Enemy within? The appeal of the discipline of sociology to religious professionals in postwar

Britain.

Abstract: This article explores the contingencies shaping a particular moment in postwar

British theology when sociological descriptions of contemporary society were given new

authority by church leaders and theologians anxious to discover a new way through the

challenges facing their churches. Attention focuses on the history of religious sociology in

Britain, and on industrial mission, social history and theological radicalism as they converged

in the work of a number of British commentators in the 1950s and 1960s. The article also

considers the significance of this development for the theory and historiography of

secularisation.

Key words: sociology, secularisation, industrial mission, social commentary, social theology,

Modernism

Introduction

        In March 1961 a small gathering of academic sociologists took place at Nuffield

College, Oxford, on the theme of 'The Sociology of Religion'.[1] Nuffield was then just

twenty-four years old, the most recent addition to Oxford's collegiate townscape, but sited –

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[1]   N. Birnbaum, 'Nuffield Conference on the Sociology of Religion 24-27 March 1961',
Archives de sociologie des religions, 6e année, no. 11 (1961), 147-8.

appropriately enough for an institution dedicated to the social sciences – out of the medieval city centre, near the railway station. Convened by the radical American sociologist Norman Birnbaum, the conference would probably present a rather unusual profile today – just fourteen men (no women), drawn from Europe and America, but with no less than five religious 'professionals' amongst them. Birnbaum's brief report gives little insight into the discussions which occupied the group over four days, but a sign of their nature is its regret that Gabriel Le Bras was unable to attend. I do not know if Le Bras ever visited Britain, but Britain – or rather the sociological establishment – never took much to Le Bras. The standard accounts of the history of the sociology of religion in Britain almost invariably distance themselves from his 'confessional' approach, calling his work, in the words of Michael Hill, "institutional, Roman Catholic, and…service-oriented", taking the content of theological dogma "as given" rather than "as part of the problem".[2]

'Religious sociology', at least in Le Bras's form, never had much appeal in Britain, condemned as it was by both empirical and theoretical schools of British sociology. This may or may not be related to the much-trumpeted isolationism and 'drearily provincial' nature of British sociology, at least as it was described by the new generation of politically-motivated social theorists and sociologists who came to the fore in Britain in the 1960s.[3] But it also illustrated different concerns. There was, as we shall see, a strong tradition of social survey in Britain which encompassed the study of religion and presented superficially similar

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[2] M. Hill, *A Sociology of Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 9.

[3] The phrase 'drearily provincial' was that of the editor of the *New Left Review*, Perry Anderson, as quoted in J. Rex, 'British Sociology 1960-80 – An Essay', *Social Forces*, 61 (1983), 1003.

sets of concerns to those of Le Bras. This so-called 'empirical' approach was not without its own commitments, and these were almost consciously non-confessional for a very good reason. Already, by the middle of the nineteenth century, at the origins of modern British sociology, British society was both religiously serious and yet religiously pluralist, and riven by sectarian conflict: high levels of churchgoing overall coincided with a fragmentation of British Christianity into 'State' or 'established' churches challenged by a multitude of Protestant dissenting denominations, with further divisions fomented by the growth of Roman Catholicism and strands of virulent anti-Catholicism. All the early forays into comparative religious statistics were controversial. Social commentators largely withdrew from the field of religious controversy in the following century to nurse their wounds.

As a consequence what passed for a British 'sociology of religion' in the immediate post-1945 period, perhaps for a generation or so, was marked by a paradox. On the one hand, the institutional reality of religion in Britain remained powerful and almost omnipresent through the late 1940s into the early 1960s. Constitutionally, Britain remained officially a Christian country, with two 'established' churches, in England and Scotland. The Christian churches were powerful providers of education at primary level. Though available statistics – mostly gathered up in *Churches and Churchgoers* (1977) – do show decline at varying rates from the early twentieth century, nevertheless to a remarkable degree in this period church practice seemed to be holding up reasonably well.[4] Shifts in key indices such as Easter communicant figures and confirmations (for Anglicans), and in the rites of passage, were

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[4] R. Currie, A.D. Gilbert & L. Horsley, *Churches and churchgoers: patterns of church growth in the British Isles since 1700* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977).

mostly minor and could give little hint of the coming religious crisis of the 1960s.[5] Some

historians have even gone so far as to speak of a 'revival' of the 1950s, when Anglicanism in

particular seemed to achieve a newly-fashionable peak, with famous adherents or converts

such as C.S. Lewis, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden and Dorothy L. Sayers.[6]

But on the other hand both the British sociological tradition and the broad mass of

religious commentary, when they reflected on the position of Christianity in British society,

assumed a fateful, inexorable downward trajectory. A report commissioned by the

Archbishops of York and Canterbury spoke, in 1945, of a "wide and deep gulf between the

Church and the people", and of the "present irrelevance of the Church in the life and thought

of the community".[7] This was language familiar to generations of observers of church life in

Britain. And it is language backed up by a formidable battery of historians. Even if the

recent trend amongst historians has been to question the dominance of the secularisation

master-narrative – more on that shortly – nonetheless there is incontrovertible evidence that

the churches were losing ground gradually but significantly from the early twentieth century

on. Simon Green has written of the 'passing' of Protestant England in the mid-twentieth

century – what he calls a "crucial moment in the decline of indigenous religious life", when

[5] See for example the summary in C.G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain. Understanding secularisation 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001), 161-9.

[6] Cf. A. Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-1985* (new edn., 1987, London: Collins, 1986), 444; for a sceptical view, S.J.D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England. Secularisation and Social Change c.1920-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 242-72.

[7] *Towards the Conversion of England* (London: Church Assembly, 1945), 2-3.

the relevant indicators "all point in one, downward, direction".[8] The most detailed study yet

of local religious life after 1945 – Ian Jones's study of Birmingham churches – traced clear

evidence of decline in the contrasting experience of a younger generation whose gradual

disaffection with and withdrawal from the mainstream churches could be identified from at

least the late 1950s, if not earlier.[9] And an ongoing research project on religious statistics in

modern Britain, by Clive Field at Birmingham University, also returns to the theme of a

gradual but perceptible secularisation in the mid-twentieth century, when the free churches

were hit especially hard.[10] My own work on South Wales in the twentieth century confirmed

this, with near-catastrophic falls in church membership (admittedly from exceptionally high

levels) for some of the free churches in the half century up to the 1950s.[11]

It is the paradox of an apparently robust institutional church life, offset or undermined

by the conviction of decline which we can observe at work in church commentary after the

war, and trace in long-term religious trends, that lies behind the argument of this article. I

aim to examine the response of church leaders to the perception of institutional decline, and

their willingness to resort to social observation and sociological theory to help them think

through strategies of revival. These strategies were not, mostly, to work. Inasmuch as

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[8] Green, *Passing*, 33.

[9] I. Jones, *The Local Church and Generational Change in Birmingham 1945-2000*
(Woodbridge: Boydell, 2012), 62-9.

[10] C.D. Field, 'Gradualist or Revolutionary Secularization? A Case Study of Religious
Belonging in Inter-War Britain, 1918-1939', *Church History and Religious Culture*, 93
(2013), 57-93.

[11] J.N. Morris, 'Religion', in C. Williams & A. Croll (eds), *The Gwent County History, 5.
The Twentieth Century* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), 246.

revival did come to some British churches in the late twentieth century, it came from unexpected quarters – from immigration, and from a charismatic renewal that was a world away from what the radical theologians of the 1960s envisaged. The article falls into three parts. First, I shall look in closer detail at the emergent sociological tradition in Britain in the twentieth century, in order to consider the nature of its attraction to some clergy. This will require elaboration of a distinction between social commentary and social theology, both of which however overlapped in a particular approach to Christian ethics in Britain which attracted the name 'Christian sociology', and yet which faded quickly after the war in the face of the rise of the secular discipline of sociology. Second, I shall examine the most striking example of an English 'adaptation' to the social analysis of religious change, namely the emergence of industrial mission. Third, and briefly, I shall proceed to sketch what I here call the 'second moment' of English Modernism, when a number of radical theologians, influenced by what they assumed to be the truth embedded in the sociology, came to advocate ambitious programmes of theological and institutional reform. Yet these programmes were to prove themselves illusory and impractical. In this sense, the sociology of religion was indeed an 'enemy within', undermining the churches' own confidence in their historic mission just at a time when they were about to encounter the fiercest period of contraction in their modern history.

The sociological tradition in Britain

If religious sociology on the model of Le Bras was not attractive or available to British church people in the mid-twentieth century, what kind of sociology was? Until the expansion of higher education in the 1960s, broadly speaking British sociology was

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dominated by an emphasis on social survey and social commentary, and by a corresponding lack of interest in high theory. It is not without significance that the most commonly-praised contribution British theorists made to Marxism in the late twentieth century was in the field of historical studies (and not social theory), where something like a working school of Marxist historiography, exemplified by people such as Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm and Edward Thompson, exerted a powerful influence on the shape of social history, up to the present.[12] Thompson, notoriously, polemicized engagement with social and critical theory in his *Poverty of Theory* (1978). Even so, these historians were to prove themselves much more persuaded of the merits of theory than were many of their sociological colleagues. Fierce debate was to break out between theorists and, for want of a better term, 'empiricists', after the 'incursion' of Marxism into British sociology from the 1960s on.[13] On one side, even sociologists not otherwise known for high flights of theory, such as Kenneth Thompson, could criticize leading sociologists of religion for their reluctance to grapple with questions of methodology.[14] And on the other, the foremost living British social theorist, Anthony

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[12] Cf. H. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians – an Introductory Analysis* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984).

[13] Rex, 'British Sociology', 1003.

[14] K.A. Thompson, 'Religion: the British contribution', *British Journal of Sociology*, 41 (1990), 531-5; his prime targets were Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce. Thompson was the author of a Weberian study of the bureaucratic development of the Church of England in the twentieth century: ibid., *Bureaucracy and Church Reform: the Organizational Response of the Church of England to Social Change 1800-1965* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970).

Giddens, could find himself condemned as a symptom of sociology's decline for his apparent failure to engage with 'real' social situations.[15]

As far as the sociology of religion in Britain is concerned, the real origins of the discipline lay not so much in the theoretical work of Durkheim, Weber, Tönnies and others, as in the nineteenth-century tradition of social commentary. This was, at first, not systematic or quantitative, so much as personal, observational, and impressionistic. Its most famous instances were Henry Mayhew's *Morning Chronicle* articles on the London labouring poor, gathered up into *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), and the passionate polemic by the Congregationalist minister, Andrew Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883). Another source, however, was official, namely the great series of Parliamentary reports – the 'Blue Books' – into the health, education, working conditions and habitations of the labouring poor that successive administrations produced in response to political pressure from the 1830s on, including even self-published 'classics' of the genre such as Edwin Chadwick's *The Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population* (1842).[16] The moral and religious preoccupations of social commentary were fused with the more systematic methodology of the Parliamentary commissions in the great series edited by Charles Booth on *The Life and Labour of the People in London* from 1881 to 1891, which included volumes

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[15]   S. Fuller, 'A Very qualified success: the case of Anthony Giddens and British sociology', *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 25 (2000), 507-16.

[16]   On Chadwick, see S.E. Finer, *The Life and Times of Sir Edwin Chadwick* (London: Methuen, 1952).

on 'Religious Influences'.[17] This was in many ways the first true 'sociology of religion'

survey in Britain, though what is significant perhaps is that it was not so much a survey of

church life – hence perhaps the reason it largely avoided interdenominational criticism – as of

the role churches played in shaping the life of the poor.

Central to this emergent tradition of social commentary was the conviction that

churches were failing to adapt to urban and industrial change, failing to attract significant

numbers of the labouring poor, and failing to transform the lives of the poor. The paradox I

noted above – high religious observance combined with a conviction of failure – was

established at the heart of this British 'sociology' of religion very early, then – in the mid-

nineteenth century. Its source – cutting a long story short – was manifold. It lay in part in the

observation that churches (especially Anglicanism) often adjusted with difficulty to rapid

transitions in demography and the urban landscape.[18] It also lay in the production of new

techniques of estimating religious success, and in the development of systematic strategies of

surveying church growth attuned to the age of statistics.[19] A third cause, and a surprisingly

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[17] Cf. J. Harris, *Unemployment and politics: A study in English social policy, 1886-1914*

(Oxford: Clarendon, 1972).

[18] Cf. A.D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England. Church, Chapel and Social

Change 1740-1914* (London: Longmans, 1976), 76-81.

[19] This was particularly true of the new fashion for church 'censuses'. There is as yet no

comprehensive study of this phenomenon, though there is a very extensive literature indeed

on the one 'official' census of church attendance, that of 1851, for which see, for example,

K.D.M. Snell & P.S. Ell, *Rival Jerusalems. The Geography of Victorian Religion*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

neglected one (until recently) was the theological logic of Christian revivalism, which predicated the need for evangelism on the recurrent tendency of human beings to fall away from the standards of belief and practice expected of them, and which therefore projected its own 'secularising' argument as a critical 'other' over and against which it had to strive.[20] In much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century social commentary, then, we can trace a mournful, pessimistic assessment of the actual influence of the churches, which expressed, *not* the anti-religious assumptions of a materialistic social science, but rather the moral and religious ambitions of an emergent discipline with its roots in the churches. Booth's 'Religious Influences' were absolutely saturated with this moral perception of decline. Just one example will have to suffice. Writing of the inner London district of Battersea, for example, he claimed "the mass of the people [are] indifferent and irresponsive and materialistic to a high degree" and that the "incoming population makes for degradation" so that "not only does religion evoke hardly any response, but its ministers are conscious that the conditions of life are daily growing worse".[21]

Not all commentators were so pessimistic. But even those such as Charles Masterman, whose *Condition of England* (1909) attempted a more panoramic assessment of English society at the beginning of the twentieth century, saw a threat to religion in the

[20] Cf. J.N. Morris 'Secularization and Religious Experience: Arguments in the Historiography of Modern British Religion', *Historical Journal* (2012), 195-219; also, D. Erdozain, 'The secularisation of sin in the nineteenth century', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 62 (2011), 59-88.

[21] C. Booth, *The Life and Labour of the People in London,* 3rd Series: *Religious Influences, vol. 5, South-East and South West London* (London: Macmillan, 1902), 165.

growing establishment of apparently 'liberal' values of tolerance and equality. Even as he

could assert that the general standard of humanitarian sentiment was "probably higher in the

cities than ever before", "present belief in religion" was slowly but steadily "falling from the

modern city race". [22] Quoting Booth with evident agreement, Masterman argued that the

climate of supernatural fear which had helped to sustain evangelism in the past was fading in

the face of modern materialism; the churches laboured steadily on amid "a huge

indifference", and even taking into account class and regional variations, this "fading of the

background" was evident "amongst all classes of the community and throughout the whole of

the modern world".[23] Masterman did not hesitate to use the word "abandonment" in

describing the withdrawal of the working classes from church.[24] Another pioneering work of

social commentary that referenced Booth, Lady Florence Bell's study of Middlesbrough,

noted as a simple fact – without making any of the speculative explanations of Masterman –

that nearly three-quarters of the city's population were absent from church on Sunday.[25]

It was this tradition of social commentary which remained central to British sociology

right up until the 1960s. It was there, for example, in the repetition of Booth's work by

Llewellyn Smith and Bowley at the London School of Economics in the 1930s, though with

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[22] C.F.G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London: Methuen, 1909), 266.

[23] Masterman, *Condition of England*, 267-8.

[24] Masterman, *Condition of England*, 272.

[25] F.E.E. Bell, *At the Works. A Study of a Manufacturing Town* (London: Edward Arnold, 1907), 10.

little explicit discussion of religious influences.[26] It was there in the work of Mass

Observation, the social survey organisation founded in 1937 which gathered data as first-

person testimony on British social life into the 1960s.[27] It was there, arguably, in the social

commentary of George Orwell, in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), for example,

though with little sympathy for the churches. It was there in the work of Geoffrey Gorer,

whose studies of English mores, such as *English Life and Character* (1955), were to prove so

popular, if ephemeral, in the 1950s and 1960s. It was there most vividly in the work of

Seebohm Rowntree, in many ways the natural heir to Charles Booth, whose series of studies

of York continued the same preoccupation with the systematic, survey-based study of social

life, with an interest in religion. In *English Life and Leisure* (1951), for example, the chapter

on religion not only recorded very striking falls in churchgoing in York between 1901 and

1948, but also used a great deal of oral testimony to conclude that the majority of those

"outside the Churches, and very likely a majority of the whole population, have…rejected so

much of the Christian story as related in the New Testament that no Church could recognize

them as Christians at all". [28]

Three points are worth drawing out from this brief excursus on the history of British

sociology. First, although many of the works I have mentioned really fall into the genre of

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[26] Cf. H. Llewellyn Smith & A.L. Bowley, *The New Survey of London Life and Labour* (9

vols., London: King, 1930-5); see also R.A. Kent, *A History of British Empirical Sociology*

(London: Gower, 1981).

[27] See N. Hubble, *Mass Observation and Everyday Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006).

[28] B. Seebohm Rowntree & G.R. Lavers, *English Life and Leisure. A Social Study* (London:

Longmans, 1951), 354-5; see also Green, *Passing*, 66-7.

social commentary, in their more systematic embodiments – Booth, Rowntree, Mass Observation, amongst others – they helped to establish a tradition of sociologically-informed comment that characterised sociology as it was known and read by a relatively wide public, including of course religious professionals. In this sense, it was the closest one could come, by the 1940s and 1950s, to the religious sociology of Le Bras, even though it was a tradition or genre that had not itself developed a systematic methodology for studying religion. But in this more inchoate or fluid form, nonetheless, it did embed and project a certain reading of the relationship of Christianity to modern society, and one that for the most part accepted what was later to be called the 'secularisation meta-narrative'. To put it bluntly, British social commentary in the mid-twentieth century schooled clergy, theologians and church leaders, amongst others, in a largely pessimistic reading of the place of Christianity in the modern world, and thus laid much of the groundwork for the subsequent flourishing of radical proposals and experiments for religious reform and renewal in the following decades. And yet, whilst justified to some degree by the available data on church membership and attendance, this regretful narrative of religion in the modern world also exaggerated Christianity's failure, and in turn missed countervailing influences that were to complicate the status of religion in Britain over the next half century.

Second, this tradition of social commentary should be distinguished from a separate if sometimes related tradition of social theology that, from early in the twentieth century, began to attract the title of 'Christian sociology'. The roots of this lay partly in the work of nineteenth-century Anglican Christian Socialists such as F.D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley, and were developed in a 'second wave' of Christian Socialism in the hands of church leaders

and theologians such as Stewart Headlam, Charles Gore and Henry Scott Holland.[29] The phrase itself was widely in use by the late nineteenth century, with appeals for the development of a 'Christian sociology' almost routine at church conferences.[30] What did it mean? It was applied primarily in the sense of a specific approach to social ethics, and was therefore a prescriptive theological 'discipline' rather than a descriptive or analytical one. It implied an interpretation of Christian faith that emphasized the broadest social appeal and sense of social responsibility, aimed particularly at deepening the Church's ministry amongst the labouring poor, but which did not flinch from advocating collective solutions to urban poverty, rather than the more conventional forms of philanthropy. This was the sense in which it was taken up particularly by a group of writers between the wars called the 'Christendom Group'. For twenty years from 1925 the ideal of 'Christian Sociology' was propagated through a 'house' journal, *Christendom*, and through books, pamphlets, articles and speeches by its leading figures, who included the Anglican priest Vigo Demant (1893-1983) and the layman Maurice Reckitt (1888-1980).[31] But it was also influential on a broader stream of Anglican thought, stretching to encompass that most prominent of mid-century Anglicans, William Temple (1881-1944).

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[29] Cf. J.N. Morris, *F.D. Maurice and the Crisis of Christian Authority* (Oxford: OUP, 2005); P.D'A. Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival 1877-1914: Religion, Class and Social Conscience in Late Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

[30] Cf. the account of Bishop Alexander of Derry's speech to the Wolverhampton Church Congress in *The Times*, 6 October 1887.

[31] Cf. V.A. Demant, *God, Man and Society. An Introduction to Christian Sociology* (London: SCM, 1933); also, D. Lyon, 'The Idea of a Christian Sociology: Some Historical Precedents and Current Concerns', *Sociological Analysis*, 44 (1983), 227-42.

Whilst strictly a sub-branch of theology, nonetheless Christian sociology drew upon the insights of the tradition of social commentary I have described. Demant, for example, went so far in 1944 as to label the present situation of British society as "post-Christian", having largely lost "the doctrine and feeling upon which the results [of the Christian outlook] have been reared".[32] Indeed the term 'secular society', like 'secularisation', was already widely in use in much like its modern sense by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[33] In the work of the Christendom Group one can thus already see the main outlines of the understanding of the 'secular society', and of 'secularisation', that was to come to the fore in the post-war period. Unlike many of the radical theologians of the 1960s, however, the Christendom Group's view of the 'secular society' was essentially negative, produced not in order to advocate a radically secularised concept of faith and the Church, but to reassert programmes of evangelisation and social action that a later generation would come to regard as conservative. This was evident also in the writing of the moderate High Churchman and historian, Roger Lloyd, whose work straddled both the inter-war and post-war periods, and whose history of *The Church of England in the Twentieth Century* underwent several reprints and two major extensions after the appearance of its first volume in1946. Lloyd drew on both social commentary – Masterman, Bell, and Booth – and Christian sociology to construct a scathing picture of the growing materialism of the early twentieth century ("the Church…had to break the loyalty commonly devoted to these new and powerful gods which

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[32] V.A. Demant, *Theology of Society. More Essays in Christian Polity* (London: Faber, 1947), 45.

[33] Cf. C.F. Rogers, 'Sociology and Pastoral Theology', in *The Economic Review*, 21 (1911), 41.

could not save"), and to describe the task of the Church along lines evocative of Demant and the Christendom Group.[34] In *The Church and the Artisan Today* (1952) Lloyd began his analysis of the missionary imperatives of contemporary society with "the most urgent of all the Church's many problems", which was that "the most numerous class in the nation seems on the whole to be quite impervious to all efforts to bring it to worship God".[35]

Third, and ironically, the startling changes in the nature of British sociology as a theoretical discipline in the 1960s, which accompanied the foundation of new departments of sociology in the new universities, and the 'incursion' of Marxism, alongside other theoretical perspectives, themselves assumed the essential truth of the meta-narrative of secularisation, and took that as the primary subject of investigation in the matter of religion. Whilst jettisoning much of the social commentary tradition in the search for a 'purer' sociology, then, the sub-discipline of the sociology of religion as it emerged in Britain in the 1960s moved decisively away from, not towards, the tradition of Le Bras. Its leading figure was Bryan Wilson, who epitomized the hard-edged theorist of secularisation; his *Religion in Secular Society* (1966) became perhaps the most influential statement. He disclaimed any particular theoretical orientation, but merely to be recording and describing a fact.[36] The disavowal was not altogether convincing, however. It was implicitly criticised by David

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[34] R. Lloyd, *The Church of England in the Twentieth Century*, I (1946), 49; II (1950), 102-5.

[35] R. Lloyd, *The Church and the Artisan Today* (London: Longmans, 1952), 1.

[36] "The concept of secularization is not employed in any ideological sense, neither to applaud its occurrence, nor to deplore it": B.R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society. A Sociological Comment* (new edn., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 11.

Martin, another influential observer of contemporary religious trends.[37] Moreover what was to come closest to continental religious sociology was to be, not British sociology of religion as such, but an important strand of the new social history of religion which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, in the hands of scholars such as Hugh McLeod. McLeod's *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City* (1974) was the first truly systematic study of churchgoing and religious practice in Victorian Britain, undertaking a close analysis of contrasting social classes and neighbourhoods in London.[38] It was to be followed in the ensuing decades by a steadily lengthening list of case studies, too many to be enumerated here. As one commentator was to put it in 1987, comparing America and Britain, "Historical sociology flourishes in both [countries]…In Britain, however, nearly all the practitioners call themselves historians".[39]

Ted Wickham and Industrial Mission

[37] Cf. D. Martin, 'Towards eliminating the concept of Secularization', in J. Gould (ed.), *The Penguin Survey of the Social Sciences* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 169-82; in a later essay, Martin speaks of the 'ideological contamination' of the concept of secularization by authors such as Wilson (for whom, nevertheless, he generally has evinced great respect): ibid., *The Future of Christianity. Reflections on Violence and Democracy, Religion and Secularization* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 26.

[38] D.H. McLeod, *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City* (London: Croom Helm, 1974).

[39] C. Calhoun, 'History and Sociology in Britain. A Review Article', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29 (1987), 615.

I turn now to consider more closely the implications of all this for the influence of the sociology of religion on theologians and church leaders in the third quarter of the twentieth century. In this section I am going to look briefly at the most famous and possibly most influential application and development of the tradition of social commentary I have sketched, namely Ted Wickham and the foundation of Industrial Mission. In the next and final section I will proceed to widen out the analysis somewhat, and to look at the broader ecclesial implications in the 1960s and 1970s.

Ted Wickham was an Anglican priest, born into a humble London family, who was to pursue a distinct ministerial career as the foremost advocate of industrial mission. A protégé of Leslie Hunter, bishop of Sheffield and in his own way a pioneer of ministry to industry and the industrial working class, Wickham was steeped in the British traditions of social commentary and Anglican social theology, as well as in social theory and continental theology.[40] He was also influenced by the French worker priest movement, and especially the Mission de France. His most famous book by far was a highly original study of the interaction of the churches and industrial society in Sheffield, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (1957). There Wickham combined both historical statistics and effective quotation from social and religious commentary to conclude that "[f]rom the emergence of the industrial towns in the eighteenth century, the working class…have been outside the churches"; or, as he put it forcefully elsewhere, it was not that the churches had lost the

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[40]   There is no biography; biographical details are from A. Jowett, 'Edward Ralph Wickham (1911-1994)', *ODNB*.

working class, but that "they have never had them".[41] He was prepared to acknowledge that

the second half of the nineteenth century were years of 'religious boom', but they were

followed, in the first half of the twentieth century, by what he called the years of 'decline and

fall': if he could regret the tendency of churchmen to bewail the decline of the churches

("there are few themes so tiresome and profitless"), nevertheless his aspiration was to subject

a trend he assumed to be true to a "sound and dispassionate analysis".[42]

Church and People went through several reprintings, and rapidly acquired the status

almost of a 'classic' of modern religious history. The most extraordinarily diverse range of

scholars praised its careful use of historical data, and assumed the essential truth of its

interpretation. It was compared by Desroche, for example, in *Archives de Sociologie des*

Religions, to the work of Le Bras himself and his school, and described as reaching,

remarkably given the difference of nation and circumstance, virtually identical conclusions

about the relation of church and industrial society.[43] Yet we also find it routinely praised in

the work of church historians of the 1960s and 70s.[44] It straddled remarkably well, for a time,

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[41] E.R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London: Lutterworth, 1957), 14;

ibid., *Encounter with Modern Society* (London: Lutterworth, 1964), p. 35. For a historical

critique, see J.N. Morris, 'Church and People Thirty-Three Years on: A Historical Critique',

Theology, 94 (1991), 92-101.

[42] Wickham, *Church and People*, 166.

[43] H.D[esroche], review, in *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, VI (1958), 197.

[44] Cf. K.S. Inglis, *The Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London:

Routledge, 1963), 326-7; E. R. Norman, *Church and Society in England 1770-1970. A*

Historical Study (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 463.

the double context of social history and church reflection on contemporary society. Its

historical methods and conclusions are widely disputed now, however.[45] We have already

seen the 'predisposition' to a pessimistic view that Wickham would have imbibed from many

of the authors he read, as well as from his pastoral experience of religious alienation in

Sheffield. It is hardly surprising, then, that he tended to read his sources teleologically,

turning even evidence for church growth into a sign of religious hubris. The shadow of crisis

hangs over the whole narrative of the book. Admittedly he did recognize the efforts made by

the churches in the second half of the nineteenth century, and even cited evidence from a

local church attendance census in 1881 which showed churches keeping pace with population

growth: "the 1881 figures…do in fact represent a vast body of church- and chapel-goers

that…add up to a substantial proportion of the population in the churches".[46] Nonetheless the

inroads churches made into securing regular attendance in this period were not allowed to

dent his confidence that the churches 'had never had' the working class.   Nor could his

considerable sympathy for the 'prophets', the tradition of Anglican social theology he traced

back through Temple to Charles Gore and beyond, prevent him from asserting, with a touch

of acknowledged exaggeration, that "in terms of effective consequence, it adds up

to…nothing!"[47] In this way, Wickham projected a chasm between his analysis of the

situation of the Church, and the efforts of preceding generations.

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[45]   Cf. M.A. Smith, *Religion in Industrial Society. Oldham and Saddleworth 1740-1865*

(Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), pp. 2-3.

[46]   Wickham, *Church and People*, 148.

[47]   Wickham, *Church and People*, 240

The significance of Wickham's work was particularly registered in the growth of industrial mission. There were precedents, represented in the nineteenth century in part by the Settlement movement, and in the twentieth century by William Temple and by the Industrial Christian Fellowship. But industrial mission in Wickham's eyes was much more than a means for studying the problems of modern society; rather, it represented a mission strategy, an attempt to produce new, more effective ways of reaching out to industrial workers and their families, but going out to mix with them and work amongst them in their workplaces, rather than expecting them to come to the churches from which they were alienated. Appointed as diocesan missioner to industry in the diocese of Sheffield in 1944 – the same year as the foundation of the Mission de Paris – in time Wickham's work came to encompass attempts to explore new ways of encouraging vocations to the priesthood from working men.[48] Wickham himself, however, resisted the comparison with the worker priest movement in France, to the disappointment of a number of more radical voices within the Church of England, and on surprising grounds: the worker priests movement, he claimed, reflected a more serious class divide than existed in Britain, and a greater hostility to organized religion than was true in Britain, for, as Wickham claimed, "the stain of the Churches runs widely over British society if thinly, even into groups that have been historically estranged from them".[49] The addition of assistant missioners created a team in Sheffield, and a model of industrial mission that was to be followed widely across Britain

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[48] Cf. J. Mantle, *Britain's First Worker Priests: Radical Ministry in a Post-War Setting* (London: SCM, 2000).

[49] Cf. D.L. Edwards (ed.), *Priests and Workers. An Anglo-French Discussion* (London: SCM, 1961); J. Rowe, *Priests and Workers. A Rejoinder* (London: DLT, 1965), citing ER. Wickham, 16.

over the next four decades.[50] By the 1960s, most dioceses of the Church of England had

industrial chaplains of some sort or other, and most major cities had an industrial mission,

usually organized on ecumenical lines, the best-known perhaps being the South London

Industrial Mission.[51] Industrial mission appeared, for a time, to be a creative and forward-

looking response to social change, until the rapid contraction of British manufacturing

industry in the 1980s and 1990s attenuated its primary constituency and eventually evacuated

it of a convincing rationale. Most missions and their associated posts disappeared in the

1990s and 2000s, or mutated into other forms of mission engagement. Wickham himself

thought that industrial mission had been tamed and diluted by episcopal intervention long

before then, however.[52]

In a recent doctoral thesis, as yet unpublished in its entirety, Sam Brewitt-Taylor has

recast the conventional reading of Wickham's work, seeing it not so much as an exercise in

historical study as in radical theology.[53] As Brewitt-Taylor points out, Wickham was

profoundly influenced by the then common interpretation – now much disputed – of

Bonhoeffer's advocacy of a 'religionless Christianity', a religion suited to a modern humanity

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[50] Cf. M. Northcott, *The church and secularisation : urban industrial mission in north east England* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1989); also P. Bagshaw, *The church beyond the church : Sheffield Industrial Mission, 1944-1994* (Sheffield: Industrial Mission in Yorkshire, 1994).

[51] Cf. M.N.A. Torry, 'The development of the practice and theology of the South London Industrial Mission', unpub. PhD thesis, University of London, 1990.

[52] Mantle, *Britain's First Worker Priests*, 87-92.

[53] S. Brewitt-Taylor, '"Christian Radicalism" in the Church of England, 1957-70', unpub. DPhil. thesis, University of Oxford, 2012.

'come of age', and which therefore predicated a plea for a radical reform of Christianity for the new epoch on the assumption that the 'old epoch' was rapidly passing away.[54] Brewitt-Taylor argues that the idea of a 'secular society' was, in effect, invented by radical theologians in the 1950s and 1960s, following on from Bonhoeffer, Tillich and others, and assumed a harder, "totalizing discourse of secularization"; it appeared suddenly in the 1960s, having been advocated by a Church liberal intelligentsia for some years: "As the 1950s drew to a close, such highly pessimistic assessments of the prospects for traditional Christianity proliferated in the theologically liberal and the theologically radical sections of the Church".[55] This is certainly a startling, fresh examination of Wickham's intellectual context; previous commentators have downplayed or entirely overlooked the theological radicalism subserved by Wickham's version of historical sociology.[56] Brewitt-Taylor broadens out Wickham's work decisively into an interpretation that makes much more sense of the theological stream into which it passed, and on which it exercised such influence. But there is a degree of overstatement here. His argument is that the 'secularization' language used by Christian radicals in the 1960s owed nothing to nineteenth-century usage, but was *sui generis*.[57] This is surely an unnecessary exaggeration of the argument. It neglects both the influence of the religiously pessimistic vision of British social commentary and the embedded assumptions about a 'secular society' that can be traced through much of the work of the

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[54] S. Brewitt-Taylor, 'The Invention of a "Secular Society"? Christianity and the Sudden Appearance of Secularization Discourses in the British National Media, 1961-4', *Twentieth Century British History*, 24 (2013), 337.

[55] Brewitt-Taylor, 'The Invention of a "Secular Society"?', 337-8.

[56] This dimension is missing, for example, from Morris, 'Church and People Thirty-Three Years On'.

[57] Brewitt-Taylor, '"Christian Radicalism"', 145-6.

Christendom Group, amongst others, and its forebears much earlier in the century. It also

ignores the very presence of the language of 'secular society' and 'secularisation' which can

be detected at work in various media from at least half a century earlier or more. To say as

much is not to discount Brewitt-Taylor's reconfiguring of the theological interpretation of

Wickham, however. The historical sociology, or rather religious sociology, which Wickham

considered he was writing entirely complemented his radical theological vision, even as it

distorted and over-simplified its description of the history of British religion.

The 'second moment' of English Modernism

In the final section of this article, I want to set Wickham's work briefly alongside that

of a number of other Anglican writers in the 1960s and 1970s, whose writing demonstrates to

what ends this British 'sociology of religion' could be put. Brewitt-Taylor argues that the

'Christian radicalism' of the 1960s owed little to the earlier, aborted phase of Anglican

Modernism, but rather stemmed from the influence of continental authors, and in particular

Bonhoeffer and Paul Tillich, whose *Shaking of the Foundations* (1949) was, for a time, a key

text in the religious evolution of a number of radical voices who were to play an important

part in church arguments in the 1960s.[58] This is probably right, in the genealogical sense at

least: that earlier phase of radicalism, associated with names such as Hastings Rashdall and

H.D.A Major, though it survived in institutional form in Ripon Hall, a theological college

near Oxford, and in the journal *Modern Churchman*, nevertheless had long ceded theological

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[58]   Brewitt-Taylor, '"Christian Radicals"', 100-1; John Robinson made this assertion of

himself, in *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963), 21-2.

influence to quite different, more orthodox or conservative voices such as William Temple, Oliver Quick and Michael Ramsey. There is little evidence that these new 'Christian radicals' read Rashdall, Major and others, or were strongly influenced by them.[59] And yet there were striking similarities –the same sense of an urgent need for a revision of traditional formulae, an impatience with Anglo-Catholic arguments on order and Evangelical arguments on soteriology, a conviction that changing situations in the world required radical doctrinal reformulation, amongst others. Though, as Brewitt-Taylor rightly avers, not only the source, but the eschatological infrastructure (a 'crisis' conviction probably owing much to Neo-Orthodoxy, via Bonhoeffer and others) of Christian radicalism was substantially different, nevertheless in relation to Anglican orthodoxy this appeared to be a new 'Modernist' moment.

Its institutional context was framed by running awareness of the pressures of decline. Perhaps the most powerful evidence of this were the succession of reports produced by the Church of England in an attempt to reconceive ordained ministry at a time when numbers of ordinands were declining rapidly. The Paul report, *The Deployment and Payment of the Clergy* (1964), assembled a formidable array of evidence behind the proposition that historians "have left us in no doubt that the decline in the influence of the Church is the other

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[59] I cannot be wholly confident of this assertion, however: David Edwards was a student at Westcott House in the early 1950s when Charles Raven was still active in Cambridge, and may very well have been aware of the work of the modernists through people such as Raven and John Burnaby.

side of the medal of the increasing secularisation of society".[60] Radical proposals for giving

the Church more direct control over recruitment, deployment and pay followed, highlighted

again by the urgent need of the Church to adapt to change.[61] Nearly twenty years later, the

Tiller report on *A Strategy for the Church's Ministry* (1983) noted how Paul provided for

expansion, but in fact the Church experienced contraction, from over 15,000 clergy in 1964

to 10,800 in 1983.[62] The 1960s and 1970s were years not only of falling congregational

numbers, but of the closure of theological colleges, amalgamation of rural parishes, the

closure and in some cases demolition of city-centre churches, and increasing experimentation

with alternative models of ministry, including non-stipendiary ministry.

But, again as Brewitt-Taylor shows, the keynote of this 'second moment' of Anglican

Modernism was not, at least initially, so much despair, as an almost apocalyptic conviction

that the moment had arrived for radical change. The most famous exposition of this view

was John Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963), a runaway bestseller which called for a new

presentation and interpretation of Christian faith. Even here, however, remote as Robinson's

radical theology might seem from the industrial preoccupations of Ted Wickham, the shadow

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[60] L. Paul, *The Deployment and Payment of the Clergy* (London: CIO, 1964), 11; Hastings

points out that, for all its thoroughness, its conclusions were "just wrong, based on gravely

false assumptions": Hastings, *English Christianity*, 535.

[61] *Partners in Ministry, Being the Report of the Commission on the Deployment and

Payment of the Clergy* (London: CIO, 1967).

[62] J. Tiller, *A Strategy for the Church's Ministry* (London: CIO, 1983), 17.

of decline hung over the rhetoric of change.[63] But it is with more mundane writers that we sense the abiding influence of the tradition of religious decline. David Edwards (b. 1929), for example, a prolific author who defended John Robinson and edited an influential collection of essays on the *Honest to God Debate* (1963), though himself a more moderate figure than some, essentially displayed the same conviction about the alienation of the masses from the churches as that held by Wickham: "[the churches] offend England not because they are too lively but because most of them seem to have been decaying over the last half-century".[64] He also displayed much the same commitment to radical reform of the Church.[65] In his many writings, Edwards repeated the broad generalisations about the downward trajectory of Christian belief and practice in Britain that we saw in the British tradition of social commentary.[66] Another example would be Trevor Beeson (b. 1926), Secretary of the 'Parish and People' movement in the early 1960s, and later editor of the radical Christian journal *New Christian*.[67] Again, as with Wickham and Edwards, Beeson advocated reform of church structures on the presumption of the Church's inability to adapt to modern society, and given its assumed failure in the preceding century and a half. He claimed that the Church of England was an institution "saddled with the burdens of conservatism and division, which made significant progress painfully slow, if not actually impossible".[68] Quoting Wickham in

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[63] Robinson did actually refer to Wickham, but to his use of Bonhoeffer, a point which substantiates Brewitt-Taylor's argument: Robinson, *Honest to God*, 25.

[64] D.L. Edwards (ed.), *The Honest to God Debate* (London: SCM, 1963), 15.

[65] Edwards, *Honest to God Debate*, 15-7.

[66] See, for example, D. Edwards, *The Church That Could Be* (London: SCM, 2002), 1-5; his main historical survey was *Christian England*, 3 vols (London: Collins, 1981-4).

[67] Brewitt-Taylor, '"'Christian Radicals"', 29.30.

[68] T. Beeson, *The Church of England in Crisis* (London: David-Poynter, 1973), 23.

his survey of the Church's problems, he suggested that whilst numerical decline might actually be good for the Church, producing a leaner and tougher body, it would require a radical reshaping of the Church's ministry, liturgy and life, and that could hardly be expected to happen "while those who remain in the church are condemned to operate a machine which belongs to another age".[69] Ironically, Beeson was later to have a ministry at the heart of the establishment, first at Westminster as a canon, and later as dean of Winchester, regretting many of the opinions he had voiced in the 1960s (not least his extraordinary proposal, not of course followed through, that the historic church of St Margaret's, Westminster, the 'parliamentary church', should be demolished as it no longer served a useful purpose).[70]

But it is not necessary to go simply to these modern 'Modernists' to see the imprint of the secularisation narrative embedded in the British tradition of sociology. Its effect was pervasive through all the main Christian denominations in Britain in the half-century after 1945, with the possible exception of Roman Catholics, who continued to experience growth in Britain until the 1960s.[71] The Congregationalist minister and industrial chaplain, Richard Taylor, paid tribute to Ted Wickham in his *Christians in an Industrial Society* (1961).[72] In a puzzling, bewildered late book even Roger Lloyd attempted to come to terms, not only with the fact of secularisation, but with the new currents of theological criticism which built on it, even paraphrasing Wickham himself to assert that "we have not lost the industrial worker, for

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[69] Beeson, *Church of England in Crisis*, 58.

[70] T. Beeson, *Window on Westminster. A Canon's Diary 1976-1987* (London: SCM, 1998), 316.

[71] Green, *Passing*, 72-3.

[72] R. Taylor, *Christians in an Industrial Society* (London: SCM, 1961), 8.

we never had him…The humiliation of the Church has been statistically rubbed in by rows and rows of depressing figures".[73] The Evangelical Anglican David Sheppard, later to be a progressive bishop of Liverpool, assumed the same narrative of religion's inexorable fall in his foray into urban theology, *Built as a City* (1974), which, incidentally, made reference to the work of Boulard.[74] Perhaps the most famous, or notorious, statement of an Anglican social mission, *Faith in the City* (1985), with some historical nuance acknowledging the relative success of nineteenth-century Anglicanism, nonetheless repeated all the same broad, pessimistic assertions about secularisation, even paraphrasing (without referencing) Bryan Wilson to the effect that it was the process "whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance".[75]

Conclusion

The highly contested historiography of secularisation in modern Britain has been distorted or misled by a tendency to hyperbole on both sides of the debate. Those adhering to the common meta-narrative of secularisation have been persuaded to read countervailing evidence of the growth and persistence of religion as essentially a mere blip in the inexorable

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[73] R. Lloyd, *Ferment in the Church* (London: SCM, 1964), 12-3.

[74] D. Sheppard, *Built as a City. God and the Urban World Today* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1974), 36-7 & 43-4.

[75] Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City. A Call for Action by Church and Nation* (London: CHP, 1985) , 31; cf. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society*, 14.

downward curve. Those critical of conventional accounts of secularisation, on the contrary, have tended to play down clear evidence of institutional contraction and religious attenuation. Neither side has proved itself adept at acknowledging the sheer complexity of the question, and even the most impressive recent restatements, which have generally avoided the pitfalls of either extreme, including those of Callum Brown and Simon Green, are not without some problems. In this article I have described one of the means by which secularisation narratives came to be so powerful in the thinking of church people themselves in the post-war period, despite the paradox of seeming institutional survival and yet evidence of decline with which I began. I have adjusted the argument recently advanced by Sam Brewitt-Taylor that the idea of a 'secular society' was inserted in British theology by the influence of a radical, continental reading of eschatology. Whilst not disputing the persuasive case he makes for the theological influence, I have reasserted the corresponding and abiding influence of a British tradition of social commentary, tantamount in its day to an empirical sociology of religion, which retained at its core an assumption of Christianity's fading strength in industrial and modern urban society (and which, incidentally, was reinforced by fiction and by popular culture). As a historian, I can only note the force of conviction of these commentators, at the same time as indicating the many *lacunae* in their arguments. To do so comprehensively would, however, require an altogether different account from that which I have been able to offer here.

What may remain, however, is simply the question 'Why'? Laying to one side the theological arguments which reinforced the secularisation narrative, why did church people find the picture drawn by this British sociological commentary so persuasive? Part of the answer to that question lies in the observation, which is no more than an expansion of some comments above, that it was a *tradition* of commentary – deeply rooted, widely held,

embedded in popular well as 'high' culture, at once seemingly 'scientific' and at the same time morally freighted, making sense *both* of the real data gathered fitfully but extensively over a century or so *and* of the missiological imperatives of modern Christian soteriology, and owned or articulated by church people themselves as much as by non-believers. Put at its simplest, it was a tradition which was so pervasive that it might even be called a pathology, a sort of default in modern Christian thinking according to which traditional Christianity could not survive in the modern world unless it reformed and adapted. It was, I emphasize again, a tradition grounded in real, observable trends in modern society – in a solid set of observations about indices of religious practice, and in a practice of oral survey that lay at the heart of sociological practice as much as marketing. But for all that it also simplified and streamlined otherwise complex and variegated social processes, producing a readily digestible account of the trajectory of traditional religion in Britain. This suited Christian radicals of the kind analysed by Brewitt-Taylor, but it also suited Christian conservatives, who could use it to attack what they saw as the misplaced arguments and strategies of the 'liberals'. It was an argument of convenience, then, but to the extent that it simplified, it also occluded, overshadowing a series of developments in modern British society that were under way already by the 1960s but overlooked by many church commentators in that decade, including the effects of mass immigration from Christian communities in the Caribbean and from West Africa, the growth of the charismatic and Pentecostal movements, the resurgence of conservative Evangelicalism, and the divisive effects of arguments over the ministry of women and over sexual ethics.

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