Secularization in the Long 1960s: Numerating Religion in Britain
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Chapter Abstracts

1. Introduction

The chapter sets the scene in three respects. It reviews the historiography of British religious change in the long 1960s, with particular reference to Callum Brown’s thesis of a gendered revolutionary secularization commencing in 1963, and the cautious or critical reactions to this interpretation of other historians and sociologists. It introduces the statistical sources to be used in evaluating such competing claims, noting any methodological limitations or availability issues, the principal data collecting agencies being the state, faith communities, opinion pollsters, and academic social scientists. Finally, it defines the parameters of the work, considering alternative definitions of the 1960s, ultimately opting for wide chronological limits (mostly presenting statistics for 1955-80), and explaining the spatial, demographic, and empirical scope (and thus any topics consciously excluded from the terms of reference).

2. Belonging – Aggregate Measures

Various aggregate measures of religious belonging are presented, relative to population. The data derive from opinion polls, church sources, and estimates by Peter Brierley. They reveal the extent of religious belonging varied according to the measure used, as well as by demographic factors. Most stable was religious profession, with no major breakthrough for no religionism. Neither did sundry self-rating indicators of the personal saliency of religion exhibit obvious collapse. Church membership figures, hard to evaluate summatively on account of differing denominational criteria, showed some net decrease, but not spectacular and with partially compensating areas of growth beyond mainline Churches. Protestant Sunday schools, by contrast, already in recession before the 1960s, lost even more ground, while in the Free Churches adult adherents reduced at a faster rate than members. The overall religious community, persons in touch with faith bodies, however tenuously, was static in absolute terms but contracted relatively.

3. Belonging – Denominations and Faiths

The size of individual denominations and faiths is documented, from their own returns of ‘membership’ or constituency, occasionally supplemented by external estimates. There were per capita falls in Anglican communicants and electoral rolls, but the most serious decline was in confirmations. The Roman Catholic Church advanced, although the pace slowed from the early 1960s, partly as a consequence of lapsation. Orthodox Churches expanded, notably in the 1970s, principally through immigration. Among the traditional Free Churches, the Congregational and Reformed cluster and Welsh Nonconformity suffered most losses. Strong countervailing (but only partially offsetting) growth was recorded especially by Pentecostal and Holiness Churches, House Churches, and New Churches (all Trinitarian) and Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses (non-Trinitarian). Muslims overtook Jews as Britain’s largest non-Christian community, through migration, which also led to big increases in Hindus and Sikhs. Paradoxically, despite an alleged religious crisis, the societies comprising organized irreligion were a weakening force.
4. Behaving – Churchgoing

Unlike membership, where different criteria applied, churchgoing was a common denominator of religious practice, accepted by all Christians. Data derive from major Churches and censuses, which were the most reliable sources; or sample surveys, which were prone to over-claiming of attendance. Both were collected nationally or via community studies. Roman Catholicism apart, regular churchgoing by the 1960s was already at a low ebb, having declined relative to population since the 1850s (Church of England) and 1880s (Free Churches). Further ground was lost in the 1960s and 1970s, but not dramatically. According to home nation censuses organized by Peter Brierley, the proportion of adults at worship on an ordinary Sunday was 9 per cent in England in 1979, 13 per cent in Wales in 1982, and 17 per cent in Scotland in 1984. Congregations would have been larger at religious festivals or at community-focused services. Churchgoers were disproportionately female and ageing.

5. Behaving – Other Practices

Two of the three principal rites of passage showed significant falls during the long 1960s, the proportion of children baptised as infants (from 85 per cent in 1960 to 60 per cent in 1980), and of marriages solemnized according to religious rites (from 73 per cent in 1957 to 51 per cent in 1980), but the Churches retained their near monopoly over funerals. The churching of women after childbirth disappeared almost entirely. Audiences for televised religious broadcasts grew absolutely but not in relation to the number of television licences and households capable of receiving Independent Television; they were also artificially boosted by the ‘God Slot’ and disproportionately comprised women, older persons, and the most religious. About one-half of adults claimed to pray regularly, but a diminishing minority read the Bible, whose authority and authenticity were increasingly doubted. Churchgoing apart, the religious observance of Christmas and Easter weakened.

6. Believing – Beliefs and Experience

Belief in the supernatural remained strong, especially among women, albeit it was a hybrid of orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and folklore, individually or communally customized in a ‘pick-and-mix’ of convictions and habits, often only loosely connected with institutional religion. Sample surveys shed some light on this world. Belief in God exceeded three-quarters, but support for a personal God diminished. Likewise, belief in Jesus Christ was steady at four-fifths, but His divinity was increasingly doubted. Belief in an afterlife was less pervasive, held by about one-half, with hell dropping out of, and reincarnation coming into, fashion. Some paranormal beliefs appealed to one in two people, others to only one-tenth, although more paid lip-service than believed, especially when it came to practising superstitions or reading horoscopes. Alternative beliefs notably attracted the young. A minority of the population claimed to have had a ‘religious’ experience, usually just once or twice, and often not obviously religious.

7. Believing – Attitudes

Although most Britons judged religion was losing its influence on national life, and there was some diminution in the public standing of Church and clergy, the overwhelming majority continued to regard Britain as a Christian country. Protestant religious prejudice against Catholicism was fading, but anti-Semitic attitudes remained common, while atheists were unpopular. Sunday was observed less religiously, partly as a result of loosened statutory controls over out-of-home activities or variable enforcement of the law. Liberalizing legislation was also passed or proposed on a range of moral topics,
splitting religious opinion on sanctity of life issues such as abortion and euthanasia, Catholics tending to moral absolutism and religious nones favouring deregulation. Notwithstanding the wish of electors to keep religion and politics separate, religious profession and attendance still impacted political partisanship, with residual links between Anglicans and the Conservative Party, Catholics and the Labour Party, and Free Churches and the Liberal Party.

8. **Institutional Measures**

Secularization did not merely challenge individual religious belonging, behaving, and believing but also impacted the infrastructure of organized religion. This chapter illustrates three ways in which the material fortunes of Christianity were affected, mainly using church data and Peter Brierley’s estimates. Some reduction in places of worship occurred, especially during the 1970s (when there was a drop of 10 per cent), the Methodist Church and Salvation Army recording most closures. The 1970s likewise witnessed a 7 per cent contraction in ministers, largely through diminished recruitment and more retirements, and only partly alleviated by new models of ministry (including non-stipendiary and female clergy). The same decade saw enormous pressures on ecclesiastical finance, particularly after the oil crisis in 1973 destabilized the national economy. The Churches were largely dependent upon congregational giving for their income, which was simultaneously eroded by inflation and declines in church membership and attendance, necessitating retrenchment.

9. **Conclusion**

The first four sections reprise findings for religious belonging, behaving, and believing and institutional measures outlined in chapters 2-8. The fifth attempts a balance-sheet of religious change in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s. It dismisses Callum Brown’s suggestion that 1963 inaugurated a period of revolutionary secularization, arguing instead that many religious performance indicators were already in decline beforehand with others remaining stable, while acknowledging some few experienced ‘crisis’ during the long 1960s. Brown’s gendered causation is also rejected, no evidence being found that women were leaving, or not joining, the Churches in greater numbers than men; alternative explanations for decline are proposed. The final section contextualizes the long 1960s within a timeframe extending backwards to the eighteenth century and forwards to the present. Summarizing previous research by the author and others, and critiquing proponents of ‘change, not decline’, the picture is one of gradualist, not revolutionary, secularization in Britain.