



European Religious Exceptionalism

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The traditional theory about modernisation is that it necessarily involves secularisation. In my 1994 book *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* I showed that a decline in churchgoing in Britain was matched by a decline in active membership of political and social organisations, and that what we were seeing in Britain was not so much a decline in belief but a change in the way that belief was expressed. The phenomenon seems to be a general symptom of late modernity. As young people escape from the authority of a church structure they don't just lose their belief; it simply changes - becoming immanent rather than transcendent for example. And there is some evidence that once the shackles are shaken off people return to ritual. In countries like Poland or Eire, where young people still feel the pressure of church discipline, they tend to rebel; but in other European countries at least some young people (in contrast to their parents) are opting, once again, for church marriages.

Unlike my 1994 book, my book *Religion in Modern Europe: a Memory Mutates*, published in 2000, did not sell like hot cakes, probably because it had the word 'Europe' in the title, and little puts the English public off more than the concept of 'Europe'. In this book I develop the idea that an instinctive adherence to religion in Europe is accompanied by the notion that churches operate vicariously: they are there to perform public functions and social roles on behalf of us all. After the sinking of the 'Estonia', for instance, the Swedes, supposedly a very secular people, instinctively went to their churches, and the Archbishop knew that it was his role to speak on their behalf. The churches in Europe are still considered a public utility, but they come to attention only if they are taken away; this is a completely different pattern from that of the USA. Religion in Europe is like an iceberg: most of what is interesting is under the water and out of view.

I like to set my students the following essay title: 'Is churchgoing deviant behaviour in British society?' In the sense that it is a minority activity, the answer is yes; but if by 'deviant' is meant flying in the face of socially acceptable values, the answer is no. People for example generally want their vicars to be happily married even if they themselves

are not; they want the clergy to stand vicariously for traditional values.

The dominant trend is from 'obligation' to 'consumption'. Churches which rely on the former are not going to get anywhere in the twenty-first century. In contrast, a small, but still significant, number of people in Europe are now choosing to attend church - and the important word is 'choosing'. Indeed far more people nowadays attend church than are actively involved in political parties or social organisations. You have to compare like with like: i.e. the active members, rather than those who support the RSPB with a standing order but otherwise take no steps to protect birds.

Freedom to choose one's faith is obviously a good thing, but too much choice can make people 'choosy'. What we have undoubtedly lost in contemporary European society, however, is a shared discourse or grammar of faith.

What are the current objects of religious choice? One is obviously the conservative evangelical churches, with their offshoot in Alpha Courses; the latter have been an amazing success, now involving a million and a half people. If Alpha were a secular movement the media would be all over it; but it's religious and so they're less interested. One reason for the success of Alpha is that it is a win-win phenomenon: not only does it supply answers, the feel-good factor is also high. Another choice is what might be called the 'aesthetic' one, which is more individualistic. People go to a cathedral or a city-centre church, chosen on the basis of its good preaching or traditional liturgy. They go for an 'experience'. Symptomatic of this type of choice is the huge sale of CDs of religious music. Linked phenomena are pilgrimage, which is growing all over Europe, and gatherings like Greenbelt or the Kirchentag. What secular movements bring in crowds like these? Incidentally, I'm much less convinced by the claims that New Age is a phenomenon of mass appeal: I don't think it adds up to much.

What about Eastern Europe? Do the same patterns apply? Do things develop differently when, instead of having pressure put on them to attend church, people have been prevented from attending church for a generation? Are Central and Eastern Europe experiencing a different modernity from Western Europe, or will it be the same modernity just a bit delayed? Will the *Orthodox* world turn out to be different, while the rest of Central/Eastern Europe becomes ever more like Western Europe? My own prediction is that this will indeed be the case.

I am becoming ever more uneasy about the idea of the privatisation of religion, the concept (most developed in France) that religion is an entirely private affair. There is now a big issue in France over the public manifestation of Islam, a religion which can't be privatised. On this side of the Channel, the question on religion in the UK census was inserted as a result of pressure from the Muslims, who wanted to identify themselves as a religious group rather than as members of different

ethnic minorities. I also suspect that a significant number of people who identified themselves as Christian in that census were really saying that they were not Muslims. Italy and Greece are traditionally countries of emigration. Over the last decade, for the first time, they have been experiencing immigration. One telling phenomenon is that we hear a great deal about Muslim Albanians immigrating into Italy, but no protest at all about Filipino Catholics. My latest book, *Europe, the Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World (2002)*, is about Europe again; but this time I am identifying what Europe is not rather than what it is. I am setting it in the context of case studies from various other parts of the world.

In Europe, the churches are a public utility. In the USA they are private enterprises. This is what lies behind the surprise which awaits Americans coming to Europe to sell a product who meet unexpected resistance and resentment from churches which are already *in situ*. More generally, I am very suspicious of American solutions to European problems.

In Latin America a remarkable and new phenomenon is the growth of Pentecostalism. It is in fact growing strongly everywhere in the world except in Europe. (Here the exception is the Roma, as we heard at the CEWERN [briefing](#) on 16 January 2003.) In the developing world, it seems that Pentecostal growth is a consequence of very rapid urbanisation and modernisation. Christianity, including Pentecostalism, has grown fast in South Korea and the Philippines; as metropolises such as Seoul and Manila grew, so did the numbers flocking to the churches.

These and other examples from around the world show that everywhere outside Europe modernisation and industrialisation often involve an invigoration of faith rather than the reverse. Immigrants to Europe are often treated with suspicion precisely because they are seriously religious. The GATE movement stands for 'Gospel from Africa to Europe'. Europeans are wrongfooted: they are used to giving rather than receiving.

All this seems to me to show that there are several different modernities, and that only the European version is predominantly secular. In Europe, modernisation (especially the growth of industrial cities) began in the nineteenth century and involved secularisation partly because religion was embedded in territory and when people were uprooted they lost contact with their faith. Most other modernities, however, have religion as one of their active components.

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