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US and UK Religion 2013

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Religion on two sides of the Atlantic

The publication in May of the Church of England’s annual attendance statistics produced a flurry of headlines about rising numbers at Christmas, falling numbers in certain dioceses and steady numbers overall. The many different slants from Church and media bring to mind the saying popularised by Mark Twain about lies, damned lies and statistics. It is difficult to capture the changing nature of churchgoing in numbers, as the interpretation of those figures becomes a battleground of received opinion. This article examines the changing nature of Church adherence in England and the United States.

One element of received opinion has been that whilst church attendance in the United Kingdom has been flaky, in Twain’s homeland of the USA it remains solid. But even here numbers, appearances and interpretations are in a state of flux, for example the rise of those self-describing as “unaffiliated” has increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults in the last five years. Such developments in the US suggest that the two sides of the Atlantic could be converging in changing patterns of Christian faith.

Recently I was at a Christian liberal arts college in the US, where the auditorium was full for midday prayers on a Friday. Over 1,000 people rose keenly from their flip-up theatre seats to join in singing the well-known spiritual *There’s not a friend like the lowly Jesus*. The last time I had been to worship like this was in the early 1980s at the nascent Willow Creek Community Church in the Chicago suburbs and it was as if nothing had changed. Protestant Christianity seems alive and well in North America but that is not necessarily the case.

This daily act of college worship was also part of the 2013 Festival of Faith and Music at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan (think smaller-scale Greenbelt on a university campus) where I was speaking about my co-authored book *Personal Jesus: How popular music shapes our souls*. Some of the input from other contributors suggested a chill wind blowing across the Christian heartlands.

In particular, the rise in younger people leaving churches and self-designating as ‘no religion’ (‘nones’ as they are known) is causing serious re-evaluation even in bastions of reformed Christianity such as Calvin. The college professor I sat next to in worship observed that he used to measure changes in student culture by the decade, now it seems to change every year.

A similar note was struck the following Sunday at Mars Hill megachurch, founded by Rob Bell (Church Times *Features* 12 April 2013). During a sermon on baptism the new minister managed to affirm both the infant and adult forms in a church which clearly practised the latter. At one point the relatively youthful pastor reflected on his experiences with high school students and their complete lack of interest in baptism. He acknowledged ruefully that this generation would be the future for the church, yet there was a clear indifference to any form of institutional affiliation.

From an Anglican perspective Diana Butler Bass, an Episcopalian journalist, retreat leader and academic, has argued recently that a metamorphosis of religion is also taking place in the United States. In her book *Christianity After*
Religion (Harper One, 2012) she draws upon the 2008 survey from the independent Pew Research Centre into the changing nature of American religious belief, which had concluded that: ‘More than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion – or no religion at all ... The survey finds that the number of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith today (16.1%) is more than double the number who say they were not affiliated with any particular religion as children. Among Americans ages 18-29, one-in-four say they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion’.

Bass argues the Christian awakening that many predicated under the ‘religious right’ in the 1980s has developed into something very different. Forces of Christian conservatism sought to reverse the social changes of the 1960s and escape from the world. However this process has run into a blind alley. Instead, Bass believes, a new ‘Great Awakening’ is now underway in all manifestations of faith across the United States but in an alternative direction to that envisaged by the religious right. This change is rooted in the common distinction between religion and spirituality (‘I’m spiritual but not religious’) and is being driven by three questions presently reshaping religion: What do I believe? How should I act? Who am I?

This view has been confirmed by further research from the Pew Center in 2012 on the rise of ‘nones’, which highlighted the rise in those describing themselves as unaffiliated. The most recent report observes that: ‘Their ranks now include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics (nearly 6% of the U.S. public), as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation (14%).’ In analysing those who are unaffiliated, the report argues that many ‘are religious or spiritual in some way. Two-thirds of them say they believe in God (68%). More than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%), while more than a third classify themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious” (37%), and one-in-five (21%) say they pray every day’.

One response to the changing religious landscape of the USA is being mapped out by James K. A. Smith, a philosopher from Calvin College, in his three volume Cultural Liturgies project. The second part entitled Imagining the Kingdom (Baker Academic, 2013) has just been published. He argues that contemporary Christian living is no longer driven by doctrine or intellectual beliefs as in much of the post-Reformation and Enlightenment period but by character, practice and ritual. Key to this are: (i) the primacy of love and the priority of the imagination in shaping our identity and orientation to the world; (ii) embodied communal rituals (liturgies) including secular liturgies; (iii) resituating Christian worship in its relationship to the world. Smith contends that we are formed in and through the embodied stories we tell inside and outside the Church. In essence, the Church cannot take refuge in itself – it must engage wholeheartedly with the world. In this context, for Smith, the truth of Christianity is that of story, metaphor and poetry. Socially and theologically he is standing on similar ground in the US to that identified by David Brown in the UK with his work on theology, culture and the arts.
Hugh Laurie (the British actor best known from the award-winning US medical drama *House*) recently paid tribute to his hero, blues singer Professor Longhair in a *Perspectives* documentary on ITV. At one point he argued that for the most part the difference between the UK and US was one of degree – 5% was the figure he gave. The exception to this he believes is faith because: ‘when it came to religion then it’s 3,000%!’ Taken as a whole, at the present time, there may be an element of truth in that hyperbole. But the situation is changing rapidly and the percentages between the two nations are much closer when we look at the generations presently emerging into and from higher education in both countries. Those who see themselves ‘spiritual but not religious’ (i.e. the ‘nones’) are increasing on both sides of the Atlantic and the common ground identified by Smith and Brown provides a key means of engaging in conversation with this emerging constituency of belief and practice.