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*Unité et diversité des
évangélismes actuels*

Éléments pour une typologie

Evangelicalism : where the US goes will Europe Follow ?

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Introduction

The basic fact of religion in the United Kingdom since 1900 is decline. Church membership, church attendance, and survey indices of popular belief all show considerable and accelerating decline. For example, in 1851 at least 40 and perhaps as high as 60 per cent of the population of Great Britain attended church. In 1979 it was around 12 per cent ; in 1989 10 per cent ; in 1999 under 8 per cent. In the 1980s, the Church of England lost 24 per cent of its attenders ; the Methodists almost half. In 1900 there were about 45'500 clergy in the UK. Had the Christian churches been as powerful or as popular at the end of the century as at the start, there would have been 80'000 clerics ; there were some 34'000. 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. At the start of the twentieth century, more than 80 per cent of marriages in England and Wales were solemnised in church ; at the end of the century, the figure was less than 40 per cent¹.

Within that pattern there is an important difference in the fates of the sectarian and denominational types of Christianity. The liberal denominations have declined rapidly ; the conservative sects have remained static or declined less rapidly, thus making them an ever larger part of the shrinking Christian culture. What is almost certainly the largest decline is seen in the most liberal denomination : with 30'000 members in 1945 and only 6'700 fifty years on, the Unitarians lost 78 per cent of their people. Within the Baptist tradition, the more sectarian Grace Baptist Assembly showed growth of 17 per cent between 1980 and 1995 while the Baptist Union of Great Britain declined by 6,2 per cent. Leaving aside those churches that recruit mainly from immigrant groups, the best performances were recorded by Pentecostal organizations and by the charismatic « house churches » of the 1970s (now usually called « New Churches »). The pentecostal Assemblies of God saw a 70 per cent growth between 1980 and 1995. The Elim Pentecostal Church grew by 100 per cent. Quantifying the New Churches is difficult but Peter Brierley (who put considerable effort into tracking them for his English Church censuses) suggests a ten-fold growth : from a total membership of around 10'000 in 1980 to over 100'000 in 1995 (Brierley 1999).

¹ For a comprehensive survey of data and listing of sources see Steve BRUCE, « Religion in Britain » and ID., « Christianity in Britain ». For data on beliefs see Robin GILL, C. Kirk HADAWAY and Penny LONG MARLER, « Is Religious Belief declining ? » and Clive FIELD, « The haemorrhage of Faith ? ».

The same pattern can be found in the USA. Between 1950 and 1975 the highest growth rates were sustained by the two most conservative organizations – the Southern Baptist Convention (80 per cent) and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (60 per cent) – while the lowest growth rates were sustained by the two most liberal major churches : the United Methodist Church (3 per cent) and the United Church of Christ (-7 per cent) (Roozen and Carroll 1979). In Holland the liberal Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands lost 40 per cent of its members in the decade 1990-2000. The mainstream Dutch Reformed Church lost 23 per cent of its members. But seven small conservative Protestant churches remained stable and there was even some growth among evangelical and charismatic groups (Krol 2001). It is not just in the *numbers* of adherents that we can contrast the relative strength of sectarian and denominational versions of Protestantism. There is also a signal difference in their levels of commitment. As Brierley's English church attendance studies show, the best attenders were to be found in the charismatic New Churches, followed by the independent evangelicals, the Baptists and the Pentecostals. The worst were the Church of England, the United Reformed Church, and the Methodists (Brierley 2000 : p. 80).

Explaining Conservative Resilience

Why have conservative sects better resisted secularization than liberal denominations ? First we should note that much of church growth and decline may be better explained by a variety of contextual considerations than by the intrinsic merits or otherwise of the beliefs, structures, rituals, liturgies, ministries and social lives of the organizations in question. For example, evangelical religion in Scotland, Wales and, to a lesser extent, the north and west of England, has suffered from a reduction of its population base as young people have left the British peripheries for education and work. Churches traditionally strongest in these areas would have had to be markedly better at recruiting than churches that were based in industrial Wales, the central belt of Scotland or the English home counties just to stay level.

There are a number of explanations of conservative success that stress intrinsic factors. Stark and Bainbridge (1985) suppose that sectarian religion is more attractive than the liberal sort because traditional supernaturalistic religions offer bigger compensators than modern liberal ones. It can, for example, satisfy the meek who will inherit nothing in this life with the promise of everything in the next. However, the idea that the decline of liberal churches has been caused by large numbers of adults defecting to something more spiritually satisfying is not supported by the evidence. Surveys that compare people's religion in childhood and in adult life show a strong flow from mainstream churches to « no religion » and almost no movement in the more conservative direction (Breen and Hayes 1996 ; Lawton and Bures 2001).

Kelley's explanation of conservative success was concerned less with beliefs as such and more with their socio-psychological and structural correlates (1972, 1978). Hoge summarised Kelley's work as follows :

Strong churches are characterized by (1) a demand for high commitment from their members, including total loyalty and social solidarity. They (2) exact discipline over both beliefs and life-style. They (3) have missionary zeal, with an eagerness to tell the good news to all persons. They (4) are absolutistic about beliefs. Their beliefs are a total, closed system, sufficient for all purposes, needing no revision and permitting none. They (5) require conformity in life-style, often involving certain avoidances of non-members or use of distinctive visible marks or uniforms (Hoge 1979 : p. 179-80).

From that complex picture we can separate out two different elements : that concerned with maintaining a sub-culture and hence with retaining its members and their offspring and retention and that concerned with outreach or missionary zeal. To see which is most relevant to the British setting, we should consider what is known about the source of recruits to conservative Protestant organizations.

Given that the dominant trend is decline, it is not surprising that very few outsiders join British churches. A survey of the 249 UK Brethren congregations in 1978 showed that 40 per cent had seen no adult conversions in the previous two years (Brown and Mills 1980). Ten years later, that figure had risen to 45 per cent. Handley's study of over 600 people who had made a public declaration of faith in some British Christian church showed that 81 per cent had been raised in a Christian home (Handley 1992). A Methodist survey of new members found that 87 per cent had a Christian family background ; 62 per cent had their first contact with church through Sunday school (Methodist Home Division 1990). Nor, despite their greater commitment to outreach, are evangelical churches more likely to recruit the heathen. An Evangelical Alliance survey (1968) found that 71 per cent of a sample claiming a religious conversion had been regular church attenders and as the average conversion age was just under 15, we can assume that this record of juvenile participation largely reflected the commitments of the parents of the converts. Hunt's Scottish Baptist data show that averaged over the 20th century there were only 4 baptisms per 100 members and that « it takes each Baptist 25 years of being a Baptist to bring just one new person to faith in Jesus Christ » (1997a : p. 34).

The obvious conclusion is that, while evangelistic work certainly is an aid to recruitment in attracting both a small number of switchers from other conservative churches and an even smaller number of outsiders, it is better seen as an index of commitment that in turn is related to the far more important area of retention (and, if families are large enough, growth) : child socialization. Hunt's Baptist studies show that more than half of those baptised had regularly attended Sunday school and had church-going parents (1997b : p. 59).

The importance of parental commitment is clear from any number of studies. To cite just a few, a recent study of 172 children of 68 Baptist ministers (Sykes 2001) showed that 70 per cent of those children grew up to be « whole-hearted » or « warm » in their adult attitude to the Christian faith (the other options being « neutral » and « antagonistic »). A very large study showed a considerable difference between the religious commitments of children raised by parents depending on whether the parents share the same faith or not. Williams and Lawler

(2001) analyse '512 respondents, divided into three groups : those whose partners belong to the same church ; those whose partners belong to a different church ; and those whose partners initially belonged to a different church but then switched to the same church. The study showed that people whose partners were of a different church « had significantly lower average religiosity scores » than those whose partners were initially of the same religion or subsequently shifted to the same church. The two religious homogenous groups scored higher « on a number of religiosity variables, including religious behaviors, joint religious activities, sense of belonging to a local church or congregation, religion being a strength in the marriage, respondent emphasizing religion in raising children, and spouse emphasizing religion in raising children » (Williams and Lawler 2001 : p. 469).

We would have to know a lot more to be sure of the direction of cause but it seems likely that there are a number of things going on here. First, the decision to marry someone of a different religion probably shows a relative lack of commitment. It is hard to imagine a committed conservative evangelical marrying someone who did not share his or her faith (and what would count as the same faith would be very narrowly defined). Hence willingness to marry out probably indicates marginal commitment. Although it is possible for a couple to attend separate churches, one can hardly imagine it makes for a comfortable life or that it would deepen the commitment of either partner. But the arrival of children raises the issue of one's commitment in a particularly stark way because decisions have to be made about what the children should be taught. Children of same religion marriages will get a firmer religious socialization than those of mixed religion marriages.

There are two reasons for this. Deliberate mixed-religion marriages (especially when one of partner is not at all religious) represent one of two things : either a casual attitude to religious identity or a thoughtful and deliberate commitment to ecumenism. Adults who sit lightly to their own church commitment (especially if they are willing to marry someone who has none) are hardly likely to work hard to raise their children in the faith. Liberals are quite different. We can readily imagine a serious committed but very liberal Catholic marrying a similar Presbyterian and both parents working very hard to teach their children both faiths and the liberalism necessary to reconcile them. However, we can also recognise that such children with start their adolescence with a greater knowledge of a wider range of religions but with less of a commitment to any.

To summarise so far, the decline of the Christian churches in Britain in the 20th century was seen first in the mainstream and liberal ones. Most conservative evangelical organizations managed to remain stable or to decline at a much slower rate. However, it seems clear that little of this relative success was due to recruiting either non-Christians or liberal Christians. Mainly it reflected the greater success in retaining existing members and, most importantly, retaining their children.

The Californication of US Evangelicalism

Shibley's (1996) survey of recent changes in US Protestantism follows me to this point. In the US parallel, the post-war period has seen the decline of the mainstream and liberal denominations and the expansion of the sectarian evangelical religion associated with the southern states. But this came to an end in the 1980s. What we might now call the traditional evangelical churches – conservative in dress and demeanour, formal in worship styles, dogmatic and doctrinaire, puritanical in personal behaviour, and oriented to salvation in the next life – are losing position to a new type of evangelical church.

Shibley describes a Vineyard congregation. Its services are informal, as is dress. The music is California soft-rock. As one congregant put it : « The pastor isn't like a dictator. He has a soft voice and a very casual way. He isn't shaking the finger at us and condemning people » (Shibley 1996 : p. 87). The church teaches very little doctrine. It is not dogmatic. It is certainly not puritanical : members drink, smoke, use much the same language as anyone else, divorce, and have sex out of wedlock. Its primary focus is personal therapy. For Vineyard, the salvation won for us by Christ's atoning sacrifice is not as the eternal enjoyment of freedom from the woes of this world. It is feeling happier, healthier and more confident *in this world*. With considerable supporting evidence for this depiction, Shibley uses the weberian term « world-affirming » to contrast the new evangelicals with the traditional ascetic world-rejecting culture. Although Vineyard congregants use some of the old fundamentalist language, what it means to them is not much like what it meant to an earlier generation. For example, 95 per cent of those surveyed by Donald Miller (1997) say they are born-again but only 37 per cent believe the Bible is the actual word of God (a classic touchstone fundamentalist belief).

This simplifies, of course, but there seems to be a basic difference between the Pentecostalism of the 1920 and the recent charismatic movement, both in appeal and in clientele. The former recruited from the lower classes and from disadvantaged minorities. It offered both miraculous (and sometimes this-worldly) assistance for those much in need of it. What Miller calls « new evangelical movements » and Shibley calls « world-affirming evangelicalism » seems very different. It recruits from the prosperous and confident who seek, not compensation and change, but affirmation and approval. The new evangelicalism is not a traditional repudiation of self-confident individualistic consumerism but its expression. One of Shibley's Vineyard congregants, when asked if she was happy at Vineyard said : « Yes, I think its good for right now » (Shibley 1996 : p. 87). And it is clear that she will decide, as the autonomous consumer, when something better is required.

The conclusion to Shibley's *Resurgent Evangelicalism* neatly expressed the extent of privatization :

The new evangelical churches know and accept their marginality in the culture and are growing precisely because they attend primarily to the therapeutic needs of individuals and not to politics in the wider society. Evangelical Protestantism outside the South is growing today by catering to

the culturally hip, and in making the tradition palatable, these new born-again congregations concede moral ground. Thus conservative Protestantism is being transformed, and the perception that resurgent evangelicalism signals a reinvigoration of traditional Christian values in American culture is simple inaccurate (1996 : p. 137).

Changes in UK Evangelicalism

It is a little early to be entirely sure but I see good grounds for supposing that conservative evangelical churches in Britain are now declining or losing their distinctive sectarian identities (which, I will predict, is the first step towards them declining).

I will give examples from Scotland and England. The two main conservative Presbyterian churches in Scotland, that clearly « out-performed » the Church of Scotland in the second half of the 20th century, have both recently split. In the late 1980s the Free Presbyterian Church divided over the Church's decision to punish a senior figure for attending a Catholic service. Lord Mackay of Clashfern, the then Lord Chancellor (head of the UK's legal institutions) was censured for attending the funeral for a legal colleague. In 2001, after a decade of internal wrangling over the theological opinions and the purported sexual indiscretions of one of its most prominent figures, the Free Church split. Out of 174 clergy, 34 (a third of them retired) left to join either the Free Presbyterian Church or to form the Free Church Continuing. But behind the specific occasion for the schisms lay a long-running and general dispute between those who wished to moderate and those who wished to strengthen the conservative evangelical opposition to modernity.

Although it is a little early to be sure of the statistics, there is no doubt that these schisms, though they are more symptom than cause, have occasioned rapid decline in evangelical Presbyterian. In 1980, the Free Presbyterian Church had about 7'000 members. In 2000, the members claimed by the two factions is no more than 4'000 and some observers think it is considerably less than that. In 1980, the Free Church had about 21'000 members. In 2000, the reported total of the two factions was around 15'000 and, again, observers think the actual figures are markedly lower.

The main change in English evangelicalism in the last two decades has been the growth of the charismatic New Churches (as noted above, there are now some 100'000 such congregations) and the decline of the traditional sects. The independent evangelical associations that resulted from congregations in more mainstream churches rejecting liberal and ecumenical trends in the 1960s and 1970s have shown a marked decline in church attendance, as have the mainly white pentecostal churches (but not the black ones ; they continue to grow with immigration). There is a clear pattern of defection to the New Churches that Brierley detected in his surveys (Brierley 2000 : p. 38-44). In 1998 there were 850 fewer « Independent » evangelical congregations but 650 more New Churches and he is sure that a large proportion of the latter are the former re-branding themselves.

It is important to understand where the New Churches have come from. It is clear from individual biographies and from the histories of congregations that the overwhelming majority of those who joined the charismatic movement in its first radical decade were conservative evangelicals. Walker says : « The members of these [house] churches were primarily from sectarian backgrounds... dissenters from Brethren, classical Pentecostal, Evangelical Free Baptist, Salvation Army, and various non-aligned churches » (1998 : p. 59). They were attracted by the idea of combining their old sectarianism with the new gifts of the spirit, the more relaxed and contemporary worship styles, and the more relaxed attitude to morality and contemporary culture. As with the contrast between the old and new evangelical movements in the US, in the contrast of old and new in the UK we can see the clear influence of upward social mobility. The New Churches tended to attract professional middle class people.

The trend can be illustrated with the example of the Brethren in Aberdeen. A number of Brethren assemblies were declining in the 1970s. One, based in a declining area of the city, moved out to the affluent suburbs and re-branded itself as the Deeside Christian Fellowship. Its new relaxed worship styles and dress codes, and its new stress of personal therapy and on « healing » in the most general sense, attracted a large congregation of young affluent professional families, many of them English and American people attracted to Aberdeen by the oil industry.

A similar shift from traditional conservative evangelicalism to a more charismatic form can be seen in the Australian churches. The very large National Church Life Survey in the early 1990s showed that some 12 per cent of church attenders had changed affiliation in the previous five years. A lot of the movement was short range : « More than 40 per cent of switching occurs between denominations within the same denominational grouping » (Kaldor *et al.* 1994 : p. 246). But where people had shifted groupings, the largest movement was from Baptist churches to Pentecostal ones.

As the British charismatic movement has grown it has lost much of its distinctiveness. In the late 1970s it attracted much hostility for its authoritarian and hierarchical structures. In what was called « shepherding », wives were subordinated to their husbands and male members were subordinated to the group leaders. Shepherds often intervened in what in most churches would be regarded as private matters ; members were instructed in their decisions about careers, house sales, marriages and the like. That has now largely been abandoned, as has asceticism. The old evangelical stress on doctrine and dogma has been replaced by the experiential and the therapeutic. The trend is from world-rejecting sects to world-affirming groups which are denominational in ethos. Stripped of its original authoritarianism, the charismatic movement has proved to be, not a revival of conservative orthodoxy at all, but a liberalising movement.

In brief, traditional evangelicalism in Britain is in decline for three reasons : it is losing individuals to liberal churches (which continue to decline because they are failing to retain members at the rate required for stability) ; it is losing individual

adolescents to the secular world ; and it is losing whole congregations that are shifting in a charismatic direction. And as they shift they become less distinctive. That much we can see already. I now want to add an element of prediction (although it is really extrapolation from previous waves of change). I fully expect that the New Churches will continue to move in the denominational direction. I expect adults to become more comfortable with people outside their fellowships and less constricted in their choice of marriage partners. The children of such « mixed » marriages will be only weakly committed to the faith, if at all. The end result will be even more defection and even greater pressure on the world-affirming evangelical churches to become even more liberal.

Conclusion

Although it could do with more rigorous examination, my conclusion can be simply stated. We must always remember that church growth and decline take place in a specific context. Conservative evangelical churches in Britain enjoyed a period of stability vis-à-vis the mainstream churches because they deliberately shunned much of the culture of the modern world. But strategies of avoidance and insulation could only do so much. They were effective when the level of ambient religion in the wider society was reasonably high. But, partly because of the decline of the mainstream churches, the world outside has become more dramatically hostile. If we consider the sexual explicitness now found in the mass media, the rates of divorce, the widespread acceptance of homosexuality, the casual attitude to recreational drugs, the consensus around evolutionary theories of the origins of the species, the proportion of women in the labour force and the decline of traditional gender roles, the insistence on the rights of the individual consumer, we can see the point. Most damaging, the dominant culture has become thoroughly relativist about competing religions. To give just one illustration, Oxford University Press publishes a very widely-used and comprehensive set of books for teaching basic literacy in primary schools : the *Oxford Reading Tree*. Young children will read one day about Muslims, the next about Hindus, then about Sikhs. Christians are described simply as one faith community among others, with no suggestion at all that Christianity is superior to the alternatives or even that it is possible to adjudicate between alternative religions.

At the same time as the cultural mainstream has become ever less pleasing to evangelicals, the ability of sub-cultures to avoid it has been reduced. This is in essence the globalization thesis. Economies of scale have seen local commercial enterprises swallowed up by international firms. Most local newspapers are now part of national and international chains with highly mobile staff and a large amount of common cosmopolitan content. Increased professionalization in public administration has seen the erosion of local distinctiveness. Small regional television channels have been bought up by the major providers and their programmes are now made in London or the USA. With the steady growth of population towns and cities have expanded and small schools have been replaced with ever-larger ones in which children are confronted by cultural diversity. Children in the Outer Hebrides and the remote west of England can now log on to the Internet. With the expansion of higher

education, more and more young people are being drawn to and educated in cosmopolitan centres. Put simply, it is now far harder than it was in the 1950s for conservative evangelical parents to raise their children in isolation from the wider world.

In conclusion, the traditional sectarian varieties of evangelicalism are now following the British mainstream churches into decline. Some evangelical groups have responded to the press of the cultural mainstream by becoming more liberal and denominational but, if the fate of the liberal churches is any precedent, then these too will decline. In either case, the period of conservative resilience seems now to have ended.

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