

Unit 7: The churches in the 1970s and 1980s

Patterns of decline

In 1969, John Robinson published an article drawing attention to the way in which church statistics were pointing to dramatic Anglican decline. Confirmations had dropped by 32.2 per cent in the previous six years, and ordinations by 24.8 per cent in the previous five years. If anything, the problem was just as acute among the Free Churches. The Methodists closed 493 churches between 1971 and 1974, and Methodist membership fell by twenty per cent in the eight years from 1969 to 1977. For the new United Reformed Church matters were even worse. Their membership dropped by thirty per cent in the eleven years from 1973 to 1984. Could it be that Christianity would be extinct within decades? This was certainly what the proponents of the 'secularisation thesis', Bryan Wilson, Alan Gilbert and more recently Steve Bruce and Callum Brown appeared to be thinking. In the 1990s, a diverse group of academics began to question the extent to which wholesale secularisation was actually taking. Their works include Robin Gill *The Myth of the Empty Church* (1993), Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (1994), and others. At the time, however, there was a widespread feeling that decline was inevitable and that Christianity per se was in danger of disappearing. In the 1970s, even Anglican bishops were beginning to show signs of public nervousness. In 1974, bishop Eric Treacy of Wakefield stated his views in the *Church of England Newspaper*: 'The time is upon us when a man who involves himself with the Church, who practises his faith in the common ways of life - will do so against the conventions of society. We are still living on the capital of Christian inheritance ... but the capital is running out'. (Cited in Alan Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain: A History of the Secularisation of Modern Society* (1980), p.ix).

Adrian Hastings makes the important point that the massive decline in church membership and church plant in the 1970s and 1980s needs to be seen not just as a church problem, but set against the patterns of decline and closure witnessed elsewhere in society. In 1976, a church may have been being demolished every nine days, but elsewhere firms both big and small were being shut down and taken over. Coal mines, steel works, small factories, family businesses, village post offices and schools - many of these closed down, often quite suddenly. Unemployment rose and people lost the prosperity and job security to which they had become accustomed in the 1960s. All this led to industrial unrest, and was fuelled by the oil crisis (world oil prices quadrupled in 1973), a sinking pound (down forty per cent against other major currencies in the early 1970s) and raging inflation (Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, pp.597-8). It would be quite unrealistic to have expected the churches to have survived all this unscathed.

To take one example: Dr Frances' Knight's research on Ely cathedral from the 1830s to the 1980s led her to conclude that it was in the 1970s that the Dean and Chapter faced more serious problems than at any time in the previous one hundred and forty years. The Dean and Chapter went deeper into their overdraft, and began to undertake only urgent repairs. Money that had been raised by the sale of the cathedral library, supposedly to finance choral scholarships, had to be diverted instead into emergency work on the west tower. In 1975, the Chapter debated the possibility of introducing an admission charge, thus calling into question what had been the deeply held principle that admission to Ely cathedral must always be free. High inflation and the very low level of salaries meant that resignations among the cathedral staff also became a continuous problem.

Ely cathedral, in a comfortable corner of the Anglican world, was simply a microcosm of what was going on elsewhere. National and international events shattered a great deal of the

optimism which had been a feature of Christianity in the 1950s and 1960s. Christians were shocked not just by the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, but by that of Martin Luther King, Baptist pastor and civil right campaigner, in 1968. The writings of the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin (d. 1955) which had been so popular in the 1960s now seemed ludicrously optimistic. Teilhard had claimed that 'disease and hunger will be conquered by science and we will no longer need to fear them in any acute form'. Yet by the 1970s, people were having to get used to daily television pictures of famine and civil war. Nearer to home, the Troubles in Northern Ireland were in part sparked off by Bloody Sunday in 1972. They led some people to the conclusion that as religion seemed to be at the root of so many tragic conflicts, the best thing was to have as little to do with religion as possible. This is a view that has been exacerbated since the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 and the Islamic Revolution, to say nothing of the dramatic events of 9/11 and the digital or electronic revolution. The world has shrunk and religion is seen by many as a malign, not benign force. This only began to be felt in the 1970s.

As the decade wore on, the possibility of nuclear warfare continued to loom on the horizon, and there was growing concern about the proliferation of conventional weapons. The Cold War froze people with a sense of fear about their future survival, and the theological implications of this should not be neglected. People of the 1960s generation grew up with a sense that they would be lucky to reach middle age. CND was led by a Roman Catholic priest, Mgr Bruce Kent, and Christian CND forged a strong identity of its own. At King's College London in the early 1980s, some students even launched a campaign to declare the Theology Faculty a Nuclear Free Zone. (It didn't seem ludicrous at the time.) The government's advice leaflet for surviving an attack Protect and Survive, which was distributed at the time of the Falklands War, did not inspire confidence, and was dubbed instead Protest and Survive. When the Berlin Wall came down quite suddenly in 1989, and the USSR began to break up, it seemed that the immediate nuclear threat had receded. Instead, environmental concerns were given a higher place on the Christian agenda.

The role of women

In every decade of the twentieth century, the role of women in British society changed in decisive ways. The various Churches responded to this at very different rates, and when churches did respond, there was frequently internal division about what the correct response should be. Could women be ministers or priests? Was it significant that all of Jesus's disciples were male? Was it significant that there were female deacons in the early church? What about St Paul's view of 'male headship' and women keeping silent in church? These religious arguments, combined with the social and cultural perspectives of the day, formed the basis for each generation's discussion of women in the church. From the late 1960s, the pace of change began to accelerate, hence the inclusion of this section here. The Free Churches were always the most willing to incorporate women into church life at all levels, with a few Congregationalist and Baptist women ministers in existence from the 1920s. The Roman Catholics were the most reluctant, and it is surprising how little is said about women in the Documents of Vatican II.

The Church of England and the Church in Wales made progress rather slowly. Edith Picton-Turberville became the first woman to preach at a statutory service, in 1919, and Maud Royden became the most famous campaigner for women's ordination in the first half of the twentieth century. She remained a member of the Church of England, although she accepted an invitation to become assistant minister at the City Temple, a Congregational church in London. By the 1920s, it was clear that the question of the ordination of women was one that the Church of England would have to face. The 1920 Lambeth Conference commissioned a doctor, Letitia Fairfield, to write a report on the medical effects of ministry on women, as there was a widespread fear that the

demands of preaching would prove too much, particularly when they were menstruating. (Almost identical arguments had been used to try to keep women out of universities in the 1870s). Dr Fairfield observed, quite reasonably, that 'neither preaching nor serving at the altar is a harder task physically than district visiting, or Sunday school teaching, or addressing congregations in church rooms or mission halls' - tasks which some women already did, either as laywomen or as deaconesses. She went on to tell the bishops that she believed the real reason that they were blocking women's ordination was their partly subconscious fears about 'ceremonial uncleanness' and superstitions surrounding menstruation. The bishops seem to have reacted to the report with stunned silence, and it was decades before any further progress was made. In 1969, Reader ministry in the Church of England was opened to women, and large numbers of women have become Readers. In Wales the diaconate was opened to women in 1980, and in England in 1987. The ordination of women to the priesthood in all the Anglican Churches of the British Isles was an event of the 1990s (the Church of Ireland, 1990; the Episcopal Church in Scotland, 1994; the Church of England, 1994; the Church in Wales, 1997). Nevertheless, the campaigns both for and against the ordination of women were being waged during the 1970s and 1980s and were very much a feature of the closing years of the period, causing a certain degree of bitterness between those of opposing views.

It became very much easier for a woman to obtain a theological education during this period, at least at undergraduate level. The expansion of higher education, and the increasing number of places in women's halls of residence was one factor. Later on, matters were improved further with the end of segregated halls. St David's College Lampeter - the predecessor of our own university here at Trinity Saint David - admitted women from 1965, and built the Harford Buildings to accommodate them. (They were locked into Harford at 11 o'clock at night until 1971.) Lampeter also allowed a few women to train as deaconesses alongside male ordination candidates in Burgess Hall, the college's seminary, in the early 1970s. London University had a longer history of permitting women to study theology, and by the early 1980s, the proportion of men and women reading for the Bachelor of Divinity was roughly fifty-fifty. Theology at Oxford and Cambridge remained an almost exclusively male preserve until well into the 1970s, due to the fact that most of the colleges only took male students. In 1986, only three of the nineteen students who embarked on PhDs in the Cambridge Divinity Faculty were female, and the following year the entire intake was male. At faculty parties, the atmosphere was rather formal and clerical, but kindly; initially, the general assumption was that a female student must be there as somebody's wife.

The relationship between church and state

1970 saw the inauguration of the general synod of the Church of England. The Queen opened the first session, and the entire political establishment attended. What was being inaugurated was a new mechanism through which the Church would be more or less able to manage its own affairs independently, but without the rigmarole of formal disestablishment. It was the first major alteration in the Church-State relationship since the Enabling Act of 1919. The Enabling Act had given the Church of England general administrative powers, subject to the Act of Uniformity of 1662 and the control of parliament, which could accept or reject, but not amend legislation that the Church brought forward. The Enabling Act had also created the Church Assembly, which was the forerunner of the general synod. Although the legislation of 1919 had made possible the creation of new dioceses without recourse to acts of parliament, it had not dealt adequately with the tensions that continued to exist between Church and parliament, seen most visibly when parliament rejected the 1928 Prayer Book.

The legislation of 1970 moved things further in the Church's direction by reducing the sense of dependence on crown and parliament. A few years later the crown appointments system was reformed so that bishops were no longer appointed entirely at the whim of the prime minister. Instead, the prime minister was given a choice between two names, ranked in order of preference. The names were selected as a result of a great deal of Church input. The principle of lay political control was maintained, although in reality it was now (usually) the Church that made the decision. Rather curiously, direct political intervention in the appointment of deans still remained. To a great extent, the workings of the general synod came to dominate the Church of England in the years after 1970. Although most MP's were happy with Synod's new powers, there remained a small rump who attempted to throw an occasional spanner in the works, by rejecting Synod's legislation when it came to the Commons for approval. In the 1970s and 1980s, the views of these MP's were most clearly articulated by Enoch Powell, Conservative member for Coventry and later Unionist member for Down and Connor, who continued to believe in the classical relationship between Church and State, in which Parliament should act as the lay synod of the Church of England.

In 1979, British politics moved sharply to the right when Margaret Thatcher replaced James Callaghan as prime minister. In the following year Robert Runcie succeeded Donald Coggan as archbishop of Canterbury. Meanwhile, Basil Hume had become cardinal archbishop of Westminster (probably the most popular cardinal in Britain since Manning) and Pope John Paul had begun his long tenure of the Vatican. Runcie and Thatcher had been acquainted since their student days in Oxford, and they both remained at the helm of Church and State throughout the 1980s, Thatcher losing power at the end of 1990, and Runcie retiring a few weeks later in early 1991. There was, however, to be no easy relationship between them. In 1982 Runcie was criticised by senior Conservatives over the tone of his 'untriumphalist' Falklands victory sermon, an event of which the media made much. He was sometimes considered to be too ready to get directly involved in political and diplomatic matters, and the kidnapping in Beirut of his 'special envoy', Terry Waite, cast a long shadow over the final years of Runcie's archiepiscopate.

In the early 1980s, with Michael Foot's Labour Party in disarray, and the government rapidly driving through policies that led to industrial closures and unemployment on a large scale, the Church of England began to assume the role of unofficial opposition to Thatcherism. Once again, the Church was finding itself taking an interest in the social issues which it had embraced so enthusiastically in the first half of the century. The number of ordains rose, and suddenly everybody wanted to work in an 'urban priority area'. For (some) church people, it could be exhilarating to be caught up in the 1980s counter-culture, rejecting the blatant materialism of the age in favour of a different set of values. For those who were in sympathy with liberal causes - political and theological - Runcie's church was the sort of organisation that one could want to belong to, rather as it had been in the 1920s and '30s. The media, for its part, gave the Church far more attention than is the case today.

In 1983, Archbishop Runcie set up a high-powered commission of mostly lay people to consider the impact of poverty in urban areas, and the Church's response. There was a realisation that as businesses and amenities shut down, the local church might be the only organisation left in some areas. The resulting report *Faith in the City* (document 8) published in 1985, provoked the strongest clash of the decade between Church and State. Conservative politicians accused the members of the Commission of Marxism, and of meddling in politics. The real significance of *Faith in the City*, however, is that it did result in social questions being put firmly back on the political agenda. It also caused the Church to reassess its mission, and the Church Urban Fund made a significant contribution to the regeneration of some deprived areas.

Not everyone inside the Church was happy with the tone and direction of events, either at a political or theological level. The 1980s also witnessed a period of internal struggle between Church of England liberals, who were seen as in the ascendant, and conservatives (both Catholic and Evangelical) who felt marginalised. There was a strong reaction against the perceived corrosive

effects of Runcie-ite liberalism. The most dramatic episode was the suicide of the church historian and Oxford don Dr Gareth Bennett in 1987. He was revealed as the author of the anonymous preface to that year's Crockford's Clerical Dictionary, a bitter article which systematically analysed the rise of the liberal ascendancy, and accused Runcie of 'nailing his colours to the fence ... His clear preference is for men of liberal disposition with a moderately Catholic style which is not taken to the point of having firm principles'. The general synod was lambasted in similar style. Bennett seemed to think that his anonymity would be respected, but tragically he had not reckoned with the power of the media. He killed himself once he realised that he would be exposed as the author of the preface. It was a tragic end to what had been a perplexing decade and more in the history of the established church.

Further reading

Adrian Hastings, A History of English Christianity Part VII & 'An Overview: The 1980s'

G.I.T. Machin, Churches and Social Issues in Twentieth Century Britain (1998) chapter 7

Peter Moore (ed) The Synod of Westminster: Do we need it? (1985) contains an interesting article by Enoch Powell.

Henry Clark, The Church under Thatcher (1993)

Frances Knight, 'Life at the Cathedral, 1836 – 1980' in A History of Ely Cathedral Peter Meadows and Nigel Ramsey (eds) (2003)

Andrew Partington, Church and State: The Contribution of the Church of England Bishops to the House of Lords during the Thatcher years (2005)