
Both the theme of this important book and proof of its argument can be found in an unremarkable explanatory aside made in its introduction. In a discussion contrasting the continuing influence of Christian fundamentalism in the United States with the situation in Great Britain in the year 2000, Brown writes: ‘The result was that, despite its science and technology, and despite its modernity and consumerist values, the USA allowed religious ideas like creationism and ‘intelligent design’ (based on the literal interpretation of Genesis, the first book of the Bible)….’ (p. 12, emphasis added). It would not have been necessary to explain to anyone at the beginning of the twentieth century, the period when Brown begins his narrative, that Genesis was the first book of the Bible. Yet, at the beginning of the twenty first century it does seem necessary, even in a book that seems designed for use, among other things, as a university undergraduate textbook. This is the dramatic change we have witnessed, and *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* sets out to explain how and when this change happened, and to suggest a few possibilities as to why.

*Religion and Society* begins with an introduction which sets out the movement of Britain from a Christian culture to a secular and pluralistic culture, discusses various theories as to what, when and why it happened, and gives an overview of some of the important statistics indicating this change. The rest of the book is arranged chronologically. Callum Brown has wisely chosen not to divide the chapters by decade, but instead to focus on key themes. This is reflected in the titles and time divisions of the chapters, such as ‘The faith society, 1900-1914’, ‘Trench religion, 1914-1919’ and ‘Christian culture in confusion, 1920-1945’. Brown’s argument is that while there was minor change in the place of religion in the early twentieth century, Britain continued to be a
culturally Christian country, and indeed witnessed a significant religious revival following World War II. The chapter ‘Faith in austerity, 1945-1959’ includes a rich discussion of the impact of the Billy Graham Crusades in London, in Scotland, and throughout the rest of Britain. As Brown reminds us, ‘So many people claimed in 1950 to be churchgoers at some point in the year that what is revealed is a highly religious society underpinned by a widespread Christian culture, sustained by the churchgoing activity of young people who grew up during the war years’ (p. 185). This changed dramatically in the 1960s, and the final two chapters, ‘The sixties revolution, 1960-1973’ and ‘The shaping of secular society, 1974-2000’, chronicle this change.

The book is well written and comprehensive. Much of the discussion in Religion and Society focuses on Christian traditions, due in no small part to the dominance of Christianity, in particular large denominations such as the Church of England, Methodists, and the Church of Scotland, throughout most of the period under study. At the same time Brown does cover smaller religious denominations such as the Quakers and the Free Presbyterian Church as well as the growth of Islam, Hinduism, and other faiths in Britain throughout the century. Another feature of the book is a variety of sidebars which go into greater detail on a particular topic or individual. These include discussions of topics such as the early twentieth century Welsh evangelist Evan Roberts, the impact of World War I combat on the religion of those who participated, and a discussion on Christmas in British society. While separate from the main text, the sidebars emphasize points being made in the narrative. For example, the description of Mary Whitehouse and her campaign in the 1960s and beyond to keep television morally pure, emphasise the transitions of this period that Brown describes in the main text.

Those familiar with Callum Brown’s Death of Christian Britain will find the same major theme being developed. In Religion and Society, however, this theme of the sudden, dramatic movement of Britain out of a Christian discourse is developed within traditional narrative structure. That is, Brown tells us the story and how it unfolded over the century, rather than thematically as was the case with Death of Christian Britain. In the story both the voices of clergy and those of laypeople can be heard. This balance is one of the strengths of the book. Too often religious history is told from the viewpoint of the clergy and
church authorities. If there is one thing the book illustrates, perhaps unintentionally, it is the incredible unreliability of the clergy’s insights into the faith of the average person. Commenting on clergy perceptions of a falling away from faith in the early twentieth century, Brown notes: ‘Much of what British churchmen at the time characterised as a loss of faith was actually a loss of Edwardian reverence for social authority – for obedience to the clergy. The class system was changing, but popular Christian faith still retained resilience’ (p. 112). Clergy always seem to have been convinced that people were falling away from the church and to have complained about this, and in the late twentieth century it actually happened. By using oral testimony of average British people, Brown is able to illustrate the continuing importance of religion to lay people through most of the twentieth century and when this changed. Their insights illustrate powerfully the changes that Callum Brown describes.

This is an important book. It provides a reliable and thorough overview of the dramatic shift that we have seen in the place of religion within British society in the twentieth century. It will prove a great textbook for courses dealing with religious history and selections from it could be used for general survey courses. The chapter on the 1960s in particular would serve well as a reading for a survey course on post World War II Britain, adding the important dimension of religion to our understanding of British society in this period. We need to ensure that such an awareness of religion and its importance in the past is recognized, because the culture in which we now function sees it more as an exotic relic, than as something that once was a central part of culture.

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