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A Knowledge of Angels: How Spiritual Are the English?

‘He had the gift of being able to talk to the English about God without making them wish they were somewhere else.’¹

‘The average English Christian (which is to say, the average lay person) seems always to have taken an eclectic approach in matters of belief. Perhaps that is due to the historical experience of the English people in the turmoil of the Reformation period. Today, most church-going members of the Church of England are lukewarm about apostolic succession, but look for reverence in worship. They reject the notion of a collectivist society, but believe that their life in the secular world is the proper place to work out their discipleship. They accept the need for open-mindedness in interpreting and even criticising the scriptures and formularies of religion, but continue to reverence the Bible and to accept the historic creeds, whatever private reservations they may feel about a faith once delivered to the saints and hence immutable.’²

‘...the Church of England is the maddening institution it is because that is how the English like their religion – pragmatic, comfortable and unobtrusive. Small wonder that so many English writers have preferred the dramatic certainties of [Roman] Catholicism. You simply couldn’t write a novel like Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory* about a church built on the conviction that anything can be settled over a cup of tea...[its] everyday liturgy, with its insistence upon prayers for the monarch and ‘all those set in authority under her’ is the voice of a church that knows its deeply conservative and semi-secular place in English society...[But] it would be a mistake to see the historical animosity towards Catholicism as proof of enthusiasm for Protestantism. You only have to look at the hostility shown towards non-conformists for taking the Bible too seriously: John Bunyan...spent the best part of twelve years in Bedford gaol for preaching without a licence.’³

Introduction: The English Spirit?

The title of this lecture presupposes that you might have read the novel by Jill Paton Walsh, *A Knowledge of Angels*,⁴ an absorbing tale that transports the reader to a medieval island. Here, the ancient but enduring legend of the wolf child is re-enacted - the story of a pitiful, savage girl found by shepherds in the mountains - and set in counterpoint to that of a shipwrecked man whose knowledge of the world, whose engineering skills and whose logic far exceed those of the great and the good who come to question his beliefs. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that one of these two lives must be sacrificed, and the zealous religious character, Fra Murta, becomes the instrument of the Inquisition.

It is a novel of ideas, but one in which religion emerges either as tortured or intolerant, and one in which reasoned agnostics (or atheists), and natural phenomena (personified perhaps, by the wolf child), are threatened by an ideology that insists on slavish correspondence to religious belief. Thus, to have no knowledge of angels is to risk either being classed as ‘inhuman’, or risk death as a godless person, charged with heresy. I cannot tell if the author bears a grudge against religion; but it emerges with little credit in the book. The real hero is the ship-wrecked stranger, who seems to bring goodness and kindness to the island from non-religious sources; an act for which he must ultimately die.

¹ Paul Vallely, writing of Cardinal Basil Hume, *The Independent*, 31/12/99, Review, p.3.

² Graham Neville, *Radical Churchman: Edward Lee Hicks and the New Liberalism*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1998, p.14.

³ J. Paxman, *The English: A Portrait of a People*, London, Penguin, 1999, p. 98.

⁴ J. Paton Walsh, *A Knowledge of Angels*, Cambridge, Colt Books, 1994.

What is so compelling about *A Knowledge of Angels* is the implicit assumption that underpins the book: that there might once have existed a society in which the overwhelming majority of citizens were 'Christian'. That is to say, that they derived their morality from Christian sources, worshipped regularly if not frequently, and were well-versed with scripture, tradition and articles of faith. The stranger featured in the novel comes from an 'Enlightened' world in every sense, in which a form of secular humanism is the dominant and acceptable mode of discourse, and furthermore, appears to steal the moral high ground. Against the present-day background of wars and conflicts that are either caused, fanned or sustained by 'religion', and furthermore one that can equate the secular with the humane, and religion with darker forces (e.g., intolerance, suspicion, superstition, etc), the novel seems to speak with some authority. The work is suggestive, because it appears to promote, in dramatic form, sociological secularisation theories dating from the 1960's. My purpose here will be to question how reliable those theories are as a guide to the state of religious belief in England. If one habitually believes all that can be read in the newspapers, the last few years of the second Millennium have been rather poor ones for English church attendance. A trickle of statistics published throughout 1999 all seemed to suggest that fewer and fewer people were going to church. In 1979, for example, about 1.7 million people were 'usually' to be found at a Church of England service on any one Sunday. By 1999, that figure is reported to have dropped to just under one million. Ergo, the newspapers concluded, England is becoming a less religious nation.⁵

To any untrained eye at the end of the century, the assertion looked sound enough. After all, the empty pews are apparently there for all to see: the secularisation thesis is true, so it seems. Until that is, someone like Sir Cliff Richard dismays almost everyone by, as one commentator put it:

'trundling complacently past rappers, sex goddesses and head-bangers to take the No. 1 slot with the *Lord's Prayer* sung to the tune of *Auld Lang Syne*: an enterprise so mind-numbingly, unbelievably kitsch that in our kitchen, even the dog howls that the words don't fit the tune and never will....What can we make of this?...I think we have to accept that this is another magnificent flat-footed Christian footprint. Cliff warbles 'Auld Lang Our Father' and Britain buys it. True, for a lot of buyers it may be the Winter's only religious gesture: but still, they are making it. You can't get around that.'⁶

Public displays of mass-religiosity - such as those noted around the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales - are a puzzle to some sociologists and newspaper editors, who believe, generally, that the world, and western Europe in particular, is becoming more secular and less sacred. Just when the thesis looks like it might gain some purchase, the secular canopy (or construction of reality) is punctured yet again by religion.⁷ At the beginning of a third Millennium, religion continues to persist.

So, to the question: how spiritual are the English? The inquest is a timely one at the beginning of a new Millennium, for to address it adequately, one really needs to define what was meant by

⁵ A number of different methods are presently being used to calculate attendance figures, and have all arrived at different results and conclusions from their surveys. For example, the Church of England contends that concentration on the 'Usual Sunday Attendance Figure' (uSa) misses vital data: those attending midweek services, occasional offices (weddings, funerals, baptisms, etc) and services taken in Residential or Nursing Homes are excluded. Christian Research has recently attempted to measure the frequency of church attendance, and has discovered that one quarter of 'regular' worshippers only attend church between 13-26 times per year, and another quarter attend only around four times per year (e.g., Christmas, Easter, Remembrance, Mothering Sunday, etc). Equally, some Roman Catholics point to the recent pattern of more worshippers attending Friday or Saturday evening Mass (and thus missing Sunday), in order to leave more time at the weekend for family/social activity. Sociologically, the rise of the weekend as a phenomenon in Britain has significantly influenced church-going habits, in ways that have still yet to be properly studied and interpreted. See P. Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out*, London, Christian Research, 1999. C.f. *Church Times*, 03/12/99, p.13.

⁶ Libby Purves, 'Is God Still No. 1?', *The Times*, 30/11/99, p.11.

⁷ I have inverted Peter Berger's notion of 'the sacred canopy' here, simply to show that secularisation is no less a construction of reality than religion. See P. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (1967) and *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), Garden City, Doubleday. As John Milbank notes: 'sociology is only able to explain...religion, to the extent that it conceals its own theological borrowings and its own quasi-religious status' (*Theology and Social Theory*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1990, p. 52.).

‘spiritual’ and what exactly it is that encompasses being ‘English’. As nearly everyone knows, the meanings of these words have shifted and expanded considerably in recent years. Clearly, definitions of spirituality abound; as do descriptions and analyses of what constitutes the ‘religious’ or ‘religion’. Equally, there can be no straightforward answer to the question as to what now constitutes ‘English’.

‘Spiritual’, for instance, can no longer simply mean ‘church attendance’ – even if it ever did. It was Bede Frost who once quipped that English people have often been obsessed with the idea that the spiritual life consists in going to church, which is ‘a fond thing vainly invented by the Puritans in seventeenth century’.⁸ England has never been an outwardly religious country, if church attendance is anything to go by. Adrian Hastings describes the Church of England in the eighteenth century as being ‘profoundly secularised’.⁹ When Edward Stanley took up his family living in 1805 (at Alderley, Cheshire), the custom was that the Verger waited on the path leading to the church, the Vicar only being called if anyone actually turned up. It remains the case that for much of English history, vast numbers of people have stayed away from church.¹⁰ Religious enthusiasm and revivals have occasionally held sway in the tenth, thirteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Otherwise, the English seem to have been rather lukewarm about religion – the Reformation is, arguably, the very settlement of that.¹¹

Yet although the English may be said to prefer their religion tepid (like their beer: flat, and without much froth), their spirituality deserves closer attention. Opinion polls and surveys consistently show that anything from two-thirds to over three-quarters of the population believe in God. In recent history, this has comforted many clergy, who have understood the English to be ‘believing without belonging’, and worked their parish ministry within that paradigm.¹² Of course, it is now no longer as simple as that. Contemporary cultural commentators talk (excitedly) of ‘pastiche spirituality’, academics (coldly) of ‘religious pluralism’, church leaders (critically) of ‘syncretism’. Many mainstream Christian denominations no longer enjoy the coherence of a homogeneous culture: movements *within* them are trying to transform them. The ‘New Age’, growing exposure to other religions, globalisation and privatisation have driven many to interrogate their faith, and then adapt it. In spite of the numbers of people who claim to believe in God, the undeniable reality of Y2K is that England is shifting from being a ‘Christian nation’ to a spiritually diverse society.¹³ Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that individuals are beginning to be more inventive with their spiritual lives, assembling private faiths from religious bits and pieces; what is created has meaning and coherence for its creator.¹⁴ Quite simply, the term ‘spiritual’ has now become rather

⁸ John Moorman, *The Anglican Spiritual Tradition*, London, SCM, 1955, p. 222. C.f. Martin Thornton, *English Spirituality*, SPCK, 1963, where *continuity* of Christian living is contrasted with *regularity* of church attendance as competitive embodiments within English spirituality. Thornton’s work provides an excellent if eclectic introduction to English spirituality, reflecting an unconscious kind of Anglican imperialism: Anselm, Hilton, Rolle, Kempfe, Julian of Norwich and the Caroline Divines are all discussed – but there is little space for Thomas More or the Wesley brothers.

⁹ Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity, 1920-1985*, London, Collins, 1986, p. 669ff. C.f., Owen Chadwick, *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, CUP, 1975, p. 265.

¹⁰ See A. Russell, ‘The Rise of Secularisation and the Persistence of Religion’ in S. Brichto & R. Harries (Eds.), *Two Cheers for Secularism*, Yelvertoft Manor, Pilkington Press, 1998, pp. 11ff. C.f., ‘R. Harries, ‘Christianity Soldiers Onward’, *The Observer*, 26/12/99, p.17.

¹¹ See C. Marsh, *Popular Religion in Sixteenth Century England*, London, Macmillan, 1998. This book, in the Macmillan ‘Social History in Perspective’ Series, will be mentioned later.

¹² C.f. Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1994. Davie points out, as others have done in the past, that the decline in church attendance is nothing like as steep as, for example, Trade Union membership or membership of political parties: nearly all traditional institutions have experienced a decline in power and prestige since World War Two. Furthermore, the apparent success of recreational or leisure activities should be seen in perspective: cinema attendance is a fraction of what it was fifty years ago. Football, although attracting significant media coverage, can only muster one sixth of the number of people on a Saturday who attend church on Sunday (c.f. A. Russell, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 16).

¹³ See J. Creedon, ‘Designer Religion’ in *Utne Reader* (Red Oak, Iowa), July/August 1998, and re-published as ‘The Age of the Do-It-Yourself Religion’, *The Guardian*, 05/09/98. C.f. G. Barna, *Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators*, Milton Keynes, Word, 1996, and M. Brown, *The Spiritual Tourist: A Personal Odyssey Through the Outer Reaches of Belief*, London, Bloomsbury, 1998.

¹⁴ See W. Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*, San Francisco, Harper, 1994, and S. Collins ‘Faith in Young People’ in (Ed.) M. Percy, *Calling Time: Religion and Change at the Turn of the Millennium*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

spongy: it seems to lack definition, and yet soak up virtually everything.¹⁵ In posing the question ‘are the English spiritual?’, (the links between church, state and crown notwithstanding), one is in danger of not asking very much at all.¹⁶

So what of being English? The confidence expressed in the relationship between England and spirituality in T. S. Eliot’s ‘Little Gidding’ – (‘Here the intersection of the timeless moment is England and nowhere. Never and always’) – is not nearly so recognisable at the commencement of a new Millennium.¹⁷ Not because England is that different, but because English identity itself is being transformed. Gone is the ‘the English, the English, the English are best’ contention of Flanders and Swan (or for that matter the serious irony of Henry Root’s forever unpublished spoof, *The English Way of Doing Things*), to be replaced by a kind of cultural perplexity – a people struggling to escape from xenophobia, and redefine themselves after generations of post-imperial ennui.

Thus, we have endured a recent spate of internal enquiries. Jeremy Paxman arguing (at a popular level) that the conventions that once defined the English are dead. Norman Davies in *The Isles* arguing that Britain has lost its cohesive power. Roy Strong arguing in *The Spirit of Britain* that all was well, at least until the end of the nineteenth century. Yet sometimes, apart from weights and measures, driving on the wrong side of the road, warm beer and Women’s Institutes, it is hard to see what being English means at all.¹⁸ Indeed, one commentator has lately suggested that the English ‘are unique amongst the home nations of the Union, insofar as they have no claim on maintaining their identity.’¹⁹

The sources of this situation are complex. The idea of English nationhood has evolved out of a farrago of assertions that look increasingly frayed at the turn of a new Millennium. Devolution for the home nations clearly does alter the ethos of a United Kingdom. Subsidiarity within individual nation states, and related to a European Union, suggests that political power is more dispersed, inter-dependent and varied than it has been previously. As a nation, the English are being quietly herded away from regarding themselves as ‘subjects’ to owning the title and status ‘citizen’.²⁰ In the process, history is being re-written: Linda Colley has recently challenged the notion that English national identity has been a constant feature of our past. She argues that national identity is a

¹⁵ For example, as NHS Trusts grow into their localised subsidiarity, they can start to own their own distinctive definitions of what it means to offer ‘spiritual services’ to their client communities. Beyond meeting ‘traditional’ religious needs and those that are best described as ‘implicit’ or ‘folk’, healthcare deliverers are increasingly recognising and appreciating a deeper spiritual pulse that may permeate many areas of practice that have no obvious religious links. Some in the Nursing profession argue that their work has a strong spiritual component. In examining healthcare literature, there has been a rush to baptise anything caring or vocational and rechristen it as ‘spiritual’. As Ian Markham points out, our problem is that ‘it is not clear precisely what is meant by “spirituality”...spirituality within a religious tradition looks very different from the way medical practitioners talk about [it]...in healthcare literature it operates in a general way that [opposes] reductionist tendencies in empirical science.’ Markham goes on to point out that ‘spirituality’ is not a term all religious traditions recognise, and those that do may have alternative accounts of meaning: for example, in Islam, it may mean extinction of the self; in Judaism, it may mean seeking the divine in the midst of the mundane. The conclusion is that ‘general’ talk of spirituality is unhelpful. That said, where the term is deployed in contemporary healthcare, it tends to cluster around important humane concepts. One author describes spirituality as ‘three main aspects of human experience’: value, meaning and relatedness. [But how does this exclude atheist or humanists, who may well be offended by having their values, meaning and relatedness appropriated by religious definitions?] Another author speaks of spirituality in more existential terms: ‘my inner person...it is who I am – unique and alive.’ See I. Markham, ‘Spirituality in World Faiths’ in (Ed.) M. Cobb, *The Spiritual Challenge of Healthcare*, London, Churchill-Livingston, 1998.

¹⁶ For an interesting perspective on this, see Callan Slipper, ‘The Shifting Pattern: Spirituality Reconsidered’, *Theology*, July/August 1998, pp270ff.

¹⁷ T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, London, Faber, 1963. Of course, one should acknowledge the distinctive voice of English spirituality down the centuries; its writers and practitioners have arguably contributed more to Christianity globally than any other nation. Bunyan, Milton, Donne and Herbert – to choose one particular period – are world-renowned. For an exemplary compilation of writings, see (Ed. P. Handley et al), *The English Spirit*, London, DLT, 1987.

¹⁸ J. Paxman, *The English*, London, Penguin, 1999; N Davies, *The Isles*, London, Macmillan, 1999; R. Strong, *The Spirit of Britain*, London, Hutchinson, 1999.

¹⁹ Simon Heffer MP, in a *BBC Radio 4* interview (11/01/00), responding to comments of the Rt. Hon. Jack Straw, that the English had concretised their identity by oppressing the Welsh, Irish and Scottish, and by acts of aggression abroad.

²⁰ See L. Colley, ‘Millennium Lecture’, delivered at 10 Downing Street, December 1999. The full text is available on www.number-10.gov.uk - extract reprinted in *The Observer*, 19/12/99, p.12.

necessary ideological framework that serves extant power interests. As Colley points out, this was done effectively in the eighteenth century by identifying English interests against those of, say, the French, and by re-aligning the 'home nations' into 'Great Britain'.²¹ It was a defensive strategy, and continues to be expressed in the Acts of Settlement, Union and the coronation oaths. In short, English nationalism has often been elided through British identity.

Finally, it must also be acknowledged that the England of 2000 AD is markedly different to that of 1950. It may be broadly correct to describe the attitude to mainstream middle-English religion as a matter of 'believing without belonging.' But such generalisations ignore burgeoning multi-ethnic inner city districts, where the continuity and practising of faith may form a key component in maintaining ethnic and communal identity. Recent research in East London shows that, alongside the faiths that have arrived with immigration, fundamentalist proselytising forms of religion and pluralist syncretistic faiths are also to be found, illustrating the continuing importance of religion in daily life.²²

So, how are we to proceed from here? First, it will be necessary to elucidate some key features of secularisation theory, its development, strengths and weaknesses. Second, it shall be argued that this kind of sociology is a form of poor and eclectic history, which fails to adequately capture the dual nature of religion and society. A conclusion will look at how 'the Pelagian apathy of the average sensual Englishman'²³ waxes and wanes in relation to church attendance, and whether or not this matters. The lecture has limits, naturally. In using the terms 'spiritual' and 'religion', I shall mainly be referring to examples from Christianity, particularly the Church of England, which I hold is still the primary arena for the expression of the innate spiritual affections of its people.²⁴

An Unfinished Symphony? Some Sonatas of Secularisation Theory

Secularisation theories come in all shapes and sizes. Their success or failure, to a large extent, depends on prior definitions of 'society' and 'religion', their separation as distinct entities, and finally, conjecture about their subsequent relation. As with so much of life, size matters, as do relations. A successful secularisation theory needs a small and de-limited definition of religion to function, in which 'implicit' religion, 'common' spirituality or folk religion are not to be taken *that* seriously. The gradual decline of official or 'state' religion is then charted as part of the territory of late modernity, which in turn, is identified as the arena for social fulfilment. In other words, a secularisation hypothesis is often a kind of pseudo-psephology of church attendance, whereby the data that is collected must 'fit' the underlying presuppositions of the theory.

It is interesting to see how sociologists can deploy an analogy to stretch a point. Steve Bruce, one of a small number of sociologists who still advocate a 'classic' secularisation thesis, suggests that the contemporary religious situation of England is one where 'the grand symphony' of religion has gone, only to be replaced by 'small groups of enthusiastic music-makers'.²⁵ Bruce sees 'religion' being squeezed out by the modern world; he imagines a history where ordered adherence to sacred values was once widespread, but is now rare. Humanity gradually evolves from its dependence on divinity. 'Religion' is the land that time is rapidly forgetting. Thus, an analogy about orchestration,

²¹ L. Colley, *Britons: The Forging of a Nation 1707-1837*, London, Pimlico, 1995. C.f. Tom Nairn, *After Britain*, London, Granta, 1999. Efforts to unite Britain were made from the 12th century onwards; unity under one monarch was achieved in 1603, then political union in 1801 – but only until 1922.

²² G. Smith, 'Ethnicity, Religious Belonging and Inter Faith Encounter: Some Survey Findings from East London', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 13, no. 3, 1998, pp. 333ff.

²³ To coin a phrase from David Martin. See A. Walker & M. Percy (Eds.), *Religion and Society: Essays in Honour of David Martin*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

²⁴ 'Spiritual', as a term, is necessarily more synthetic than analytic, since biblical tradition does not really divide divine-human relations into sacred-secular, or religious-social. Similarly in England, the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Authorised Version* of the Bible are part of its *national* heritage. See N. Sykes, *The English Religious Tradition*, London, SCM, 1961 (revised edition).

²⁵ S. Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World*, Oxford, OUP, 1996, p.234. Here Bruce echoes an earlier Weberian analogy. See also S. Bruce (Ed), *Religion and Modernisation*, Oxford, OUP, 1982.

composition, performance, audience and attention ('the symphony') is born; this is a sweeping socio-historical narrative about the alleged *former* power of Christendom. Yet no sooner is the analogy plucked from the womb of sociological imagination, it is effectively killed off by its composers. The suspects, blamed for the demise of religious power and its influence, are revealed: modernisation, rationalisation, globalisation, individualism, privatisation and the like, who belong to a constructed sociological cabal known as 'secularisation theorists'.²⁶ Expressed like this, the story line here is more opera than symphony. Nonetheless, the analogy is deceptive in its simplicity, plotting as it does a Sonata of ever-decreasing interest in God and the performance of 'religion' (which is hardly ever defined).²⁷

The origins of the secularisation symphony (for it surely is its own production: a kind of 'intellectual history'), as an ascription and description of religious history in the West, are varied. The etymology of the word 'secular' lies in a Latin term, meaning only 'that which belongs to its own time'.²⁸ In the twelfth century, the term was used to differentiate parish clergy from those priests in religious orders. Only in recent times has the term been antonymous in relation to religion. For example, in 1850, the term 'secularism' was being deployed more systematically by one G. J. Holyoake, to describe 'the doctrine that morality should be based on regard to the well-being of mankind in the present life, to the exclusion of all considerations drawn from belief in God.'²⁹ In contemporary and popular usage, the term now carries a variety of meanings: modernity is eclipsing religious frames of reference; individuals are being liberated from irrational beliefs; society is either evolving or disintegrating, due to the decline of religion.

The assertion of sociologists in the 1960s, that the world was in the grip of an irreversible process of secularisation, and that 'religion was in decline', is the most basic tenet of the theory. Bryan Wilson expresses the creed in these terms:

Secularisation relates to the diminution in the social significance of religion. Its application covers such things as, the sequestration by political powers of the property and facilities of religious agencies; the shift from religious to secular control of various of the erstwhile activities and functions of religion; the decline in the proportion of their time, energy and resources which men devote to super-empirical concerns; the decay of religious institutions; the supplanting, in matters of behaviour, of religious precepts by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria.³⁰

Wilson is another exponent of a 'classic' secularisation thesis. The notion of 'decline' is the principle presumption, and in looking for causes, it reaches back in history to find them, completing the circularity of argument. Marx, Durkheim and Darwin are cited as persons who had an impact on religious thought; the Reformation is presented as a moment at which the secular state first emerged; Protestantism as the beginning of individualism; the Enlightenment as the shedding of beliefs in the supernatural, in favour of the rational.³¹ In such thinking, it is a *crisis* in religious belief that has led to 'the plausibility structures' of religion being undermined.³² Granted, this is the simplest kind of Sonata in the symphony, yet its boldness is but a prelude. Thus, Berger can state

²⁶ I find the linking of these terms with late-modernity highly problematic. It seems to me that the idea of 'globalisation' has been around since the days of Alexander the Great; rationalisation since the time of Archimedes; and secularisation since Jesus asked his followers to befriend mammon and the world, and 'render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's'. Others have made similar points. See J. Habgood, *Church and Nation in a Secular Age*, London, DLT, 1983, p.27.

²⁷ See Ludovic Kennedy, *All in the Mind: A Farewell to God*, London, Sceptre, 1999, for an interesting perspective on the collusion between an *apologia* for atheism and theories of secularisation.

²⁸ *The Oxford English Dictionary (on Historical Sources)*, Vol. II, , OUP, 1983, p.1926

²⁹ D. Edwards, *Religion and Change*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1969, p.15. C.f., A. Russell, 'The Rise of Secularisation and the Persistence of Religion', in (Eds.) R. Harries & S. Brichto, *Two Cheers for Secularism*, Yelvertoft Manor, Pilkington Press, 1998, p. 12.

³⁰ B. Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 149. See also B. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society*, London, Watts & Co, 1966.

³¹ A. Russell, *Ibid.*, p.14.

³² P. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, Garden City, Doubleday, 1969, p.47.

that:

‘No human society can exist without legitimation in one form or another. If it is correct to speak of contemporary society as increasingly secularised (and we think that this is correct), one is thereby saying that the sociologically crucial legitimations are to be found outside the area of institutionally specialised religion.’³³

Although we are wholly concerned with England in this paper, the limits of the ‘classic’ secularisation thesis are more easily exposed by particular reference to other countries. In Indonesia, at present, enhanced religious adherence has been a by-product of modernisation. As people from outlying districts and islands have converged on new towns and cities, they have lost their previous ‘settled’ identity. This has been re-captured for many, by identifying with a community built around a mosque or church.³⁴ In the USA, in theory the most advanced secular nation in the world, religion and church-going continue to be socially significant.³⁵ Throughout the Western world, sales of religious, spiritual self-help and New Age books are booming. Secularisation theorists can, at this point, defend themselves by confining their remarks to Europe – a case of ‘exceptionalism’, but which will nevertheless eventually influence the world through globalisation.³⁶

Yet even here, there are caveats. In Denmark, over 90% of the population continue to be confirmed. In Greece, over 95% of the population are still baptised into the Orthodox Church: they have no word that covers the term ‘secularisation’. That said, others have questioned the extent to which Europe could ever have claimed to be Christian: the inculturation of Christianity in the West has never been ‘pure’, any more than it has been in Africa or Asia.³⁷ This renders the rather depressing trajectory of ‘classic’ secularisation theories – decline leading to fragmentation – even more suspect.³⁸

The simple Sonatas of Wilson and Bruce have given rise to a number of variations on the theme. One of those is from David Martin, who has seen a number of factors - including dissonance in belief, the relative respect for the public role of religion and the clergy, and its continued persistence at many levels in English society - pointing towards Christianity’s continuing and important role in contemporary life.³⁹ Martin has also criticised ‘classic’ secularisation theories on the basis of their foundations, which amount to the propagation of ‘master trends...rooted in an ideological view of

³³ Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, 'Sociology of Religion and Sociology of Knowledge', *Sociology and Social Research*, vol. 47, 1963, pp. 417-27. Reprinted in R. Robertson (ed.), *Sociology of Religion*, Harmondsworth, London, Penguin, 1969, p. 68.

³⁴ In the same way that historians have explored the rise of Methodism *because of* the Industrial Revolution, or noted that religious participation in the USA *significantly increased* during its most rapid periods of modernisation. On Indonesia, see R. Harries, 'Comment', *The Observer*, 26/12/99.

³⁵ See *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Volumes 34-38, 1995-1999. There is almost no issue of the journal without an article on secularisation, belief and the church in the USA.

³⁶ Larry Shiner, for example, further qualifies the ‘classic’ theory by offering six ‘simple’ types of the secularisation concept in use today: 1. *Decline of religion* - The previously accepted symbols, doctrines and institutions lose their prestige and influence. The culmination of secularisation would be a religion-less society. 2. *Conformity with 'this world'* - The religious group or the religiously informed society turns its attention from the supernatural and becomes more and more interested in 'this world'. 3. *Disengagement of society from religion* - Society separates itself from the religious understanding which has previously informed it in order to constitute itself as an autonomous reality and consequently to limit religion to the sphere of private life. 4. *Transposition of religious beliefs and institutions* - Knowledge, patterns of behaviour and institutional arrangements which were once understood as grounded in divine power are transformed into phenomena of purely human creation and responsibility. 5. *Desacralisation of the world* - The world is gradually deprived of its sacred character as man and nature become the object of rational-causal explanation and manipulation. 6. *Movement from a 'sacred' to a 'secular' society* - This is a general concept of social change, emphasising multiple variables through several stages. [Larry Shiner, 'The Concept of Secularisation in Empirical Research', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol., 6, 1967, pp. 207-20.]

³⁷ See Anton Wessels, *Europe: Was it Ever Really Christian?*, London, SCM, 1996.

³⁸ C.f. S. Bruce, *Religion in Modern Britain*, Oxford, OUP, 1996. The subtitle reveals the plot in advance: ‘from Cathedrals to Cults’.

³⁹ See D. Martin, *A General Theory of Secularisation*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1978 and *The Breaking of the Image: A Sociology of Christian Theory and Practice*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1980.

history'.⁴⁰ Commenting specifically on England, Martin has noted the continuance of quasi-religious views about life: astrologers on prime-time television, horoscopes in many national newspapers, and the like.⁴¹ None of this suggests a more secular world. In Renan's words: 'The gods only go away to make places for other gods'.⁴²

Following David Martin, Grace Davie has taken another approach to the concept, using more subtle ideas of differentiation. Whilst Martin's was partly resourced through careful historical work, Davie's is more concerned with common spirituality, in which the English religious situation is described as 'believing without belonging'.⁴³ Davie's work is a partial rehabilitation of another revised thesis, found in the writings of Thomas Luckmann (and later, Peter Berger). Here, the notion of 'invisible religion' is invoked, with religion acquiring a wider seat in the sociology of knowledge, rather than being simply institutionally based.⁴⁴

Then there are empirical and theoretical modifications of the concept. Mention should be made of Robin Gill's work on church decline and growth. Gill's work is especially valuable, adding much to our understanding of religious attendance. Gill argues plausibly that the secularisation thesis rests upon a false historical picture of the popularity of religion in past times: that the gradient has *not* shifted from one of ascendancy to that of decline.⁴⁵ Indeed, as Russell notes:

'The work of recent historical research has made the intensity of the religious condition of the medieval past less easy to believe in...traditional society was more secular and more modern than [has] been described...commercially aggressive, self-confident and expansionist...'.⁴⁶

Recent work in the sociology of religion has attempted to put some considerable distance between itself and the 'classic theories'. For example, Jose Casanova's work offers a critical revision of the concept and the theory of secularisation, embedded in a historical account of the development of Western modernity. He argues that the de-privatisation of religion forces us to rethink and reformulate, but not necessarily to abandon uncritically, existing theories of secularisation. The analysis shows that what passes for a single Symphony of secularisation is actually made up of three different Sonatas: secularisation as religious decline, secularisation as differentiation, and secularisation as privatisation. The assumption that religion will tend to disappear with progressive modernisation, a notion that has proven to be patently false as a general empirical proposition, is traced genealogically back to the Enlightenment critique of religion.⁴⁷

Thirty years ago it would have taken a brave person to predict that by the end of the century there would be an apparent resurgence of religion, with new places of worship being built in profusion, new religious sects emerging in greater numbers, and fundamentalism on the increase. Is this 'God's revenge', in Kepel's memorable phrase?⁴⁸ Sociologists such as Aldridge seem to think so; he describes the secularisation theory 'as being in retreat'.⁴⁹ Is it not time to cancel God's funeral?

Certainly the origins of the religious efflorescence are varied. Of considerable importance, notes

⁴⁰ D. Martin, *The Religious and the Secular*, London, Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1969, pp. 9ff.

⁴¹ D. Martin, *A Sociology of English Religion*, London, SCM Press, 1967, pp. 52ff.

⁴² A. Russell, *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴³ G. Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1994.

⁴⁴ T. Luckmann & P. Berger, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Garden City, Doubleday, 1966.

⁴⁵ For example, compare Gill's essay in S. Bruce (Ed), *Religion and Modernisation* (1992) with E. Barker, J. Beckford & K. Dobbelaere (Eds.), *Secularisation, Rationalism and Sectarianism*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1993.

⁴⁶ A. Russell, *Ibid.*, p. 17; C.f. A. Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1978, p.168. J. Maltby, *Prayer Book and People In Elizabethan and Early Stuart England*, Cambridge, CUP, 1998, offers a more optimistic perspective on laity interest in the English church.

⁴⁷ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994.

⁴⁸ G. Kepel, *The Revenge of God*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994.

⁴⁹ A. Aldridge, *Religion in the Contemporary World: A Sociological Introduction*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999, Chapter 5.

Jeff Haynes, is the fact that popular faith in progress - via *secular* modernisation - has widely collapsed. Instead, the post-modern condition - the contemporary *zeitgeist* - reflects a widespread undermining of the certainties by which people, especially in the West, have lived for decades.⁵⁰ Haynes does not believe that it is accurate to describe what is happening as a global religious *resurgence*. This is because tens of millions of people - especially, but by no means exclusively, in the Third World - have been staunchly religious throughout their lives; consequently, it is implausible that they have suddenly *rediscovered* religion. Millions of other people in other parts of the world also have what might be called 'the religious impulse'. This involves a quest for meaning that goes beyond the restricted empirical existence of the here and now. It is an enduring feature of humankind.⁵¹

So far as we are concerned with the English situation, there can be no question that sociology has struggled in recent years to come to terms with its persistence. Davie warns that given the complexities of contemporary society, the classic sociological explanations of religion are faltering: new frames of reference need to be found.⁵² Davie points to the 'persistent undercurrents of faith', and describes the growing chasm between indices of belief (which remain fairly high), and statistics that apparently (and regularly) suggest a marked decline in religious membership and practice. It seems as though religion persists, although not necessarily in its traditional forms. As we noted in the Introduction, faith is mutating rather than disappearing: 'religious values' are now an invisible part of the sociology of knowledge, because sociologists have not yet learned how to look.

Support for this narration is available empirically, both for Europe and Britain. The surveys undertaken by the European Values Systems Group (1981 and 1990) have serious consequences for the secularisation symphony, having 'discovered' that:

'Most Europeans maintain a belief in God and regard themselves as religious, but the Christianity they profess is 'diluted'...God remains very important...four out of five Europeans identify themselves as belonging to a Christian religious denomination, and almost three out of four claim to have been brought up religiously at home...'.⁵³

The British Social Attitudes Survey⁵⁴ states that the British are neither devout nor irreligious: seven out of ten adults believe in God, and almost two thirds claim affiliation to a denomination. That said, it does seem to be the case - following Casanova, and others - that theism is becoming increasingly more general, and religion more private, individual and relative. This may partly (but not wholly) account for the rise in so-called 'New Age' religion,⁵⁵ although it is by no means clear that this actuality vindicates the secularisation thesis, as some sociologists suggest.⁵⁶

Yet despite the clear evidence of the widespread tenacity of English religion, a small minority of sociologists of religion continue to try and salvage the secularisation theory, by arguing that we are witnessing no more than the last, dying gasps of religion.⁵⁷ (Despite the 'classic' theory being weakened by its own unsteady evolution, hundreds of qualifications and caveats, and some first class, even lethal critiques).⁵⁸ They continue to claim that modernisation does indeed secularise,

⁵⁰ Jeff Haynes, *Religion in Global Politics*, London, Longman, 1997.

⁵¹ For further discussion, see the varied treatment of secularisation in W. Braun & R. McCutcheon (Eds.), *Guide to the Study of Religion*, London, Cassell, 2000.

⁵² G. Davie, *Ibid.*, 1994, pp. 5ff; c.f. P. Clarke & P. Byrne, *Religion Defined and Explained*, London, Routledge, 1993, pp. 204-206.

⁵³ See *The European Values Study 1981-1990*, London, Gordon Cook Foundation, p.10 & 42.

⁵⁴ *9th Report*, Aldershot, Gower, 1992/3.

⁵⁵ Were we to be more concerned with philosophy than sociology, then a treatment of post-modernity would be appropriate here. On the fraying of innate Christian theism, see P. Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1997.

⁵⁶ See A. Greeley, 'The Tilted Playing Field: Accounting for Religious Tastes', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 14, no. 2, May 1999, pp. 189ff.

⁵⁷ For an excellent summary of the discussion, see S. Hanson, 'The Secularisation Thesis: Talking at Cross Purposes', *Journal for the Study of Contemporary Religion*, Vol.12, no.2, 1997, pp.159-179.

⁵⁸ See T. Jenkins, 'Two Sociological Approaches to Religion in Modern Britain', *Religion*, Vol. 26, 1996, pp. 331-42; and *Religion in*

and that the contemporary efforts of religion to modernise itself merely represent a last-ditch attempt to triumph in a war that will turn out to be un-winnable. Ultimately, secularisation will achieve victory.⁵⁹

From the survey so far, it is clear that that the original ‘classic’ theory of secularisation is in some disarray: unfinished and uncertain. Yet the *theory* remains strong - in public life, the media, and even the church⁶⁰ - partly because many (especially clergy, perhaps) believe themselves to be *experiencing* the *process*, even as Western society shifts from modernity to post-modernity. The thesis still seems a compelling one in contemporary life, when one looks at the empty churches of England. The comparatively monotone sociological ‘symphony’ of secularisation, (yet undoubtedly containing some fine movements), must be judged against history if its ‘master narratives’ are to be properly exposed and critiqued. It is to this exercise, in relation to English religion, that we now turn.

Secularisation Theories as Defective English History

The intentional pun in this lecture on Angles and Angels refers us back to the incident described in Bede’s *History of the English Church and People*.⁶¹ Here he tells of how the original mission to England arose out of a misconception in a Roman slave market. Children who look like angels are in fact Angles, and Gregory begs the Pope ‘to send preachers of the word to the English people in Britain to convert them to Christ’.⁶² The story is interesting on a number of counts. First, and according to Bede, Roman Christianity has already been active in England for centuries: the martyrdom of Saint Alban is dated at AD 301.⁶³ Second, it is clear from Bede that ‘the English’, in their genesis, are a multi-racial people, comprising Britons, Celts, Angles, Saxons and others, and that their identity continued to evolve.⁶⁴ Third, there is ample evidence of religious syncretism being tolerated and fostered in England from earliest times. A copy of the letter sent by Pope Gregory to Abbot Mellitus on his departure for Britain in AD 601, states that

‘...we have been giving careful thought to the affairs of the English, and have come to the conclusion that the temples of the idols among that people should on *no account be destroyed*. The idols are to be destroyed, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up in them, and relics deposited there...In this way we hope that the people, seeing their temples are *not* destroyed, may abandon their error and, flocking more readily to their accustomed resorts, may come to know and adore the true God.’⁶⁵

This sort of religious pragmatism is commonplace in English history. Queen Elizabeth I may have settled the reformation on the English, but this did not prevent her from consulting a personal wizard for most of her life. (There is nothing particularly new about English royalty consulting astrologers). Mixtures of folk or ‘common spirituality’ competing with and complementing ‘official’ religion are part of the tapestry that makes up English society, and the phenomenon is by no means confined to pre-modern times.⁶⁶ As Alan Wilkinson notes, World War One exposed

Everyday English Life: An Ethnographic Approach, Oxford, Berghahn, 1999, p. 34. See also R. Laermans & J. Billiet (Eds.), *Secularisation and Social Integration: Essays in Honour of Karel Dobbelaere*, Leuven, Leuven UP, 1998.

⁵⁹ S. Bruce, ‘Religion in Britain at the Close of the Twentieth Century: A Challenge to the Silver-Lining Perspective’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 11, n.3., 1997, pp.3-21

⁶⁰ See D. Lyon, *The Steeple’s Shadow*, London SPCK, 1985, and J. Habgood, *Varieties of Unbelief*, London, DLT, 2000: both authors seems to share the assumptions of the secularisation thesis.

⁶¹ Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, (Ed. Leo Sherley-Price), London, Penguin, 1955 (revised edition, 1968).

⁶² Bede, *Ibid.*, p. 100. C.f. R. Gameson (Ed.), *St Augustine and the Conversion of England*, Stroud, Sutton Publishers, 1999.

⁶³ Bede, *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶⁴ Bede, *Ibid.*, p.56 – Middle, East and other Angles are mentioned by Bede later. Of course, this is all before even the Normans arrive – 1066 and all that.

⁶⁵ Bede, *Ibid.*, pp.86-7. [italics mine]

⁶⁶ For a sideways glance at this issue, see R. Brett, *Faith and Doubt: Religion and Secularisation from Wordsworth to Larkin*, Macon, GA, Mercer University Press, 1997. See also S. Gilley, *A History of Religion in Britain*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997.

many Church of England clergy for the first time to a full range of implicit religion, innate spirituality and superstition amidst the trenches.⁶⁷ Mention has already been made of the reactions to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, and of Christmas: the English may or may not attend church, but it does not follow that they are not religious.

The strategy of opening up a critique of secularisation through history is intentionally simple. As Diarmaid MacCulloch quips, ‘every academic is convinced that [his] own discipline forms the straightest road to enlightenment’.⁶⁸ Sociology is frequently guilty of obscuring its own production as only one arrangement of reality. Sociologists *are* constructionists; not naturalists, simply observing life. As Catherine Bell remarks: ‘That we construct “religion” and “science” is not the main problem: that we forget we have constructed them in our own image - that is a problem.’⁶⁹ Raymond Aron goes further, and argues that:

‘At the risk of shocking sociologists, I should be inclined to say that it is their job to render sociological or historical content more intelligible than it was in the experience of those who lived it. All sociology is a reconstruction that aspires to confer intelligibility on human existence, which, like all human existences, are confused and obscure.’⁷⁰

Mills adds that ‘the sociological imagination [should] enable(s) its processor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals...’.⁷¹ And I would add that the task of the historian is the resurrection of the dead: the making of their time so real to the present that we cannot doubt that in their time they were as real as we are in our time. One of the biggest complaints about secularisation theories is that they imagine a world – a Christendom – in which roughly all knew and believed the same things; decline comes with Enlightenment and industrialisation. In this portrayal, the Grand Narrative frequently ignores important historical data. Any historical ‘facts’ that are assembled are done so in order to prove an underlying thesis that has already been determined, namely, one where religious influence and affiliation are waning.⁷²

The point is that social theorists who measure and judge ‘secularity’ against the success or failure of ‘official’ religion have failed to read the plot.⁷³ There have been very few periods in English history when everyone went to Church or Sunday School, knew right from wrong, and absolutely believed everything their parish priest said. As Keith Thomas notes: ‘...what is clear is that the hold of organised religion upon the people [of England] was never so complete as to leave no room for rival systems of belief...’.⁷⁴ As further evidence, Thomas cites an extract from one of Oliver Heywood’s *Diaries*:

‘One Nov 4 1681 as I travl’d towards Wakefield about Hardger moor I met with a boy who would needs be talking. I begun to ask him some some questions about the

⁶⁷ A. Wilkenson, *The Church of England and the First World War*, London, SPCK, 1978.

⁶⁸ D. MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996, p. 46.

⁶⁹ C. Bell, ‘Modernism and Postmodernism’, *Religious Studies Review*, July 1996, 197-190.

⁷⁰ R. Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, Vol. 2, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970, p.207.

⁷¹ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, London and New York, OUP, 1959, p.5.

⁷² See S. Bruce (Ed.), *Religion and Modernisation: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularisation Thesis*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1992: even in this volume, the sociologists heavily outnumber the historians. Peter Glasner’s *The Sociology of Secularisation: A Critique of the Concept* (London, Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1977) suggests that were the sociology of religion to be deprived of its secularisation theories, little would remain that could provide the discipline with coherence: an implied criticism relating to the absence of proper historical research.

⁷³ Noted exceptions such as David Martin should be explored in more detail. See D. Martin, *Reflections on Sociology and Theology*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1997; c.f., ‘Sociology and the Church of England’ in *Sociologie et Religions: Des Relations Ambigues*, Kadoc, Leuven University Press, No. 23, 1999, pp.131-138.

⁷⁴ K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1971, p. 178. This quotation is resonant with David Edwards’ observation (echoing Ted Wickham) that the Church of England ‘have not lost the inner cities – they never had them’.

principles of religion: he could not tell me how many gods there be, nor persons in the godhead, nor who made the world nor anything about Jesus Christ, nor heaven nor hell, or eternity after this life, nor for what ends he came into the world, nor for what condition he was born in – I ask't him whether he was a sinner; he told me he hop't not; yet this was a witty boy and could talk of any worldly things skillfully enough...he is 10 years of age, cannot reade and scarce ever goes to churche...'.⁷⁵

Granted, the Yorkshire region could be argued for as a special case. Ever since records began for the area, church attendance figures have been consistently poor, and always below any national average.⁷⁶ That said, detailed readings of parochial records from almost any age can illustrate the pragmatic, amateurish nature of 'official' English religion:

Clophill We present William Spellinge the 23 of Marche beinge then called Palme Sondaye in the churche & tyme of eveninge prayer, before suche maydes as then had receaved the communion, dyd in theyre seate lye upon his backe verye unreverentlye till the ende of the fyrste lesson, and also other tymes dothe seem to forgette to yeilde dewe reverence in the tyme of dyvyne service.

Langford Our chancell is owte of repayre in tymber & wyndowes, at the parsons defaute. Our churche wyndowes are in decaye by reason of fowle that cometh in at the chancell wyndowes which hath broken them.

Bedford Sancti Petri [sic] There is no pulpitte in the littel churche. The x commandments are not on the walles. The chancell & churche are not paved in some places.

Colmworth We have had no service on the weeke dayes not from Maye daye last tyll September & no service on Sancte Peters Eve nor Sancte Bartholemewe Eve nor Michaelmas daye at nyghte & they had iiij children christened iiij wayes, & he wold not let the parishe see his licence & one syr Brian Hayward dyd in the like case. Umphrey Austyne churche warden last yere wold not present the lead that was missing oute of the steeple. Item Nicholas Dicons, Thomas Jud, William Quarrell & his wyfe have not receaved this xij monthes. Item the Quenes Iniunctions or the bisshoppes were not made thes iij yeres nor the catechisme taughte.

Tylsworth We have had but one sermone since Michaelmas, which was the Sondaye after New yers daye.

Farandiche The chancell & parsonage are in decaye by the parson's default. They have but one sermon this year.

Bidham We doe present that we had no Communion but once this yeare, and that our last churchwardens dyd not make there accompt for the yere.

Patnum [Pavenham] Our chansell is in decaye and redye to faule dwone, at the defaute of Trynitye College in Cambridge.⁷⁷

The picture painted of religion in sixteenth century Bedfordshire is probably enough to raise Bunyan from his grave. Yet this haphazard, semi-secular, quiet English Christianity, continues well

⁷⁵ K. Thomas, *Ibid.*, p. 206; C. f. Oliver Heywood, *Diaries*, iv, p.24, (Ed. J. H. Turner, 1885).

⁷⁶ See J. Gay, *The Geography of Religion in Britain*, London, Duckworth, 1971.

⁷⁷ *Archidiaconal Visitations in 1578*, [Bedfordshire Historical Records Society, no.69. Bedford, 1990].

into successive centuries.⁷⁸ James Woodforde's *Diary of a Country Parson* provides an invaluable window into the life of the clergy and the state of English Christianity in the eighteenth century. Again, a close reading of the text suggests that whatever secularisation is, it is not obviously a product of the Industrial Revolution. Woodforde is writing just before the social and economic changes; his parish is ten miles from Norwich Cathedral, yet he clearly thinks it is reasonably good to have 'two rails' (or thirty communicants) at Christmas or Easter, from 360 parishioners. His church is only ever full when there is either a war on, or a member of the royal family is gravely ill. (Again, not so different from today, except the Royal Family are in better health, and England doesn't go to war as much as it used to). He carries out many services (especially christenings) in the warmth of his parlour and not in church, and we learn more from his *Diaries* about the food he eats and the company he keeps than we ever do about the Christian year.⁷⁹

Even in epochs of revival and religious fervour, such as the Reformation period, it is not possible to show that church-attendance was high. Historians agree that there is a 'general lack of statistically reliable evidence'.⁸⁰ Part of the burden of Keith Thomas' work is to show that 'a substantial proportion' of the population remained hostile to organised religion, resulting in paltry church attendance. On the other hand, Eamon Duffy asserts that certain Masses were *very* well attended – but no evidence is supplied to support this contention. Scarisbrick argues that most late medieval people seldom went to church, and when they did, probably only arrived for the elevation of the host.⁸¹

Thomas' work, parish records, and Parson Woodforde, as any good historian knows, show that English situation is neither a wholly sacred or secular one. It is one in which official religion waxes and wanes against a background of innate spirituality.⁸² This may be crudely formed, but opinion polls and surveys consistently affirm that most choose to describe themselves as believers in God, even though they may not belong. There is ample enough evidence. Diana's death, Hillsborough, Heysel, Zebbrugge: a litany of 'disasters' that prompt an outpouring of 'common spirituality'.⁸³ Each of these tragic ruptures in mundane reality (or rather the rejoinder to them) are suggestive of an innate disposition – a kind of lazy-hazy theism – which occasionally bursts upon the public domain, and in turn demands a 'response' from 'official' religion. This may only be opening the church for candles and silence, but the offering does help give some articulation, shape and focus for common spirituality.⁸⁴

None of this disproves 'the decline of official religion' theory, but it does suggest that 'classic' secularisation theories are blunt instruments. Spirituality remains common; religion can still be public. Furthermore, thus was it always so: the angle on Angles is that things are not so very different now as in the past. The English, like many other peoples in Western Europe, are anterior in their semi-secular spiritual identity; any ulterior values may have little impact on this.

The purpose of this eclectic history has been twofold. First, to underline the point made earlier, namely that the secularisation Symphony remains unfinished, partly due to its own uncertainty, but

⁷⁸ E.g., (Ed) M. Spurrell, *The Brightwell Parish Diaries*, Oxford Record Society, Vol. 62, 1998.

⁷⁹ James Woodforde, *The Diary of a Country Parson 1758-1802* (Ed. John Beresford), Norwich, Canterbury Press, 1999. See the Introduction by Ronald Blythe, p. vii.

⁸⁰ C. Marsh, *Popular Religion in Sixteenth Century England*, London, Macmillan, 1998, p. 41.

⁸¹ C. Marsh, *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42. See also E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, London, Harper, 1992, p. 465; J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1984 p. 163; K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1978, pp. 190, 204.

⁸² This means, of course, that 'official religion' can become the centre of irreverent but good-natured humour. For an interesting perspective on books that out-sold the Bible in the sixteenth century, feasting, festivals and various Shrovetide rituals, see M. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross*, London, Penguin, 1997, pp. 226ff. Jenkins (1999) argues that we need better theorisations of English culture, to show how it *constantly* co-opts and copes with the new, and with apparent antitheses. Religion persists alongside and in relation to pluralism and change. Furthermore, this phenomenon is not new: our own 'breathless view of chronology' gives undue appeal to the secularisation thesis.

⁸³ See F. Bridger, *The Diana Phenomenon*, Cambridge, Grove, 1998.

⁸⁴ C.f. 'Popular Religion' *Concilium*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1986.

also because historical data suggests English religion has often persisted in the midst of pluralism and change. The earliest and boldest of the secularisation Sonatas are based on suspect foundations: theses ‘supported by anecdotes’,⁸⁵ as Jenkins describes them. Second, I have sought to demonstrate that the apparent English indifference to ‘official’ religion is not a product of secularisation, modernisation or the Industrial Revolution:⁸⁶ rather, this coolness is culturally ‘normative’ for the English (at least), and furthermore (and paradoxically), pursued with some degree of passion.⁸⁷ It is also apparent from our survey that *within* that very same indifference to religion, there is consistent affection.⁸⁸

Whilst it is true that the ‘culture’ of post-modernity may have an impact on this in the near future, there is no real case for describing religion in England in terms of a trajectory of descent, namely ‘from cathedrals to cults’.⁸⁹ The evidence marshalled on attitudes to church attendance - taken from previous centuries - suggests that any talk of ‘decline’ from the proponents of secularisation theory is a particular production of the sociological *imagination* rather than one of *reason* (to paraphrase McAulay), which has failed to test itself in sustained historical research.⁹⁰ Thus, the original analogy that Bruce uses to describe the grand ‘symphony’ of Christianity (that has allegedly crumbled into groups of ‘enthusiastic music-makers’) looks rather suspect. Indeed, might not the parallel be reversed to re-describe secularisation theorists? Perhaps it is more of an expression of the confines of the sociological imagination, and the limits of the secularisation thesis, than a matter of fact.

Back to the Future? Re-Visiting the English Church

One of the difficulties faced by sociologists in addressing the issue and nature of innate spirituality is deciding upon what to measure and assess. A common problem with ‘classic’ secularisation theories is their tendency to elide the boundaries between ‘Church’ and ‘Christianity’, and treat these areas both similarly and quite indifferently. To be sure, the two are connected. However, as we noted earlier, ‘religion’ is part of the wider sociology of knowledge in England, which in turn is mainly (but not wholly) formed by a type of indigenous Christianity. Semi-independent of the influence of the actual Church, ‘Christian memory’ lives on in society, albeit with a shallow and haphazard pulse – but this has always been so. This in turn renders the classic secularisation theories to be a kind of permanent ‘false memory syndrome’, replete with Grand Symphonies, Golden Ages and Master Trends, *necessarily* leading to a vector and verdict of decline in the present.⁹¹ Circumstantial evidence, a farrago of statistics, the feeling of the *experience* of living in a secular age, combine to confirm this thesis. Yet closer attention to detail may suggest otherwise.

⁸⁵ T. Jenkins, *Ibid.*, 1999, p.34.

⁸⁶ Neither is it a product of Protestantism. One interesting feature of Roman Catholic scholars such as Kieran Flanagan (sociology) and Eamon Duffy (history) is the way in which they use their disciplines in narrating the blame for English indifference to church attendance, attaching it to the Reformation. For further reflection, see D. Cressy, *Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*, Oxford, OUP, 1997.

⁸⁷ From a Sermon by Rt. Revd Lord Robert Runcie, at the Anglican Consultative Council, Durham Cathedral, 1981; quoted in A. Hastings, *Robert Runcie*, London, Cassell, 1991, p.162.

⁸⁸ See for example D. Jenkins, *The British, Their Identity and Religion*, London, SCM, 1975.

⁸⁹ For two alternative perspectives, see D. Edwards, *The Futures of Christianity: An Analysis of Historical, Contemporary and Future Trends within the Worldwide Church*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1987, and P. Brierley, *Christian England*, London, Marc Europe, 1991.

⁹⁰ For example, David Martin points to periods of secularisation in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, and to intense periods of *de*-secularisation such as the Romantic Movement. I suspect that one of the reasons that secularisation theories emerge as rather ‘thin descriptions’ of reality, is the failure of sociologists to develop an adequate philosophy of history in the first place. See R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford, OUP, 1946; E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, London, Pelican, 1961; K. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, London, Routledge, 1991. That said, others would see the ‘thin’ description as an inheritance from the detachment of sociology from anthropology, and its own research not being sufficiently grounded.

⁹¹ For an alternative and more self-conscious view of sociology, see A. Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method*, London, Hutchinson, 1976, pp. 159-62; C.f. A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991, p.14: ‘...the pivotal position of sociology in the reflexivity of modernity comes from its role as the most *generalised* reflection on modern life...the discourse of sociology and the concepts, theories and findings of the other social sciences continually circulate in and out of what it is they are about. In so doing, they reflexively restructure their subject matter...’ [italics mine]. See also T. Jenkins, *Ibid.*, 1999.

One commentator suggests that English 'religion' may have recovered from its apparently terminal illness, and that 'it is [now] difficult to support the secularisation hypothesis as an irreducible process in modern society'.⁹² This assertion is supported through the matrix of Alan Gilbert's observation that in England, commentators and social theorists have often been bewildered by the persistence of religion, coupled to an inability to distinguish between the apparent secularisation of society and its de-Christianisation.⁹³ A number of recent surveys support this, and suggest, as we noted earlier, that England is moving away from being a Christian nation towards becoming a spiritually diverse society. In spite of that, church-going and Christian belief remains an important feature of English life. However, three cautionary notes should be sounded.

First, the apparent decline of English (or British) Christian beliefs - measured in surveys and statistics - has been carefully analysed by Robin Gill, amongst others. Lest there be any complacency about the inadequacies of the secularisation thesis, it would seem that 'general' beliefs in God have declined markedly in recent times: from four-fifths of the population to two-thirds. Under one half of the population now think Jesus was the 'Son of God'. Belief in life after death is held by about half the population, but the number of people actively not believing in life after death has risen significantly. Somewhat bizarrely, belief in the devil has climbed back to the levels of the 1960s, after polling rather poorly in the 1970s.⁹⁴ Gill's observations are consistent with patterns that can be traced in Europe, which point towards the gradual erosion of belief, and the rise of what he terms 'disbelief'.⁹⁵

Second, and allied to this picture of crumbling Christian belief, there also seems to be mixed news on church attendance. According to Peter Brierley, 10% of the English population were in Church on a 'normal' Sunday in 1989 - about 3.7 million people. Merseyside has the highest percentage of churchgoers (14%), and South Yorkshire the lowest (6%).⁹⁶ However, these figures represent a decline on the data gathered from 1979, which in turn, led to various media headlines reporting that the churches were 'losing 1,000 members per week'.⁹⁷ The underlying trend may still be said to be worrying: fewer and fewer young people seem to be from religious backgrounds, suggesting that the reservoir of religious knowledge is leaking away.⁹⁸ Weekly (or frequent) church-going is in decline, although this does not mean that actual regular church-going is suffering. The only positive gloss on this is offered by Davie, who suggests that religious 'belonging' remains very popular, provided one now distinguishes between organisation and denomination. Various Christian associations, activities and other forms of voluntary (religious) organisations continue to provide important outlets for many.⁹⁹

Third, the persistence in 'non-traditional types' of belief also presents the observer with a somewhat cloudy picture. Beliefs in reincarnation, horoscopes and ghosts have remained virtually constant for the last thirty years, as has the percentage of people expressing disbelief in them.¹⁰⁰ Whilst such

⁹² A. Russell, *Ibid.*, 1998, p.19. C.f. E. Bailey, *Implicit Religion*, London, Middlesex UP, 1999.

⁹³ R. Currie, A. Gilbert & L. Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles Since 1700*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1970. This volume remains one of the most important historical surveys on church attendance. However, Robin Gill has suggested that the data collected in the 1850s may have a tendency to over-estimate the numbers of people attending church. See R. Gill, *The Myth of the Empty Church*, London, SPCK, 1993.

⁹⁴ See R. Gill, C. Kirk Hadaway & P. Long Mather, 'Is Religious Belief Declining in Britain?', in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 37, No. 3., 1998, p.509.

⁹⁵ R. Gill et al, *Ibid.*, 1998, pp.510-514.

⁹⁶ See P. Brierley & D. Longley, *UK Christian Handbook 1992/3*, London, Marc Europe, 1991. C.f. P. Brierley, *Christian England*, London, Marc Europe, 1991.

⁹⁷ The weekly figure may now only be 7.5%, but critics of Brierley's data have asked what 'member' means here, given that the Church of England has no real concept of membership. Electoral Roll figures are notoriously ambiguous, and the uSa figures (see footnote 5) may also be unhelpful.

⁹⁸ See J. Kerkhofs, 'Between "Christendom" and "Christianity"', *Journal of Empirical Theology*, Vol. 1, no. 2., 1988. The data from the European Value Systems Study Group, which Gill uses to look at Britain, is in M. Abrams, D. Gerard & N. Timms (Eds.), *Values and Social Change in Britain: Studies in the Contemporary Values of Modern Society*, London, Macmillan, 1985, and N. Timms, *Family and Citizenship, Values in Contemporary Britain*, Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1992.

⁹⁹ G. Davie, *Ibid.*, 1994, p.71. op. Cit. N. Timms, *Ibid.*, 1992, pp.28-32.

¹⁰⁰ R. Gill et al, *Ibid.*, 1997, p.511.

beliefs are often carelessly disregarded as ‘superstition’, their prevalence indicates that a ‘religion in decline’ thesis is too general. Gill and Davie also suggest that the resurgence of fundamentalism and the rise of New Religious Movements also points towards diversification. Paul Heelas goes further, and suggests that the success of capitalism itself may provide religion with an opportunity; he partly explains the rise of some more recent New Age movements by linking their particularity to the commodification of religion in a consumerist world.¹⁰¹

There are at least three ways of interpreting these indices.¹⁰² Classic secularisation theorists seize on the vectors of decline, and point towards an increasingly marginal status for religion in the lives of individuals and national affairs. In such thinking, the persistence of non-traditional religion is seen as evidence of the rise of individualism, and symptomatic of the erosion of religious values and beliefs. Others such as Davie or Iannaccone continue to emphasise the persistence of religion.¹⁰³ Finally, others see the picture as one of *accelerating* (post-war) pluralism and change, rather than decline or persistence.¹⁰⁴ Each of these interpretations acknowledges some degree of secularisation, whilst at the same time affirming the continuing powers and adaptability of religion.¹⁰⁵

The discussion in this paper has been vigorously contesting the ‘classic’ secularisation thesis (and its reading of the relation between religion and society), and arguing for a synthesis of the interpretations of ‘persistence’ and ‘pluralism and change’; the earlier historical excursion, to some extent, confirmed this as ‘normative’ for English religion. But where exactly does this leave the Church of England in relation to its own people? If innate spirituality continues to endure, independent of the churches, what are its priests really for? Equally, if pluralism becomes an ever-more powerful driver in a post-war, post-modern age, will there be any future coherence for the idea of ‘English’, ‘religion’ and ‘spiritual’?

Unsurprisingly, the answers will lie with the English themselves, and I conclude with three observations. First, the recent proposals to reform the House of Lords contained within the *Wakeham Report*, suggest that a binding between religion and politics is axiomatic to English identity and its constitution: religion is part of the ‘hidden wiring’ within the State. The nature of religious representation is undoubtedly broadening out to reflect increasing pluralism and change, but there appears to be no appetite for removing religion from the heart of the nation.¹⁰⁶

Second, clergy (particularly within an established church) continue to be in demand, offering a ministry that is public, performative and pastoral. The phenomenon of ‘vicarious’ religion has long been acknowledged, the mechanism whereby an institution and its representatives are needed to believe in things that others are not quite so certain of.¹⁰⁷ At times of death, birth, love and loss, the church is often there to provide focus, articulation, meaning and interpretation. It remains the case that few leave church because of intellectual doubts; and few join out of conviction. *Relating* to the church remains a very English thing.¹⁰⁸

Third, religion continues to provide enchantment within the modern world; people know there is

¹⁰¹ See P. Heelas, ‘The Sacralisation of Self and New Age Capitalism’ in N. Abercrombie and A. Warde (Eds.), *Social Change in Contemporary Britain*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992, pp. 139-166.

¹⁰² R. Gill et al, *Ibid.*, 1997, p. 514.

¹⁰³ See *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 35., no.3., September 1996.

¹⁰⁴ A. Russell, *Ibid.*, 1998, p.21.

¹⁰⁵ For further exploration, see J. Beckford, *Religion and Advanced Industrial Societies*, London, Unwin Hyman, 1989; Phillip Hammond (Ed), *The Sacred in a Secular Age*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985; T. Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*, New York, Macmillan, 1967.

¹⁰⁶ See M. Percy, ‘Reform, Revolution or Refraction: The Church and the State’, in *The Church in the Future: Lincoln Studies in Theology* (Vol. 5), Sudbury, Yard Publishing, 1999; K. Medhurst & S. Moyser, *Church and Politics in a Secular Age*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1988; and R. Harries, ‘A New Chamber’, *Church Times*, 28/01/00, p.8.

¹⁰⁷ See for example the treatment of English religion in W. Carr, *Say One for Me*, London SPCK, 1992

¹⁰⁸ A. Russell, *Ibid.*, 1998., p.20.

more to life than the explainable and visible. Small wonder that churches – even apparently empty ones – continue to say something to the English, and something about England; that faith is not dead, and is woven into our history, fabric, and identity.¹⁰⁹ The future of the nation lies in a deepening of its appreciation of this past, in all its plurality, tolerance, semi-sacred and semi-secular eccentric Englishness. Anyway, enough prose; the poetry of T. S. Eliot says it all, for now:

‘...the communication
of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living...
...A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
On a winter’s afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England...’¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Witness the discussion on the importance of church buildings in rural communities in *Faith in the Countryside, The Report of the Archbishops Commission on Rural Areas*, London, Church House Publishing, 1990. C.f. S. Jenkins, *England’s One Thousand Best Churches*, London, Allen Lane, 1999.

¹¹⁰ T.S.Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, London, Faber, 1963, p.215 & 222.