

THE CONTEXT OF MISSION IN THE 21st CENTURY

ROBIN GILL



ROBIN GILL is the Michael Ramsey Professor of Modern Theology in the University of Kent at Canterbury.

FOR THE LAST DECADE I HAVE BEEN STUDYING RESULTS FROM BRITISH SOCIAL ATTITUDES (BSA) AS ONE WAY OF LEARNING MORE ABOUT THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF CHURCHES IN BRITAIN TODAY. I have gradually come to the conclusion that BSA offers vital information about changes in attitudes to religion and morality that have direct relevance to mission. BSA has been described as the Rolls Royce of questionnaire surveys, conducted by the academically highly respected, non-profit making National Centre for Social Research. It is widely used by government and university departments, but seldom by church leaders. This is a pity because it offers some important clues about trends, free from the sort of spin that now characterises statistics produced by churches themselves.

Two of the most dramatic changes arise from the question, “Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?” In 1983 31% said they had no religion and 40% that they were Anglican. In 1998 it is now 45% who claim no religion and only 27% to be Anglican (the affiliation decline in other denominations is less dramatic). These two striking trends have been plotted by all of the BSA surveys over the last fifteen years and do seem to be firmly established. People in Britain today, especially the young, are less inclined than before to claim nominal church membership, opting instead for no religion. In the past many people might simply have opted for “C of E”, whether they went to church or not, but not so today. It will be a couple of years before it is known how many people have opted for the “none” category in the April 2001 Population Census, but I suspect that it will also be fairly substantial (significantly it is given as the first option on the census form).

As expected, overall levels of claimed churchgoing across denominations have declined during this same period, but this decline is not nearly as striking as the two other trends. Of those interviewed in 1983 21% claimed to go to church at least once a month, but by 1998 this dropped to 19%. The drop has been particularly amongst those claiming to go every week, without a corresponding increase in monthly churchgoers. Despite claims to the contrary, it does seem that somewhat fewer people go to church, not that the same number of people go to church but less often.

A slight health warning is needed here: a gap between stated and actual behaviour has long been noted by sociologists. On the basis of BSA 1998, average Sunday attendance in all denominations added together should have been 15%, whereas Peter Brierley’s 1998 church

census suggested a figure exactly half that. Frankly, many of us may overestimate our churchgoing, just as we underestimate our eating and drinking! Yet, whichever method of calculating church attendances is used, both fit a pattern of slow overall decline, which has continued, almost without interruption, since the 1870s.

If nothing else this does suggest the size of the challenge that faces mission in Britain in the twenty-first century. As the failure (at this level at least) of the Decade of Evangelism has shown, institutional church decline has become progressively more and more difficult to reverse. The sort of long-term patterns of institutional decline that I mapped out in *The Myth of the Empty Church* (SPCK 1993), do seem to be continuing relentlessly.

The contrast between the slow decline in churchgoing and the rapid decline in nominal membership is important. When questioned about their religious beliefs the British are by no means wholly secular. Only about a quarter in 1998 claim to be atheists (albeit in the 1950s only a tenth did) and half claim to believe in life after death. A third also believe in religious miracles and see themselves as at least “somewhat religious”. Two thirds also think that “there are basic truths in many religions”. In contrast, only 12% responded that “there is very little truth in any religion” and just 14% that they were “very” or “extremely” non-religious.

Although not exactly secular, there is evidence of increasing alienation from churches on moral issues. A generation ago many claimed that they did not need to go to church to be good Christians. Today people may not consider being a Christian to be good at all and this, I suspect, is the greatest challenge to mission. Despite considerable evidence that churchgoers are more active than others in voluntary work and see themselves as altruistic and unprejudiced (as I showed at length in *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics*, CUP 1999), our public image is not so good. So in BSA 1998 three quarters of respondents agreed that “looking around the world, religions bring more conflict than peace” and that “people with very strong religious beliefs are often too intolerant of others”. And almost two-thirds agreed that “religious leaders should not try to influence government decisions”. Yet, somewhat confusingly, less than a third agreed that “Britain would be a better country if religion had less influence”.

One moral area showing an increasing gap between official church teaching and popular attitudes is sex. BSA suggests that the public has remained consistently opposed to

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adultery (people clearly respect faithfulness), but has changed considerably in other areas. In 1983 a significant minority (42%) considered premarital sex was “not wrong at all”. By 1998 this had become a two-thirds majority, believing in addition that “it’s a good idea for a couple who intend to get married to live together first”. Interestingly, a majority of Anglican churchgoers agree. The instincts of the harshly treated report *Something to Celebrate* were clearly close to the views of people within and outside the Church.

At Lambeth ’98 Western Anglican bishops were ambivalent about homosexuality (and remain so over Section 28), but non-Western bishops were overwhelmingly in favour of the strong line finally taken. Perhaps the former were conscious that attitudes are changing in the West. BSA confirms this. In 1983 62% thought that “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex” are always or mostly wrong, but only 45% in 1998. Across many Western countries most pensioners take this position, whereas the under 30s do not. Those of us who are middle-aged are simply confused! Given the average age of British congregations, the dilemma for church leaders in all denominations is obvious.

Naturally, church leaders should not base their teaching on moral issues simply upon social trends. Nazi Germany and Apartheid South Africa are clear warnings against that. Church leaders rightly risk unpopularity when resisting evil in society. However, the BSA results might help them to be more aware of changing moral sensitivities. In the context of mission it is a matter of concern that so many ordinary people appear alienated from churches and may even feel morally superior to churchgoers. BSA 1998 suggests that most people are still morally concerned, agreeing for example that: income differences between rich and poor should be reduced; genetic science needs careful regulation; genetic research on humans should only be for therapeutic purposes; fiddling taxes is wrong; and personal honesty is important.

Generally we appear to be a decent and semi-religious lot. Yet, from the BSA evidence, we have less confidence in churches today than we have in the legal system or schools. Only Parliament ranks as low in our estimate. If a majority of the British population begins to feel morally superior to churches, this is not good news for mission or for the long-term survival of these churches.

What conclusions for mission can be drawn from all of this? I would suggest the following:

- We need to distinguish more clearly between what we

can change and what we cannot. The growth and energy of the Victorian churches in Britain was closely associated with rapid population growth and urban expansion (as it was in South Korea in the 1970s and 1980s). In a static population context such growth is much more difficult (as South Korea discovered in the 1990s). Individual congregations can still encourage new members and have flexible and responsive worship, but even they find consistent growth elusive.

- There are still points of contact between churchgoers and non-churchgoers. Most of the latter are not atheists and do have values. They may even feel morally and perhaps spiritually superior to churchgoers. We do need to keep the doors open.
- We cannot assume goodwill. Britain (unlike Catholic Europe) has very little anti-clericalism, but there is evidence of a growing moral distance between churches and society at large. We could work harder at promoting our moral strengths. Voluntary work in the community, personal honesty, a sense of meaning and purpose, and altruism are all strong features of churchgoers. They are points of real contact with society at large.

If we said rather more about them and rather less about sex our voices might be heard more widely. ■