to many people. Christians may find it controversial, especially church leaders and clergy who, despite watching the inexorable decline of members year-on-year for the last four decades, still in the main hold to an optimistic outlook for their religion. Some clergy, especially of the liberal mainstream Christian denominations, locate the future of their religion within a 'multi-faith' vision of society in which ecumenism and church union introduce a new acknowledgement of the validity of religious experience and belief derived from other religious traditions. Many church-people may find the claim excessive, especially since the *UK Christian Handbook* suggests that in 1995 as many as 65 per cent of Britons were 'Christian'.<sup>3</sup> More widely, the death of Christian Britain will be controversial to others because the 'death' of a religion has hitherto been unimagined – except when a secular socialist state, state repression, religious 'reformation', or military-supported religious imperialism has threatened a faith, none of which apply to Britain in the new millennium. It will also be controversial to a large group of scholars in the social sciences and humanities (including sociology, church history and social history) for whom the decline of religion is not something new but something very, very old. For most scholars, Christian religion in Britain, Europe and North America has been in almost constant decay for at least a century, and for some sociologists and historians for even longer – for between two hundred and five hundred years. They have imagined religious decline as one of the characteristics of the modern world, caused by the advance of reason through the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment, and through the social and economic dislocation of the industrial revolution. What scholars have imagined is religious decline as a long-term process that has left today's Britons with a residual Christian belief but no churchgoing habit. In all of these cases, Christian decay in Britain has been perceived as a decline without an imagined end. This book imagines the end.

The first and most obvious manifestation is the Christian churches in crisis. In the year 2000 less than 8 per cent of people attend Sunday worship in any week, less than a quarter are members of any church, and fewer than a tenth of children attend a Sunday school. Fewer than half of couples get married in church, and about a third of couples cohabit without marriage. In England only a fifth of babies get baptised in the Church of England, and in Scotland one estimate is that about a fifth are baptised in either the Church of Scotland or the Roman Catholic Church. By some calculations, as few as 3 per cent of people regularly attend church in some counties of England, and in most the non-churchgoers represent over

90 per cent of the population. If church participation is falling, all the figures for Christian affiliation are at their lowest point in recorded history. Christian church membership accounts for less than 12 per cent of the people and is falling. There is now a severe crisis of Christian associational activity: religious voluntary organisations, which formerly mushroomed around congregations and independent missions, account for a minuscule fraction of recreational activities. Most critical is the emerging evidence of the decay of Christian belief. Though 74 per cent of people express a belief in the existence of some kind of God or ‘higher power’, 50 per cent or fewer subscribe to the existence of sin, the soul, heaven, hell or life after death – while the numbers having specific faith in Jesus Christ as the risen Lord are considered so statistically insignificant that opinion pollsters do not even ask the question.<sup>4</sup> Whilst some non-Christian religions are growing in Britain as they are elsewhere – notably Islam and comparatively small ‘new religions’ like Mormonism – growing religions are not filling the spiritual vacuum being deserted by Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

So weak are the demographics of church connection that the government is now contemplating disestablishing the Church of England (the last state church in the countries of the UK), whilst the Church of Scotland is contemplating destroying its historic status as the National Kirk by a union with three other denominations.<sup>6</sup> Church authorities every week deal with the disposal of church buildings by selling them off as carpet showrooms or for conversion into ‘des. res.’ flats, while older cathedrals and minsters survive by transformation into heritage sites for historical–religious tourism rather than religious worship.<sup>7</sup> In such ways, Christianity is becoming Britain’s past, not its present. The Christian churches have not only fallen in size but also in moral standing. They were once a safe and unmoveable fixture at the heart of national standards, but now confidence in the probity of church leaders is almost weekly challenged by scandal. In the last five years, at least one Catholic bishop and a seemingly endless line of priests have admitted to having sex with women, a significant minority of priests and nuns stand accused of child abuse, Protestant ministers and elders (of both sexes) are accused of extra-marital relations, gay priests are starting to ‘come out’, and even accusations of financial impropriety have been levelled at some clergy.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, these are small minorities in each of these categories, but such public scandals are destabilising the moral certainty formerly vested in Christian churches.

Also under threat are the Christian churches as fixtures in the landscape of British institutions. Ecclesiastical statisticians are now routinely predicting the disappearance of churches. Major denominations, ranging from the Roman Catholic Church to the Church of Scotland, are short of recruits to be priests and ministers.<sup>9</sup> Britain’s leading church statistician, Peter Brierley, has warned that declining popular support will cause some denominations to disappear during this century. The Church of Scotland

in 1997 even put a date on its own demise through membership loss – in the year 2033.<sup>10</sup> As never before, church leaders are being forced to think the unthinkable as every statistic, and every balance sheet of income and expenditure, forces them not just to close church buildings, but to think about where this inexorable ‘down-sizing’ is leading. Crumbs of comfort have come in the last decade from evidence that the British people still recognise the existence of God even if they do not attend church. As Grace Davie, a leading religious sociologist has put it, the people are ‘believing without belonging’. However, even she acknowledges that ‘the content of belief is drifting further and further from the Christian norm’.<sup>11</sup>

The situation was not always like this, and it is surprising how recent that was. Between 1945 and 1958 there were surges of British church membership, Sunday school enrolment, Church of England Easter Day communicants, baptisms and religious solemnisation of marriage, accompanied by immense popularity for evangelical ‘revivalist’ crusades (the most well-known being those of the American Southern Baptist preacher, Dr Billy Graham). Accompanying these was a vigorous reassertion of ‘traditional’ values: the role of women as wives and mothers, moral panic over deviancy and ‘delinquency’, and an economic and cultural austerity which applauded ‘respectability’, thrift and sexual restraint. Not since the late Victorian period had there been such powerful evidence of a professing Christian people in Britain. Nor was Britain unique. In the United States between 1942 and 1960, popular religiosity and institutional church strength not only continued to grow, but earlier denominationalism gave way to a vigorous and inclusive religious culture which – as in Britain – nurtured conservatism and traditional values, whilst church membership *per capita* grew faster than at any time since the recording of statistics began in 1890.<sup>12</sup> In Australia, the period 1955 to 1963 has been described as a ‘modest religious boom’ which affected every denomination across all the measurable indices of religious life, characterised by the same crusading evangelism and social conservatism as in Britain and the United States.<sup>13</sup> In most regions of West Germany between 1952 and 1967 there was a modest rise in church-going amongst the Protestant population, whilst in France, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands in the 1950s a resilient religious observance underpinned confessionalist politics.<sup>14</sup> National experiences varied greatly, and there were exceptions (notably in Scandinavia), but there is clear evidence that in the mid-twentieth century there was a significant resilience to Christianity in Britain and much of the Western world.

On a surface level, the 1950s appeared to be the beginning of our modern and contemporary condition. Britons then were appreciating the beginnings of the new technology which presaged our world of 2000: nuclear power (which went on stream in 1957), television (which spread quickly to most homes after the broadcast of Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation in 1953), and labour-saving kitchen appliances (like refrigerators and modern electric

cookers). The welfare state was under full construction, cities were being modernised by comprehensive town planning (slum-clearance and the building of peripheral housing estates and new towns), and there was a start being made to the expansion of higher education. But to perceive a modern 'feel' to the 1950s is merely to probe skin-deep. It is a measurement made overwhelmingly in terms of things, not in terms of what the British people felt, did or thought. In its cultural climate, the 1950s was in fact a deeply old-fashioned era, so old that it has often been described as the last Victorian decade. Nearly 2 million people came to hear Billy Graham preach in London in a short religious crusade in 1954, and a further 1.2 million came in Glasgow in 1955, with 100,000 worshippers packing Hampden Park football stadium for a single religious service. Nothing like it had been seen before in British Protestantism, and nothing like it has been seen again. The mental world which produced this in the 1950s was not just a world of a tiny minority, held together by the sub-culture of a closeted and defensive Christian community. The mental world which drew in those worshippers was a national culture, widely broadcast through books, magazines and radio, and deeply ingrained in the rhetoric with which people conversed about each other and about themselves. It was a world profoundly conservative in morals and outlook, and fastidious in its adherence to respectability and moral standards. Many people may have been hypocritical, but that world made them very aware of their hypocrisy.

A vast chasm separates us from the mid-twentieth century condition. Religious statistics show how far away that world of the 1950s was from ours in the year 2000, and how much closer it was to the world of 1900. Take the types of marriage – religious or civil – which couples undertook. In 1900, 85 per cent of marriages in England and Wales (and 94 per cent in Scotland) were religiously solemnised. By 1957, 72 per cent of marriages in England and Wales (and 83 per cent in Scotland) were still by religious rites. But in the 1960s, decline was rapid. In England and Wales, religious marriage fell from 70 per cent in 1962 to 60 per cent in 1970, and continued to decline to 39 per cent in 1997. In Scotland, the fall over the same period was from 80 per cent in 1962, to 71 per cent in 1970, and then to 55 per cent in 1997. The position has been even worse for Christianity than these figures suggest, because an increasing proportion of religious nuptials has been by non-Christian rites. These statistics might appear bad for the state of religious marriage, but in the year 2000 they actually constitute the highest indicator of religiosity there is. All the other measures of Christian activity and adherence are markedly worse in both absolute terms and in terms of rate of decline. Take the proportion of infants baptised in the nation's largest Christian church, the Church of England. Out of every 1,000 live births, 609 baptisms were performed in the Church in 1900; by 1927 the proportion had actually risen to 668, the highest ever, and even by 1956 the figure was 602. But then it fell dramatically – to 466 in 1970,

365 in 1981 and 228 in 1997. Or take the level of church membership in the population at large. Between the 1840s (when data become available) and the year 2000, the best estimates indicate that the peak year of church adherence per head of population came in 1904 for England and Wales and 1905 for Scotland. After some decline over the next forty years, the proportion rose again to a peak in England and Wales in 1959 only 11 per cent lower than at the start of the century; in Scotland the peak came in 1956, and was only about 6 per cent lower than in 1900. This relatively minor decline was followed after 1963 by steep decline. In Scotland total church adherence *per capita* was 46 per cent lower in 1994 compared to 1905, whilst the proportion of the population who were Easter communicants in the Church of England had halved by the end of the 1980s compared to the start of the century.<sup>15</sup>

These dry, impersonal statistics reveal an important thing. They show that people's lives in the 1950s were very acutely affected by genuflection to religious symbols, authority and activities. Christianity intruded in very personal ways into the manner of people's comportment through their lives, through the rites of passage and through their Sundays. Religion mattered and mattered deeply in British society as a whole in the 1950s. But it started to stop mattering in the 1960s. Something happened to change the destiny of these statistics of church connection and activity, statistics which had moved up and down only slowly for over a hundred years but which very suddenly plunged.

There is a need for imagining this 'endgame' of Christian decline in Britain. It is needed for reasons of scholarship, for reasons of understanding our contemporary society and its future, or for simply needing to know whether church buildings and church schools are going to be needed for much longer. At a simple level, it is not acceptable – logically – to continue perceiving Britain's (or any other country's) principal religion as 'in decline' without conceptualising where the decline is heading (or has already arrived). At a more complex level, whilst commentators concentrate attention on the continuing statistical evidence of church decline at the start of the twenty-first century, it may be more imperative to pose the question whether the meaningful event – the destiny-shaping turning-point – has already passed. Was there some perceptible change of a much wider and more profound nature in around 1963 which triggered the downward march of all statistical and related evidence of popular religiosity? To declare Christianity dead, do you wait until the proportion of people who attend church, who pray to a living personal Christian God, who get married in a church or who baptise their children, falls below 50 per cent, 25 per cent, or 10 per cent? Alternatively, do you wait until the last church closes or the last Christian dies? When dealing with a society, its Christian construction depends on not just the existence of churches or Christians within it. Muslims, Jews and many other non-Christian faiths exist in

Britain in the year 2000, but nobody attributes them with defining the character of the nation's culture. The point here is that the mere presence of Christian churches or Christian people in Britain does not make, and never has made, Britain Christian, and their mere gradual disappearance does not in itself make it unchristian. What made Britain Christian was the way in which Christianity infused public culture and was adopted by individuals, whether churchgoers or not, in forming their own identities. Before getting to religious decline, the conception of religiosity must be made wider and deeper.

What happened at the point of secularisation helps us to grasp what constitutes Christian religiosity. What is 'ending' in Christian Britain as we start a new millennium is something more elemental than merely the churches failing to attract the people to worship. The 1960s' revolution was about how people constructed their lives – their families, their sex lives, their cultural pursuits, and their moral identities of what makes a 'good' or 'bad' person. For example, Christianity has been challenged not just by the decline of religious marriage, but by the decline of marriage itself as cohabitation rises steeply. Similarly, the transformation is not just to be measured in the growth of sexual activity with multiple partners, contrary to traditional Christian rules on sex with nobody but a spouse, but by the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967 and the overt pride displayed since by those in gay relationships. This is a most fundamental change in morality since the 1950s. Similar changes have happened to women since the 1960s – changes that have gone further in this country than almost any other: the increasing proportions of women who never marry, never have children, and the increasing age at which those who do have children start their families. This does not infer that unmarried sexually-active people, gays, older mothers of young children, and childless spinsters cannot be Christians. That is not the point. The point is that the complex web of legally and socially accepted rules which governed individual identity in Christian Britain until the 1950s has been swept aside since the 1960s. Secularisation is to be located, in part at least, in the changing conditions which allowed previously regarded Christian and social 'sins' to be regarded as acceptable and moral, at least by many, in British society in 2000.

Consequently, identifying the end of Christian Britain – its date – is bound up with defining what Christian Britain was before it died. Much of this book is concerned with this task. What actually constitutes the 'end' of the religious nation can only be truly appreciated by taking a vantage point from which we can perceive what has been lost and when it was lost. This is why an historical perspective is most important. To be aware of the magnitude and character of such fundamental cultural and religious change, we have to look at the starting point and reassess its character.

The starting point for any study of British secularisation has traditionally been the birth and rise of British urban and industrial society.

Historians have evolved a rather pessimistic view of religion's role in Britain between 1800 and 1963, based on two major hypotheses. The first of these is that the growth of industrial cities in the nineteenth century caused a decline in religiosity. The second hypothesis is that within cities (and smaller towns as well), the working classes became in broad terms alienated from organised religion and were the leading edge of secularisation. These two notions have been deeply ingrained in both ecclesiastical and historical understanding of British Christianity over the last two hundred years. In this book, both arguments will be challenged in their own terms by a re-examination of the evidence which supports them. But they will also be challenged by showing how the hypotheses have tended to foster very biased ways of constructing and 'reading' the evidence. The book offers an alternative religious history of modern Britain in which dispute is taken with the received wisdom that in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries Britain was a secularising place in which religious decline was a product of the social chasm between 'slum' and suburb, or between working and middle classes. In so doing, the dating of religious decline is shifted from the nineteenth century to the late twentieth century.

As a result, this book re-brands Britain of 1800 to 1963 as a highly religious nation, and the period as the nation's last puritan age. The Britain of our nearest forefathers is re-branded as a deeply Christian country of unprecedented churchgoing levels and the most strict religious rules of personal conduct. This puritanism was imposed not by the state but by the people themselves. Building on the work of some historians who have been 'optimistic' about religion in Victorian society, this task is undertaken through a reconception of what it meant to be a 'religious' person in a 'religious' society. In the chapters that follow the way in which Christian piety was imagined and represented between 1800 and 1950 is examined in some detail, to show the extent to which Christianity informed the individual woman and the individual man about their own identities. At the heart of this vision of Christian piety was evangelicalism which constructed a highly gendered conception of religiosity. Evangelical puritanism impinged mostly upon women rather than upon men. The book focuses considerable attention on how piety was conceived as an overwhelmingly feminine trait which challenged masculinity and left men demonised and constantly anxious. It was modern evangelicalism that raised the piety of woman, the 'angel in the house', to reign over the moral weakness and innate temptations of masculinity. Reversing pre-industrial society's privileging of male piety, this evangelical gendered framework for religion dominated public discourse and rhetoric, not just in the nineteenth century, but for the first six decades of the twentieth century as well. As a result, women, rather than cities or social class, emerge as the principal source of explanation for the patterns of religiosity that were observable in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Most importantly, two other things will emerge. First, women were the bulwark to popular support for organised Christianity between 1800 and 1963, and second it was they who broke their relationship to Christian piety in the 1960s and thereby caused secularisation.

This account differs substantially from existing British religious history and narratives on secularisation. How British Christianity got to the state it is in at the year 2000 is currently understood almost universally in terms of the theory of long-term secularisation which was developed academically initially by sociologists, but since the 1950s has been adopted in whole or in part almost universally by historians. The theory of secularisation posits that religion is naturally ‘at home’ in pre-industrial and rural environments, and that it declines in industrial and urban environments. The rise of modernity from the eighteenth century – the growth of machines, rationality, class division and dissenting churches, and the supposed decline of primitive husbandry, superstition and harmonious social relations – destroyed both the community foundations of the church and the psychological foundations of a universal religious world-view. Secularisation, it is traditionally argued, was the handmaiden of modernisation, pluralisation, urbanisation and Enlightenment rationality. Consequently, the theory identifies the main origins of British secularisation in the industrial revolution and urban growth of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which then accelerated in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For most investigative scholars of social history and sociology, British industrial society was already ‘secular’ before it had hardly begun.<sup>16</sup> This is referred to as the traditional, ‘pessimist’ view of religion in industrial society, an outlook which has dominated British academic life since around 1960.<sup>17</sup>

From the early 1970s, social historians of religion became progressively disenchanted with the theory of secularisation. Its sweeping claims made many uneasy when their empirical research revealed a complexity to the historical and social landscape that the theory seemed unable to encompass (leading some scholars into an ambivalence and sometimes an ambiguous silence about the theory), and when some research began to undermine – whether intentionally or not – the theory’s causative explanations and traditional chronology of religious decline.<sup>18</sup> From the early 1980s, a revisionist school of ‘optimist’ scholarship became discernible – a growing scholarship which argued more directly that the theory of secularisation was wrong in whole or in part because it failed to account for the observable success of religion in nineteenth-century British industrial society.<sup>19</sup> Quite separately and simultaneously, scholars in other parts of the world also started to problematise and challenge secularisation theory with new empirical research – especially in the United States where pluralisation of urban denominations was re-assessed as correlating with increasing religiosity rather than its diminution as the theory predicts.<sup>20</sup> The accumulative

effect of this work in Britain has been to push back the timing of religious decline from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and to make the early decline of popular religiosity appear more gradualist, nuanced and regionalised.<sup>21</sup>

However, the revisionism of scholars who are 'optimistic' about religiosity in urban society leaves two major problems. The first of these is empirical – the evidence already introduced briefly of sustained church growth and high religiosity among the British people in the 1940s and 1950s. The second problem is more fundamental. Whilst revision to the theory of secularisation has transformed understanding of the social history of religion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through new methods<sup>22</sup> and model-building,<sup>23</sup> and has done much to destroy the validity and utility of the theory,<sup>24</sup> the way revisionism has gone about this task has been almost as flawed as secularisation theory itself. Scholars (including the present author) have been trying for years to qualify or disparage secularisation theory on its own terms – using the same methods and the same conceptualisation of the issue. But this has meant studying the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in something close to obsessive detail, and has resulted in showing that secularisation took place more slowly, marginally later, and less completely than the theory originally suggested. But it has left the theory still in place, if not intact. This is a critical failing. By merely rescheduling the timing and gradient of secularisation, revisionism has left unmodified the core notion of religious decline as a prolonged, unilinear and inevitable consequence of modernity. By relying upon improved social-science investigation of religiosity to revise secularisation theory, revisionism has mistaken what the problem is.

The problem is social science itself and its definition of religion. The social-scientific study of religion has been one of the great projects of Enlightenment modernity. From the late eighteenth century to the present, religion has been defined, measured and 'understood' through 'empirical' evidence spawned by the supposed 'neutrality' of social science. Social science has privileged a 'rationalist' approach to religion which assigns importance to 'formal religion' and which denigrates or ignores 'folk religion', 'superstition' and acts of personal faith not endorsed by the churches. It privileges numbers, counting religion by measures of members or worshippers, and ignores the unquantifiable in argument and methodology. It makes religion an institutional 'thing' of society, in the form of the churches, religious organisations, the act of going to church, the act of stating a belief in God and so on. In doing so, social science dichotomises people: into churchgoers and non-churchgoers, into believers and unbelievers, those who pray and those who don't, into 'the religious' and 'the non-religious'. It is reductionist to bipolarities.

This chapter, of course, has already been guilty of this charge. In order to introduce discussion of religious decline, statistics have been cited in

some profusion, dividing the people into churchgoers and non-churchgoers. This was deliberate and unavoidable. There is at present no well-developed alternative *modus operandi* in which to explore religiosity and its decline. To provide any analysis on religion in society in the last two centuries, scholarship (as well as church management) has demanded social-science method, and that demand continues today unabated as churches commission statistical projections of their own decline. But the argument of this book is that this social-science method obliterates whole realms of religiosity which cannot be counted. More than that, the argument is that the definitions of religiosity used by today's Christian churches rely on the social-science method initiated by evangelical churchmen of the 1790s and 1800s. Seduced by Enlightenment rationality, it was they who gave us the definitions of religion with which we today are still obsessed. One task of this book is to break this circular and enclosed form of reasoning, to bring the bipolarities of 'the churchgoing' and 'the non-churchgoing' under the microscope of examination, and to challenge the whole social-scientific project on religion.

Social science is not only reductionist in telling us what religion 'is', but what it 'does'. As thinking people interested in the state of religion in society, we talk about it in rhetoric, in the very language, created by social science. What social science did was give birth to the notion that religion has 'roles' or 'functions' in society. Broadly speaking, virtually all historical and sociological studies of religion and society have envisaged the 'role' of religion in four 'forms': *institutional Christianity* (the people's adherence to churches and practise of worship and religious rites), *intellectual Christianity* (the influence of religious ideas in society at large and of religious belief in individuals), *functional Christianity* (the role of religion in civil society, especially local government, education and welfare), and *diffusive Christianity* (the role of outreach religion amongst the people). These 'roles' have traditionally formed the basis for measuring the 'social significance of religion'<sup>25</sup> and are important matters for research. But the argument here is that the way each of these four 'functions' or 'roles' operates in a modern society depends on something more basic. There is a higher-level 'form' that religion takes. In this book it is called *discursive Christianity*.

*Discursive Christianity* is defined using modern cultural theory. Christian religiosity of the industrial era is defined as the people's subscription to protocols of personal identity which they derive from Christian expectations, or discourses, evident in their own time and place. Protocols are rituals or customs of behaviour, economic activity, dress, speech and so on which are collectively promulgated as necessary for Christian identity. The protocols are prescribed or implied in discourses on Christian behaviour. The discourses may be official ones from churches or clergy, public ones from the media, 'community' ones from within an ethnic group, a street

or a family, or private ones developed by men and women themselves. The discourses will tend to be uniform, though the protocols need not be; indeed, they may be contradictory (as we shall see later). The discourses will be manifest in the protocols of behaviour (going to church on a Sunday, or saying grace before meals), but they will also be discerned in the ‘voices’ of the people. These voices are ‘heard’ as reported speech by contemporaries, as autobiography and oral-history testimony, and as biography and obituary (where the question of who is ‘speaking’ becomes a little complex). By listening to these voices, and by consulting the dominant media of the time (such as popular books, magazines and religious tracts), we can trace how the discourses circulated in society, how the protocols were derived from them, and how individual people in their testimony of autobiography and oral record show a personal adoption of religious discourses. This process is known by oral historians as ‘subjectification’ of discourse where people have been reflexive to the environment of circulating discourses. This is a personal process of subscription to often very public discourses, but can involve also very private (indeed sometimes intensely secret) protocols related to those discourses. This subscription is thus not necessarily an action which unifies individuals’ behaviour or religious beliefs, but it creates a compelling religious culture (in the jargon a ‘discursivity’) to the construction of religiosity in the society at large. In this way, we reconstruct an individual’s religious identity from how they in their own words reflected Christianity.

This fifth, discursive, conception of Christian religiosity is taken here as the prerequisite of all other roles of religion in society: of institutional, intellectual, functional and diffusive Christianity. For Christianity to have social significance – for it to achieve popular participation, support or even acquiescence – in a ‘democratic’ society free from state regulation of religious habits, it must have a base of discursivity. Otherwise, it is inconceivable. Concomitantly, secularisation – the decay of religiosity in all four traditional forms – is inconceivable without decay in discursive religiosity in which there is a loss of popular acceptance and recirculation of those discourses.

This method involves the relegation of social science as a method of inquiry. This is because the statistics and ‘rational’ measures of religion upon which historians and churchmen have traditionally relied are themselves products of that discursive Christianity. Christian discourse of the period 1800 to 1950 defined a ‘religious person’ in a variety of ways, but vital ones were as churchgoer and church member. Similarly, one key element in the definition of secularisation is the decline in churchgoing and church membership. These are not neutral measures of religiosity; they are highly specific ones in historical terms which applied in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but not, for instance, in seventeenth-century England.<sup>26</sup> In this way, the theory of secularisation is constructed around

the discourses of a specific age. As a consequence, critical to the method and the order of this volume is the relegation of social science to the status of a discursive constituent of the secularisation debate. The temptation to deal with the ‘hard data’ first in a book such as this is very great, even when the purpose is to show their shortcomings and inconsistencies. In Chapter 2, the discursive nature of religious statistics is shown through studying the intellectual origins of data collection on religion. But the data themselves have been relegated towards the end of the book so that they may be understood in the light of being themselves the product of Christian discourse on what protocols people should follow to establish their Christian identity. The bulk of the book – Chapters 3 to 7 – focuses on the period 1800 to 1950. It starts by examining the media, symbols and agencies for the circulation of religious discourses in Britain (Chapter 3). It proceeds to examine the discourses and their highly gendered construction (Chapters 4 and 5). Next, it turns to the subjectification of the discourses by individuals, following their penetration into people’s accounts of their own lives (personal histories revealed through autobiography and oral history) and their translation into protocols of religious identity (Chapter 6). It is in the next chapter that the statistics of religiosity are interpreted, allowing a ‘reading’ of them as not neutral and social-scientific measures of religiosity, but as products of discourse (Chapter 7). Finally, the book turns to the period 1950 to 2000 to examine the final flourish of discursive Christianity in the religious growth of the late 1940s and 1950s, followed by its spectacular collapse in the 1960s and the secularisation of Christian Britain which ensued (Chapter 8).

The analytical heart of the book is Chapter 6. This is where we listen to people rather than counting them as numbers, as they speak about themselves and their lives. In the process, we ‘hear’ how the discourses of religious identity of the periods in which they lived were internalised and made personal, each constructing his or her idea of ‘self’ and structuring the stories of their lives in symmetry to the expectations of Christian life stories. This reflexivity of personal identities to discursive Christianity becomes the method to establish Britain as a Christian nation from 1800 to 1950, and the method to understand (or ‘read’) the ‘hard data’ of Chapter 7. In particular, it is through the individual’s negotiation between discourses on religion on the one hand and discourses on other things (such as femininity, masculinity, respectability, parenting) on the other, and *then* in a negotiation between those discourses and the needs of day-to-day life, that some of the characteristics of the ‘hard data’ become intelligible. Where social-science ‘structuralism’ has one set of explanations for statistics of religiosity before 1950, the individual’s personal subjectifying of Christian discourses can offer radical alternatives.

Chapter 8 focuses on the 1950s and 1960s and the issue of change to Christian discourse. It looks at how British people re-imagined themselves

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in ways no longer Christian – a ‘moral turn’ which abruptly undermined virtually all of the protocols of moral identity. Ironically, it was at this very moment that social science reached the height of its influence in church affairs and in academe. Secularisation theory became the universally accepted way of understanding the decline of religion as something of the past – of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The 1960s viewed itself as the end of secularisation. But by listening to the people themselves, this book suggests it was actually the beginning.