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Christianity in Britain, R. I. P.

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Rodney Stark has again claimed that secularization is a myth based on exaggerating the religious vitality of the past and under-estimating that of the present. This article takes issue with the first point briefly but concentrates on showing that, in the case of Britain, even if we confine ourselves to comparisons of religiosity in 1851, 1900 and 2000, the evidence is of clear and dramatic decline. Recently gathered data on church membership and church attendance are presented. They show that unless long-stable trends are reversed, major British denominations will cease to exist by 2030. While we may legitimately argue about the causes and timing of secularization, no amount of supply-side revisionism will change that fact that organized Christianity in Britain is in serious trouble.

INTRODUCTION

In his contribution to this journal's recent special issue on the secularization debate, Rodney Stark has, with his customary panache, again claimed to find no evidence for the secularization approach to religious change (1999). He argues that the claim that religion in Western Europe has declined in popularity is a mistake made possible by an exaggeration of the strength of religion at some point in the past and an under-estimation of its present importance. Doubtless others will respond for other European countries; in this brief reply I will consider the case for Britain. As the argument between the secularizationists and Stark's supply-siders is now well documented, I confine myself to presenting information which may not be familiar outside Britain. Recently gathered data on church membership and church attendance show that unless trends are reversed, major British denominations will cease to exist by 2030. While we may legitimately argue about the causes and exact trajectory of secularization, no amount of supply-side revisionism will change that fact that, if we can legitimately extrapolate from well-established trends, organized Christianity in Britain is in serious trouble.

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STARK THEORY

In 1966, when Bryan Wilson published *Religion in secular society* it was, to borrow from Jane Austen, 'a truth universally acknowledged' that Britain was less religious than it had been a hundred years earlier. That remained the consensus until the late 1970s and 1980s. In each of those decades Stark discovered a compelling reason why the consensus must be wrong (for a comprehensive list of sources see the bibliographies of Stark 1999 and Bruce 1999).

His first reason for denying secularization came from the theory he developed with William Sims Bainbridge (Stark and Bainbridge 1987). According to their complex reasoning about the links between rewards and compensators, humankind will always need religion. Desires (if only the desire for immortality) always outstrip rewards. In the absence of rewards, people seek compensators. Religion is superior to secular providers of compensators because it can play the God trump card. Invoking the supernatural increases the attractiveness of compensators and reduces their vulnerability to refutation. In the absence of inheriting anything in this world, the meek will want to be told they will inherit the earth *in the next life*. Hence the demand for religion should be pretty well universal and stable. If one form of religion declines, another should take its place. Enduring secularization is impossible.

The second reason for Stark to deny secularization is that, in the British case, it would run counter to the expectations of the supply-side model of religious economies to which he became attached in the 1980s. For a variety of reasons that sound rather like propaganda for *laissez-faire* capitalism, competitive free markets are supposed to be better at meeting not only material but also spiritual needs. Religious monopolies (especially state-supported ones) dampen the demand for religious products. Competitive free markets produce a wide variety of religious products at low costs and thus increase consumption. Hence there should be a strong positive correlation between religious diversity and religious vitality. The religious history of Britain, conventionally understood, is a problem. Before the Reformation there was one church, organized on a national parish structure, which glorified God on behalf of, and provided religious offices for, the entire people. With the Reformation, the religious cultures of Scotland, Wales and England diverged. Each national church also fragmented internally, to create a large number of competing organizations. By the middle of the nineteenth century, about half the population worshipped outwith the state churches of England, Wales, and Scotland. Since then pluralism has increased further with the growth of non-Trinitarian sects and Pentecostalism. There are interesting technical arguments about exactly how one measures diversity but no-one questions that the last two hundred years have seen a considerable increase in its extent. Few Britons are far from a major urban area and for most of the twentieth century it has been possible to find almost every imaginable variant of Christianity on offer in British cities. According to Stark, the increase

in diversity and the gradual removal of constraints on competition (such as supporting the state churches with public funds and denying government office to dissenters) should have created an increase in religious vitality. Britain of the 1990s should be more religious than Britain of the 1890s or 1790s or 1690s.

To summarize, it is vital for the theoretical positions that Stark has long promoted that the conventional view of religion in Britain be wrong. He makes the case from both ends. He argues that the Britain of the past (and that could be any date before the Census of Religious Worship of 1851, which provides us with our first Britain-wide data on church attendance) was nowhere near as religious as we think. And that the present is considerably more so.

The argument between secularizationists and supply-siders is now well documented in the social science literature and there is no need to go over old ground. The purpose of this brief article is to make known to a wider audience, the most reliable recent information on religious trends in Britain.

THE AGE OF FAITH

Stark believes that British sociologists of religion exaggerate the religiosity of pre-industrial Britain. He cites a number of historians who document lay dereliction of religious duties and give examples of irreligious behavior and concludes from such studies that the institutional strength of the pre-industrial Christian churches disguised considerable popular indifference. Short of citing the very many British historians who think otherwise (for those see the bibliographies of Bruce 1996 and 1999) there is no compressed way of answering that assertion. I will only note that to sustain Stark's revisionism, we would need to accept most or all of the following sociologically implausible assumptions.

- The most powerful national institution had little or no influence on the people.
- The sums given by people of every station of life to fund masses was a reflection of religious indifference.
- The huge sums given by rich people to build and to endow churches, chantries and chapels was not a mark of religious interest.
- Those institutions and the social practices they sustained had no impact on cosmology, theology or morality.
- The people who allowed very large proportions of the national wealth to be given to religious activities believed them to be pointless.
- The institution of swearing oaths on the Bible was used to encourage truth-telling because nobody believed anything bad would come from offending God.
- Most people took Mass at Easter just because most other people did and nobody actually believed in it.
- All rights of passage, all significant dates in the agricultural calendar, and all important community events were glossed with religious rituals because nobody believed religion mattered.
- Finally, we must conclude that the enormous intrusion of organized Christianity into social and cultural life was utterly ineffective in socializing people into the beliefs and values that organized Christianity represented.

Given the impossibility of answering Stark's scepticism in detail in this space, I will conclude this point by quoting the assessment of David Martin, one of the first British sociologists to question aspects of the secularization thesis and a man frequently claimed by Stark as an ally.

The difference [between pre-modern laxity and present-day indifference] is simply this: what is possible and indeed quite frequent in pre-modern societies is probably and nearly universal in the modern situation. . . . a pre-modern society can be marked by hostility to religion and indifference, and a modern industrial society can be marked by high practice and a favourable appraisal of religion . . . but the reverse polar case is nevertheless much more frequent (Martin 1978:84-5).

THE LAST 150 YEARS

Even if we accept Stark's claim that the religious vitality of pre-industrial Britain has been exaggerated, we may ask how the changes of the last 150 years fit his expectations. The best source of national data for the nineteenth century is the 1851 Census of Religious Worship. It is a highly complex source that is only now being analyzed with appropriately sophisticated statistical techniques (Crockett 1998) and analysts differ in how they report its findings (in particular, how one deals with the fact that the original returns reported *attendances* at morning, afternoon and evening services rather than the number of *attenders*). Nonetheless, there is a consensus about the plausible upper and lower figures. Brown (1987) reports attendances (not attenders) as 61 percent of the adult population for Scotland and 59 percent for England and Wales. In turning those data into an estimate for attenders, Brown almost halves the attendances and gives a Scottish figure 'in the region of 30-35 percent' (1993:7). Crockett, working from the original data and with better statistical techniques, comes to a higher figure: "one can estimate that between 61.5 percent and 65.1 percent of the 'potential congregation' attended worship on census Sunday" (1998:131). Even allowing for rounding up in the original returns, he concludes that the best estimate would be between 57 and 61 percent. Let us, accordingly, take as our best base for evaluating the twentieth century data the assumption that between 40 and 60 percent of the adult population of Great Britain in 1851 attended church.

Peter Brierley, probably Britain's foremost collator of religious statistics, has conducted a number of nation-wide censuses and surveys of church attendance in England, Wales and Scotland. As in the 1851 Census, the data come from clergy estimates of how many people come into their churches on a particular Sunday. Brierley's return rates are good, for he is well-known to, and trusted by, church leaders and, moreover, has some thirty years experience of working with such data. In short, if we can accept any survey data as reliable, Brierley's should surely rank high in confidence.

The results of the third English study, conducted in 1998, have just been published (Brierley 2000). Brierley concludes that 7.5 percent of the adult population attended church. This represents a continuation of the trends previously found: the figures for his 1979 and 1989 censuses were respectively 12 and 10 percent.

Brierley divides his results into those for 'institutional' and 'non-institutional' organizations. The Catholic Church (the largest of the 'institutional' group) has seen its attendances decline markedly and at an accelerating pace. In the 1980s, attendances fell by 14 percent. In the 1990s they fell by 28 percent. The second largest, the Church of England, has seen attendances fall from 1,671,000 in 1979 to 980,000 in 1999; a fall of 24 percent for the 1980s and 23 percent for the 1990s. The United Reformed Church has declined similarly. Only the very small Orthodox Church has shown growth (from ten to twenty-five thousand). Overall, attendance for these four churches has fallen over two decades from 3.9 million to 2.4 million.

Among the 'non-institutional' churches or denominations, the Methodists have declined drastically from 621,000 in 1979 to 379,700 attendances in 1999. The Baptists and Pentecostals have pretty well held their own and the 'new churches' have grown over the same period from 64,000 to 230,000. However, this growth fails to compensate for the decline in the larger denominations so that the 'non-institutional' group shows a decline from 1.6 million in 1979 to 1.4 million in 1999.

To summarize Brierley's data, the big organizations have declined badly; those that have stayed stable or grown have been the small ones. Hence the pattern for England overall is of a decline in church attendance from 12 to 7.5 percent of the adult population.

There are three grounds for confidence in these data. First, they fit with what we know from the institutions themselves. The Church of England's own data show that in 1997 Anglican church attendance fell below 1 million for the first time since records began in the eighteenth century and this is in the context of a population that has grown steadily from 18 million in 1850 to 52 million in 2000. Second, these attendance data fit with membership data (of which more below). Third, the national figures fit with what is known from detailed area studies. Gill's painstaking work on Northumberland (1993) shows that in the 1980s only 9 percent of the population attended church. He summarises his equally detailed work on Bromley, Kent, in these terms: "31 percent of the Bromley population were in church in 1903 but only 10.5 percent by 1993. Thus a threefold decline, and perhaps in reality a fourfold decline, seems to have taken place in these ninety years" (2001:4).

Brierley, not an intemperate man, entitles one chapter of his book 'Bleeding to Death.' One reason for his pessimism is that the gross figures of decline hide a trend even more worrying for the future of Christianity in Britain: age bias. For each of his three English surveys he estimates the age profile of the various

groups of denominations. With the exception of the Pentecostal churches that recruit mainly from the Afro-Caribbean population, churchgoers are considerably older than non-churchgoers. Worse, the bias has been increasing over the two decades. Of the Anglicans churchgoers, in 1979, 19 percent were 65 and over (as compared to 18 percent of the general population). In 1989, that was 22 percent and, in 1999, 29 percent. The respective figures for those aged 65 and over in the Catholic Church in 1979, 1989, and 1999 were 13 percent, 16 percent, and 22 percent. The major non-conformist denominations had an even-greater bias to the elderly. For the Methodists, they were 25 percent in 1979, 30 percent in 1989, and 38 percent in 1999. The United Reformed Church figures were almost identical.

Similar figures can be found in recent social surveys. A study of 1,000 respondents conducted by Opinion Research Business for the BBC in May 2000 showed that 15 percent of those who said they attended worship once a month or more were aged 16-29 as against 18 percent for the whole sample. Of the regular churchgoers, 30 percent were aged 30-49; for the sample as a whole it was 41 percent. The relationship reversed for the 50-69 age group; 42 percent of regular churchgoers but only 31 percent of the total sample fell into that age group. The greatest difference was at the top end. Of the regular churchgoers, 13 percent were aged 70 years or above; for the total sample it was only 9 percent. If a large proportion of the population was church-going or had been socialized in the Christian churches in childhood, we might suppose that as those young people presently avoiding church aged, they might attend church more frequently. But as the vast majority of young Britons have no church connection or religious socialization (see below for Sunday School data) this seems very unlikely and Brierley's pessimism seems well-founded.

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

The picture of change in church membership over the twentieth century is clear (Brierley 1999:Tables 2.8). In absolute terms, the major Protestant churches grew slightly between 1900 and 1930 but the membership growth always lagged behind the growth in the general population. From the 1950s onwards these churches declined in net terms. The Roman Catholic Church came close to matching population growth, as it was bolstered by large numbers of migrants from Ireland, but since the 1960s it too has experienced absolute as well as relative decline.

Brierley has helpfully aggregated the figures. As Table 1 shows, church membership for the UK as a whole has fallen from 27 percent of the population in 1900 to 10 percent in 2000. Of course direct comparison with any period before the middle of the nineteenth century is impossible because the nature of church involvement has changed so much. Nonetheless, it is hard to imagine any

serious historian arguing that less than ten percent of the people of 1750 or 1800 would have any sort of church connection.

TABLE 1

Church Membership, United Kingdom, 1900–2000

Year	Members thousands	Population thousands	Member as % of population
1900	8,664	32,237	27
1920	9,803	44,027	22
1940	10,017	47,769	21
1960	9,918	52,709	19
1980	7,529	56,353	13
2000	5,862	59,122	10

Source: Brierley 1999: Tables 2.12 and 4.10.2.

It should be stressed that Brierley is not alone in these conclusions. With the exception of Stark and his associates, every scholar who has studied British church membership has reported similar trends and come to the same conclusions. Sawkins, for example, has studied the Methodist data (which is among the most accurate and detailed). In the late 1940s and early 1950s there were five years when there was a net and very small increase in membership. In 1985 there was a 1 percent increase when it was decided to include various local ecumenical congregations in the Methodist figures. Apart from that year, every year since 1957 has shown a net decline in membership, usually of between 2 and 3 percent. If that remarkably consistent trend continues (and Sawkins can see nothing to indicate it will not), the Methodist Church will cease to exist in 2031 (Sawkins 1998).

Let us put these figures in a longer historical context. My estimates of church membership in Britain (for the basis of calculation see Bruce 1999:209–12) are as follows. In 1800 some 18 percent of the adult population was in church membership. In 1850 it was around 27 percent. In 1900 it was 26 percent. Set against those figures, I can see no reason to describe the subsequent changes over the twentieth century (21 percent in 1940; 10 percent in 2000) as anything other than decline.

The Relationship Between Attendance and Membership

It is worth saying a word about the increase in church membership between 1800 and 1850. Taken on its own (and ignoring the fact that the subsequent decline has now gone on unaltered for a century), it might be possible to take that period of church membership growth as evidence that church adherence varies cyclically and hence that describing the overall pattern as one of decline

is premature. However, any knowledge of the way in which the nature of church membership has changed would answer that point. In the eighteenth century only the dissenting congregations had 'members.' The national churches of England and Wales, and Scotland served all those people who did not consciously dissent (and at times they tried to serve even them). Formal membership was not a consideration, and attendance was a better mark of adherence. At the end of the eighteenth century and during the first half of the nineteenth, as dissent flourished, so people came to mark their loyalty by 'joining' as well as attending their church. By the end of the twentieth century, attendance had again become a better index of attachment than membership because churches gave membership very readily and many people remained nominal members while ceasing to attend.

SUNDAY SCHOOLS

One way in which the British churches dominated the culture and society was through the provision of education. Until the middle of the nineteenth century (and later in many places) most formal schooling was provided by the churches and many children (and some adults) attended Sunday schools to gain a 'secular' education. Even as a viable nation-wide system of state schools was being constructed, very many non-church-going parents sent their children to Sunday schools. Their motives may have been secular but the result was that most Britons gained at least an elementary knowledge of the Christian faith. Table 2 gives figures for UK Sunday school scholars. What it shows is that at the start of the century half of Britain's children were socialized into Christian beliefs and doctrines. By the end of the century, the number of Sunday Scholars was so small that either only the children of church attenders went to Sunday school or not even all the children of regular churchgoers were being so socialized.

TABLE 2

Sunday School Scholars, United Kingdom, 1900–2000

Year	% of population
1900	55
1920	49
1940	36
1960	24
1980	9
2000	4

Source: Brierley 1999: Tables 2.15.

FULL-TIME PROFESSIONALS

Full-time clergy may be paid either out of public taxation or the donations of the congregants. In the first case the size of the clergy is a useful indicator of the social power of religion; in the second, it is a good sign of its popularity. In 1900 there were 45,408 clerics in the UK. That figure has declined steadily, until in 2000 there were only 34,157: a fall of 25 percent at a time when the population almost doubled. Or to put it another way, had the Christian churches been relatively as powerful or as popular at the end of the century as at the start, there would have been 80,000 clerics. For the first half of the century, the Catholic Church in Britain showed considerable growth, as the small pre-Reformation population was boosted by migration from Ireland. In Scotland the number of Catholic priests rose from 475 in 1900 to peak at 1,437 in 1960. It then started to decline so that in 2000 there were only 861 priests (Brierley 1999:Table 8.6.4). Entries to training have declined even faster. In 1979 there were 193 men studying for the priesthood. In 1999 there were only 57 (Mackay 1999).

I might add that, were the churches dependent on their present power or popularity, there would be even fewer clerics than there are. Most of the major UK organizations now depend for almost half their income on profits from invested capital garnered during better days.

RELIGIOUS OFFICES

One way in which the unchurched can continue to have some contact with organized religion is through the use of religious offices for rights of passage. While the proportion of people coming to church to be married, baptised and buried remains higher than the number of members or regular attenders, the trends are moving in the same direction. In the nineteenth century almost all weddings were religious ceremonies. For all religions, we only have data from 1971, but these show that the proportion of English weddings that were then religious was 60 percent. This declined fairly steadily to 31 percent in 2000. Given its position as the national church, the Church of England's record of weddings is a good indicator of how popular church weddings are for those outside the narrow circles of committed church members. In 1900, 67 percent of all weddings in England were celebrated in an Anglican church; in 2000, it was only 20 percent (Brierley 1999:Table 8.5).

It is a mark of the importance that was then given to the institution of Christian Baptism that in the Middle Ages midwives were taught a simple formula to baptize babies who seemed unlikely to survive until a priest arrived. In 1800 almost all newborns were baptized. The proportion of infants baptized in the Church of England is a good indicator of the general popularity of baptism in England because, unlike non-conformist bodies, the Church has maintained a commitment to the population at large. Between 1885 and 1950 the proportion

of babies baptized in the Church of England fluctuated between 60 and 67 percent (Bruce 1996: 268). In 1962 it was 53 percent. In 1993 it was 27 percent.

NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

The idea that secularization is impossible because people have an enduring need for religion, and hence that the decline of one sort of provider will be compensated for by the rise of some innovation, cannot be tested unequivocally because its proponents may always extend the time-scale for its fulfilment. However it seems reasonable to suppose that, were such compensating mechanisms operating, we would by now have seen some signs of vigorous religious growth. Brierley (1999: Table 10.2) estimates the total membership of non-Trinitarian churches (including the Christadelphians, Christian Scientists, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses) as having risen from 71,000 in 1900 to 537,000 in 2000. The Mormons and Witnesses together account for more than half that growth. But that seemingly impressive figure amounts to *only one sixth of the members lost to the main Christian churches over the same period* and less than 1 percent of the total number of people who do not belong to a Trinitarian Christian church.

The new religious movements of the 1970s are numerically all but irrelevant. On the most generous estimates, Brierley can only find 14,515 members. Knowing that the Unification Church has fewer than 400 members puts the contribution of the NRMs in its proper context.

BELIEFS

One response to this evidence is to argue that religious belief, sentiment, or potential, remains strong; what has declined is faith in the traditional religious institutions as institutions. As one leading Anglican cleric put it: "There has been a general flight from institutions. Trade union membership is down, as is that for political parties and voluntary organizations" (Petre 1991:15). Sociologist Grace Davie makes a similar point when she sub-titled her book on *Religion in Britain since 1945* 'believing without belonging.' It is always possible that private religious sentiment has remained strong while the form in which it has been expressed for centuries has withered (though even that would be a momentous change that should not be dismissed with a Starkian flourish). However, two points suggest that, whatever changes there may have been to our ways of expressing religious sentiments, the strength and popularity of those sentiments have also declined. First, and this is the weakness of the supply-side model, there is no shortage of varieties of Christian organization. We could imagine people losing faith in a certain institution (too sexist or insufficiently sexist; too hierarchical or too democratic; too formal or too informal; too liberal or too conservative) but if there was still a lot of demand for Christianity one would have thought that it would find some avenue of expression in the plethora of choices.

And the religious market is now so 'free' that there are no obstacles to creating new churches. Given that Christianity has always valued collective acts of worship, it is difficult to suppose that the almost universal decline of the Christian churches in Britain does not signify a decline in the demand for Christianity.

The second point is that we do have evidence of changes in the popularity of beliefs. Measuring beliefs independent of people acting on them is always difficult, but we now have fifty years of opinion polls and attitude surveys and their message is consistent. The proportion of people claiming Christian beliefs is considerably higher than the proportion of people who actively support the Christian churches, but those data show a steady decline in the popularity of Christian beliefs that shadows the decline in church adherence. In the 1950s, 43 percent of those surveyed said they believed in a personal creator God. In the 1990s, it was 31 percent. In the May 2000 ORB survey the figure was 26 percent. The number of those explicitly saying they did not believe in God has risen steadily from 2 percent in the 1950s to 27 percent in the 1990s. In their summary of all the available poll data on religious beliefs in Britain from the late 1930s to 1997, Gill, Hadaway and Marler say (1998:514):

these surveys show a significant erosion of belief in God . . . Second, the most serious decline occurred in specifically Christian beliefs including belief in a personal God and belief in Jesus as the Son of God as well as traditional Christian teachings about the afterlife and the Bible. . . Third, while traditional Christian beliefs changed markedly, non-traditional beliefs remained stable albeit among a minority of respondents.

That last point is worth dwelling on. Keith Thomas (1978), who is favorably cited by Stark, shows that in certain times and places, significant sections of the laity of the Middle Ages were not orthodox and observant Christians. He does so by showing in great detail that they were believers in heretical superstitions and practitioners of deviant magic. The orthodox and the deviant together formed the vast bulk of the population. In twentieth-century Britain, the swing to 'non-traditional beliefs' fell a long way short of compensating for the decline in orthodox Christian beliefs.

The decline of traditional Christian beliefs should be no surprise. Whether there is some essential human need to raise spiritual questions is too broad a question to be answered here, but there is no mystery about why Christian beliefs should decline when the institutions that carry them decline. Ideologies do not float in the ether. They need to be preserved; mechanisms must exist to acquaint the next generation with those beliefs. In the 1850s, most people attended church. Basic Christian ideas were taught in school, legitimated by every major social institution, promoted by the social elites, reinforced by rights of passage, and pervaded every aspect of social life. Even in the 1930s, when church-going was becoming less common, a large proportion of Britain's children would have had some acquaintance with Sunday school. Now the vast majority of people do not go to church and only the children of churchgoers go

to Sunday school. Christian ideas are not taught in schools, are not promoted by social elites, are not reinforced by rights of passage, and are not taken-for-granted in the mass media. Given those changes it would indeed be a miracle if Christian ideas were as popular now as they were in the 1950s.

CONCLUSION

Taken in isolation, none of the data presented above would be compelling. Any one index is unreliable. Definitions of membership or attendance or belief change. In a multi-national state with a wide variety of churches, the base lines inevitably shift. Proportions are inevitably dubious because some sources use the entire population while others use only adults as the denominator (and the cut-off point for defining adulthood shifts). But what makes the data presented above compelling is their cumulative effect. All of them point the same way — towards increasing secularization — and they have consistently pointed that way for between 50 and 100 years, depending on the index in question.

When Stark first articulated his revisionist depiction of religion in Britain, church attendance stood at 12 percent. Twenty years later it has fallen below 8 percent. Well-informed commentators, sympathetic to the plight of the churches, such as Brierley (2000: 28), write seriously of the prospect of organized Christianity falling below the critical mass required to reproduce itself. When the Methodists, the exemplars of nineteenth-century dissent, finally fold around 2030, when the Church of England is reduced to a trivial voluntary association with a large portfolio of heritage property, and when church attendance falls below 1 percent, will the supply-siders finally stop insisting that secularization is a myth?

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