A CHRISTIAN NATION?

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IT WOULD BE FOOLISH TO DENY THAT CHRISTIANITY HAS PLAYED A ROLE IN THE FORMATION OF BRITISH NATIONAL IDENTITY. However, Britain's Christian heritage does not make it Christian. To continue to claim that Britain is a Christian nation is to perpetuate an untruth that is dangerous on many levels. Instead of lending support to the cause of Christianity in the UK, the notion of 'Christian Britain' serves to mask the reality of the cultural situation in which Christians actually find themselves. The sooner the British Church comes to grips with this fact, the sooner it can get on with serving the real needs of its communities. Bringing Christ to an already 'Christianised' culture marks one of the greatest challenges to Christian witness in the current age. Christians in the UK live in a mission field, one carved out of post-Christian Christendom.

THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF BRITAIN

It may be objected that if any country can lay claim to being 'Christian', it must be Britain. Legally, historically and culturally the UK is enormously indebted to Christianity. The Churches of England, Ireland and Scotland enjoy, in their different ways, relationships to their governments and societies unparalleled in the Western world. Roman Catholic, Methodist and Baptist churches can be found in every neighbourhood, their influence on British life and culture impossible to ignore. More recently, British African and Caribbean congregations have established vibrant evangelical and Pentecostal churches in urban areas. The monarch is the Defender of the Faith. The Anglican Church is the Tory party at prayer. The Labour party owes more to Methodism than to Marx, and so on. National polls and census findings routinely register a high percentage of people identifying themselves as 'Christian', even, it must be said, as Church attendance plummets. When it comes to Christian values and ethos, it is often assumed by cultural commentators that while the wider populous may not regularly attend services, nevertheless this nominal majority share 'in spirit' what the committed minority practice in person. As well as enriching the language with its *Book of Common Prayer* and the Authorised Version of the Bible, British Christianity has instilled the traditional values of duty, loyalty, industry, sacrifice and reserve in the nation. The religion has contributed so much to the national culture that some quarters see an attack on Christianity as an attack on British identity and vice versa.

In many ways, Britain *is* manifestly a 'Christian' country in its history, institutions and moral frameworks. Yet the undisputed historical fact of Christian influence on

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British culture should not be confused with the present reality of the spiritual life of the average person living in Britain. As commendable as the presence of traditional Christian values may be, they are not a reliable indicator of present faith. Biblical Christianity does not allow for confounding the outward works of public morality with an inward relation before God in Christ.

Census statistics and poll numbers can be made to tell many different stories, and debates over the exact religious make-up of the population are alive and well. However, as we shall see, no matter how the numbers are manipulated in favour of 'religion' or 'belief', they do not look good for authentic Christianity in Britain.

In 2001 the Census of Population showed approximately 72 per cent of England and Wales identified as 'Christian', with 3.1 per cent Muslim, 1.1 per cent Hindu, 0.9 per cent 'Other', 0.7 per cent Sikh, 0.5 per cent Jewish and 0.3 per cent Buddhist. The combined total of 'No Religion/Not Stated' came to 23 per cent of the population.[1] Defenders of the notion of Christian Britain may be tempted to look at these numbers and assume that the faith has retained a strong foothold in the hearts and minds of the population at large. A clear majority of 72 per cent would, on the outset, appear to offer a relatively healthy state of existence. However, the bold numbers demand closer inspection.

In the census for England and Wales, the question on religion was grouped with the 'background' and 'country of birth' questions, with the *deliberate* intent that 'religion' would supplement the topic of 'ethnicity'.[2] In addition, the English/Welsh census provided a simple check box for possible religions with no opportunity for deeper reflection or with the expectation that one's religious affiliation could be further delineated. By contrast, the Scottish version of the census did not group religion with ethnicity, and it also offered options for different Christian denominations. As a result, people were more likely to check 'none' for religion. In a country that is generally recognised by religious commentators to have a more active Christian populace relative to England, the Scottish census produced a 'Christian' population of 65 per cent. It is not unreasonable to assume that a significant proportion of the English/Welsh population, with a differently worded questionnaire and a more nuanced understanding of 'Christian' would follow the Scottish example. It seems that for many people in England and Wales, religion is still more like a

nationality than a voluntary organisation, a set of beliefs or even a moral code.[3]

There is a further problem: the well-known willingness of respondents to register as 'believers' without being able to back up or articulate these beliefs in any meaningful Christian sense.[4] For example, studies previous to the Census suggest widespread lack of clarity when it comes to Christianity, because, when questioned further, some who registered as 'Christian' also registered belief in horoscopes, reincarnation, ghosts, etc., as well as fuzzy notions of basic Christian doctrines such as the incarnation and the resurrection.[5] This DIY approach to religion suggests, as Voas notes, that a lot of people's self-professed beliefs do not, in fact, affect their lives very much. Thus, he calls it 'believing without believing' and claims that one 'cannot conclude from the fact that people tell pollsters they believe in God that they give the matter any thought, find it significant, will feel the same next year, or plan to do anything about it'.[6] In short, one cannot infer from widespread acknowledgment of 'belief' that the population is basically Christian or aware of what Christianity actually entails.

A more reliable indicator of Christianity in a population is active participation, as evinced by Sunday attendance at a place of worship. Obviously church attendance does not mean everything, but it does mean *something*. The best estimate for Sunday church attendance in 2000 was just below 8 per cent of the population.[7]

OPPORTUNITY AND AUTHENTICITY

As the link between British national identity and meaningful Christianity becomes ever more tenuous, it could be tempting to despair that Christianity has lost all hope of relating to the shared 'common sense' of the average Brit. But this 'common sense' can hinder rather than help the emergence of a living faith. We should not assume that the structures of Christian Britain 'prepare the ground' for the reception of faith in the population at large. Indeed, often it is these Christianised trappings that serve to inoculate people *against* Christianity, allowing for the tacit assumption that as one already lives in a Christian culture, there is no need to appropriate the faith for one's own. In a culture which assumes as a matter of course that one's religion is primarily a matter of tradition, ethnicity or accident of birth there can be no free decision to 'repent and believe' (Mk 1.14–15). And without personal appropriation of the gospel message (see Rom 10.9) there can be no true mission, no turning to Christ, So

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NOTES
1. Census April 2001. National Statistics website, www.statistics.gov.uk, Crown copyright 2004. Percentages calculated by Paul Weller on the basis of Census data. Due to rounding, the percentages total an excess of 100 per cent. Weller, *Time for a Change* (London: Continuum, 2005).
2. As stated in the census White Paper (The 2001 Census of Population, Cmd 4253, 1999, Section III para 64).
3. 'The disquieting thought arises that "Christian" is being used at least by some as a code for "white", a tendency that the 2001 census question might encourage.' David Voas, 'Is Britain a Christian Country?', in P Avis (ed.), Public Faith (London: SPCK, 2003), p. 102.
4. The sociologist Grace Davie refers to a population that generally holds similar beliefs without active involvement in a congregation as 'believing without belonging'. See her *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).
5. See R Gill 'Is religious belief declining in Britain?', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37:3 (1998), pp. 507–16; Voas, 'Christian Country?', p. 96. See also the chapter entitled 'Rites of Passage' in Kate Fox, *Watching the English* (London: Hodder, 2004), pp. 353ff.
6. Voas, 'Christian Country?', p. 96.
7. P Brierley (ed.), *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends No. 3 – 2002/2003* (London: Christian Research, 2003), Table 2.23.4.
8. Paul's use of *skubalon* here (literally `lumps of excrement') is hardly a ringing endorsement of patriotic pride in relation to one's relation to Christ!
9. See especially Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity* (trans. HV and EH Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

▶ rather than despair that Britain is no longer a 'Christian' country I think churches in the UK should seize the opportunity to clear the decks for the promotion of an authentic, Christ-centred gospel.

There is encouragement to be found in the first-century Church experience, for far from attempting to forge 'national' links between the Christian message and the people being preached to, Paul went to great pains to uncouple Christianity from any one specific ethnic or cultural *milieu*. This is perhaps most clearly seen in Romans, a book that from the outset is shaped by national identity issues. Romans 1.14–17 sets the tone, where Paul's ministry is couched in terms of difference between Greek and non-Greek, Jew and Gentile. For the rest of the book we see Paul re-fashioning the Christian identity as distinct from Jew or Gentile, and, by implication, any other national culture.

Paul adopts an 'open-handed' approach when it comes to the national identities and cultural allegiances of his day (cf. 1 Cor 9.20–21). He affiliates with the occupying Roman Empire and claims citizen's rights when it serves his mission, but he also strongly identifies himself with his Jewish ethnic group (Rom 9.3). However, it is difficult to paint Paul as a nationalist, for what he praises in one place, he pulls down in another. Philippians 3 contains an extraordinary list of all the cultural markers that identify Paul's credentials as a true Hebrew national, only to have him 'rubbish' them in the light of Christ (Phil 3.8).[8] Indeed, the shedding of some 'national' clothes only follows the trajectory already set by the gospel (Col 3.11).

In short, all that we know of Paul suggests that he was happy to take up or lay down political, cultural and ethnic affiliations as and when it suited his gospel purpose. For Paul, it would seem that national identity has its place, but it is a few steps removed from what is really important.

Taking our cue from Paul, we can see that it is not necessarily a bad thing when the Christian life cannot be described along national lines. In this way, the New Testament context of mission offers hope and guidance for our situation today. However, there is a major historical element standing between first-century mission and twenty-first-century mission – *Christendom*.

COMMUNICATING CHRIST: THE CHALLENGES

Unlike the pagans of Paul's day, our ubiquitous 72 per cent do not claim another religion. They do not claim 'no religion'. They claim 'Christianity'. However, it seems fair to say that most of this population is not Christian in any biblical or existentially meaningful sense of the word. Thus, we find ourselves in a situation akin to that of the nineteenth-century Danish theologian and polemicist Søren Kierkegaard, whose stated aim was 'to reintroduce Christianity into Christendom'.[9] More than any other writer, Kierkegaard recognised the unique challenges that face the Christian communicator trying to express Christ in a land where everyone thought that they were Christians as a matter of course.

One of Christendom's greatest dangers is that it sees Christianity primarily as a category of information and direct knowledge. If one knows about Christian history and cultural successes, perhaps by studying it at school, then one knows Christianity. If one signs up to certain traditional moral values, then one is basically a Christian. Yet Kierkegaard points out that the truth of Christ cannot be doled out as a waiter serves food direct from a platter. People cannot be argued into Christianity like they can be convinced of a mathematical truth, or check boxes on a spiritual 'To Do' list. It is in the assent of faith that 'Jesus is Lord' that authentic Christianity adheres, not in any collection of facts. The central tenet of the incarnation can never be proven, for it is not a logical necessity, nor is it 'common sense'. For this reason, perhaps the last thing Christendom needs is more information *about* Christianity by way of preaching, speaking and writing. The direct facts of the Christian religion have contributed to the common culture so much that they are often too easily taken for granted. What is needed is an indirect way to get people to the point where they recognise that they must either reject or assent to the God-Man.

For Kierkegaard, *indirect communication* is inextricably bound up with the notion of *offence*. Offence, and not doubt, is the opposite of faith. He suggests that the possibility of offence at the idea of the incarnate Christ and at the life of his followers that must be kept alive at all times if authentic faith is to happen. Why else would Jesus say 'blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me' (Matt 11.6) unless being offended was a live possibility? Facing this possibility of offence at Jesus is the first step towards faith in Christ. Yet who can be offended at the benign, wise or obviously divine figure presented to us by our Christianised culture? Christendom has forgotten how incredible, how improbable, and how challenging the incarnation is – that this *man* is God, or indeed that God is this man, are notions that should offend the most cultured sensibilities.

There is a second level of offence for the ones who in faith are not offended by the claims of Christ. Our society has found a way to neatly categorise Jesus and thus dispose of him. People who take Christ seriously in such a society will themselves cause offence to the sophisticated inhabitants who think that they are already Christians by dint of their membership in their culture. An authentic Christian's life will serve as a catalyst that can lead either to offence or to faith in those who observe. Because it is not about argument, apologetics or persuasion, in this way the possibility of offence is itself an instance of indirectly communicating Christ to a population that thinks it already knows all it needs to be 'Christian'.

CONCLUSION

The British Church is located in a place where the population may be 'heathen', but the structures and cultural fabric of society are not. In this country, Christianity enjoys many advantages and gifts bequeathed to it by the reality of establishment. It has profoundly shaped English, Welsh and Scottish identity through its laws, language and customs. The influence of the Christian ethos on the legal framework is recognised and admired around the world. The debt owed to the Church by English literature and learning is incalculable. Characteristic Christian virtues such as honesty and responsibility are embedded in the British psyche. All of these social goods contribute to Christianity's 'calling card' in society, and it would be foolishly harmful to attempt to dismantle or disown them. And yet, all these cultural 'fruits' of established Christendom are not the *raison d'être* of the Church, and to point out their presence in society is not to identify the presence of the authentically Christian. The fundamental activity of any expression of Christianity is not to shore up particular versions of national identity. Instead it must be 'to proclaim Christ crucified' (1 Cor 1.23).

The spiritual and cultural landscape has changed in Britian. To have faith and live as an authentic Christian is no longer to reside in the status quo, or to enjoy the support of institutions and the public at large. What was once a conservative, defensive and common sensical position has now become a minority, radical and even offensive stance. Yet it is often that offence that is necessary to clear away the trappings of Christendom in order to get at the heart of the Christian message. That Britain is no longer a Christian nation may be just what we need if we are one day to have a nation of Christians. ◼