

# The Churches and the Working Classes



The Churches and the Working Classes:  
Leeds, 1870-1920

By

Patricia Midgley

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P U B L I S H I N G

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## PREFACE

The apparent failure of the churches revealed by the 1851 Religious Census led them to increase their efforts to reach the working classes, particularly in cities. By the late nineteenth century most denominations were providing more buildings and an increasing variety of religious and secular activities to attract men as well as women and children. This mission to the poor and those beyond formal religion is examined through several denominational examples taken from central and suburban Leeds, with special reference to activities in working-class areas. Despite individual successes, by the end of the century it was becoming clear to the clergy and other concerned activists that the churches as a whole were failing in their mission and facing growing competition from state and commercial alternatives in the provision of education, welfare and leisure. Large buildings necessary for expanded church work were becoming a liability which limited the flexibility of the churches to meet further social change. Though the churches were at first optimistic that the Great War would bring people back to seek the consolations of religion, they were unable to halt the slow institutional decline. Nevertheless this case study of their mission in several parts of working-class Leeds shows evidence of considerable success, especially in outreach to the young, which helped maintain a Christian framework of shared beliefs in working-class communities beyond the confines of institutional religion. In the historical debate about the timing and extent of secularisation, this Leeds evidence suggests that, while institutional secularisation was taking place progressively from at least 1870 (when Board Schools were established), cultural secularisation was much slower and more patchy. Indeed the work of the churches between 1870 and 1920 may well help explain why residual Christianity remained an important though declining aspect of working-class culture until the 1960s.



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# CHAPTER ONE

## SETTING THE SCENE

### Introduction

The concentration of populations in urban areas as the nineteenth century progressed, and the contrasts with the apparent continuities and stability of previous centuries, have led to a rich array of interpretations of the changes to the relationships between churches and poorer members of urban communities. The period between 1870 and 1920 is a particularly fruitful one to consider, with parameters outside the control of the religious organisations but having undoubted impact on them—the 1870 Education Act, and the effects of the 1914-1918 War.

Much attention has been given by historians to the question of secularisation—whether, and if so when, religious decline happened, leaving the secular to replace the pervasive religious culture which it was assumed had existed previously. For most historians focusing on the fifty years between 1870 and 1920, urbanisation and industrialisation are at least strong undercurrents to the dynamics of the relationship between religious organisations and the working classes. For some of them, they are the cause of the perceived decline in religiosity, with different social patterns and the emphasis on survival in the market economy of the burgeoning urban areas taking the place of the traditional hierarchical, but symbiotic, relationships of the countryside and small towns.<sup>1</sup> For others, it was the very success of religion by the mid-Victorian period that inevitably led to its decline; there seems to be some merit in this latter assessment, for the growth of religious organisations, including the churches' associated clubs and societies, almost inevitably led them into a competition with other organisations, including the State, which in the end they could not win.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E.R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London, 1957); A.D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England* (London, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> G. Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-75* (London, 1971; 1985 edn), pp.190-191.

Concerns about the implications of rapid urbanisation had been expressed by commentators, religious leaders and legislators since early in the nineteenth century. The presence of large numbers of people living in close proximity to one another, often in crowded, unhealthy and unpleasant conditions, brought with it the potential for immorality, irreligion, crime, disease, chaos and loss of control, at a time when worries about the likelihood of outbreaks of insurrection and revolution similar to those taking place in other parts of Europe were rife.<sup>3</sup> Attempts were made to highlight and remedy the various environmental problems in the worst affected areas of the towns and cities: as well as genuine concerns about the health and welfare of the poorer inhabitants, there were also worries that any diseases linked to living conditions, as well as the effects of revolutionary reaction, could spread to the more well-to-do areas. Edwin Chadwick's 1842 Report caused alarm and led to a flurry of measures to attempt to address urban physical problems, including the 1848 Public Health Act when for the first time Parliament began to take some responsibility for the health of the nation.<sup>4</sup>

A more intractable problem, though, was the perception of the irreligiosity of the growing working-class population of the towns and cities. Concerns had been raised since early in the nineteenth century regarding working-class indifference to religion, and they increased with the growing town populations crowded together in areas which seemed lacking in the social pressures and norms which went with religious observance, and which seemed to the more affluent to underpin Victorian values. Many towns acquired interdenominational town missions to the working classes during the 1830s, their aim one of religious conversion, but often at the same time offering practical help to the poor. The very fact that they were called "missions", and the setting up of "mission halls" in various towns and cities, demonstrated the widely held concept that there were heathen hordes to be converted.

Friedrich Engels, writing in 1844 after visiting England (and admittedly biased) noted "All bourgeois writers are agreed that the workers have no

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<sup>3</sup> Twenty years later, Matthew Arnold remained wary of the growing working class, its potential for disruption and the overturning of social order, with no conviction that there was any remedy in religion as it revealed itself through its institutions: M. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (London, 1869; reprinted Cambridge, 1966), pp. 59, 105.

<sup>4</sup> E. Chadwick, *The Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (London, 1842; new edn, 1985).

religion and do not go to church".<sup>5</sup> His views were shared by many, and contemporary analysis of why this was so reached various conclusions: long working hours leaving little time or energy for religious activity; removal of the social pressures to attend church which were present and potent in small communities; different and more exciting alternatives; lack of suitable clothing and money for pew rents. The Congregationalist Edward Miall, having sought the views of working men on their reasons for non-attendance at church or chapel, found that they criticised the emphasis of the religious institutions on respectability, and felt that there was a contempt and lack of sympathy on the part of clergy and members of every denomination for the problems of the working classes in general.<sup>6</sup> More optimistically, because more easily remedied, on the part of the churches there was a perception that the problem was an insufficient amount of church accommodation for the growing numbers in the towns—leading, for example, to Walter Farquhar Hook, vicar of Leeds, completely reorganising arrangements within his large parish during the 1840s to provide more churches and more clergy.<sup>7</sup>

The Church of England assumption was (and remains) that everyone in England was a member of the (Established) Church, though some had chosen to dissent and go elsewhere. Everyone lived (and lives) in a parish of the Church of England, and was expected to attend their parish church and support it. Two developments challenged this ideal by the mid-nineteenth century; the impact of evangelicalism and of dissenting denominations, all of which demanded more of a Christian than mere residence in a parish, and the changing social structure of the growing

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<sup>5</sup> F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Stanford, 1844; new edn, 1958), p.141. His comments beg the question, of course, of what was meant by religion—an observable attendance at church services, or a personal faith that may not include formal observance.

<sup>6</sup> E. Miall, *The British Churches and the British People* (London, 1848), pp.143-144.

<sup>7</sup> H.W. Dalton, "Anglican Resurgence under W.F. Hook in Early Victorian Leeds. Church Life in a Nonconformist Town 1836-1851", *Thoresby Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, 12 (2002). Dr. Hook, though, was not completely optimistic about the remedial effects of adding to the number of churches; see W.F. Hook, *On the Means of Rendering More Efficient the Education of the People, A Letter to the Lord Bishop of St. David's* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn, London, 1846).

urban areas which meant the clergy no longer had the degree of support they had come to expect from social elites.<sup>8</sup>

When the official census of population was taken in 1851, for the first time a religious census was carried out as well, to gauge whether (as the churches suspected) there was a problem of accommodation. The compiler of the census results found that to meet the population needs of the urban areas, at least 2000 new churches and chapels were needed nationally. However, the results of the religious census, based on church attendances on 30<sup>th</sup> March, gave unwelcome evidence which seemed to confirm the fears of some church and community leaders, with less than 50 per cent of available adults actually attending church services on that Sunday, leaving plenty of room in the existing accommodation.<sup>9</sup> The general assumption at the time had been “that at least one visit to some place of worship every Sunday was the normal custom of anyone who claimed to be a respectable Christian”, so the level of non-attendance was disturbing.<sup>10</sup>

Ten years after the census, an article in the *Westminster Review* took issue with the Establishment view that more churches meant more church attendance, stating that what was needed were new doctrines. The writer was in fact in agreement with Miall’s findings of thirteen years earlier.<sup>11</sup> Thomas Wright, the “Journeyman Engineer”, gave little attention to the place of religion in his 1867 account of working-class life, describing Sunday as a welcome day of rest and amusement for most. His 1868 publication, however, devotes some space to the working-class view of the churches, noting that the latter generally put the blame for non-attendance on the working classes themselves, whereas the fault lay with the religious institutions, and he pre-empted later historians in querying whether formal membership or attendance was indeed an indicator of religiosity.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The composition of the social elites themselves had changed, from landed gentry and some professionals in rural areas and county towns, to a preponderance of manufacturers and “self-made men” in urban areas.

<sup>9</sup> H. Mann, *Religious Worship in England and Wales* (London, 1854). The adjusted figure for attendance in Leeds was 47 per cent. Mann had named Leeds as one of the industrial towns with the lowest attendance, noting that “the masses of our working population ... are never or but seldom seen in our religious congregations”, p.93.

<sup>10</sup> G. Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (London, 1962), p.149.

<sup>11</sup> W. Binns, “The Religious Heresies of the Working Classes”, *Westminster Review* (January 1862), pp.60-61.

<sup>12</sup> T. Wright, *Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes* (London, 1867); T. Wright, *The Great Unwashed* (London, 1868), p.81.

The rumblings about working-class religiosity which had begun early in the century, gathering momentum with the publication of the religious census, reached new heights with the publication in 1883 of the Congregationalist Andrew Mearns' pamphlet about the London poor, based on the reports of the London city missionaries. Mearns' polemic could be extended to be representative of any of the large industrialised urban areas, and his linking of the religious indifference of the poor with their living conditions, together with the association of the latter with immorality and "sin" in general, had an unprecedented impact on the churches and on the public.<sup>13</sup> The impact was helped by the *Pall Mall Gazette's* reprinting of the pamphlet in its pages, together with editorials, interspersed with a great number of readers' letters.<sup>14</sup> Even so, Mearns' environmental approach to the problems of the working classes, including their religiosity, was rejected by many churchmen in favour of the old remedy of building more churches, the Methodist Forster Crozier, for example, being emphatic that what was needed was "to multiply chapels and to increase Christian agencies, so that he [the irreligious workman] will readily find a place of worship".<sup>15</sup> Mearns' approach did, however, influence William Booth, forming a basis for his 1890 publication in which he sought a change in the physical environment of the poor, to farm colonies, to aid their spiritual re-birth.<sup>16</sup>

A variety of strategies was used by the churches in an attempt to deal with the perceived problems relative to the working classes. There was a great deal of activity on the part of all denominations, the second half of the nineteenth century being particularly fertile for the establishment of societies, classes and clubs associated with churches and chapels, some aimed at existing members, but many formed to attract and embrace working-class people, and to improve their physical living conditions and security (for example, savings clubs) as well as their spiritual condition. It is debatable how far these various strategies helped the long-term viability of the religious organisations or whether they became part of the churches' problems. This is one of the issues that will be examined below. And in spite of all the resources of time, energy and money ploughed into these efforts, just before the First World War the same concerns about working-

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<sup>13</sup> A. Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (London, 1883; reprinted Leicester 1970).

<sup>14</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, 16 October 1883, 23 October 1883.

<sup>15</sup> F. Crozier, *Methodism and "The Bitter Cry of Outcast London"* (London, 1885), p.23.

<sup>16</sup> W. Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (London, 1890).

class religiosity seemed to be being aired; Charles Masterman noted with regret that it was wrong to talk of the working class in the cities losing their religion, for they had never had one, with religion counting “for little in the scheme of human affairs”. He describes the moral values by which the working classes seemed to live, for which Christianity or churchgoing was unnecessary—a theme to be picked up by later historians.<sup>17</sup>

## The historiography

Hugh McLeod has noted that there are many ways of telling the story of religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the historiography bears this out.<sup>18</sup> For more than a century following the religious census, most commentators, clergy and historians based their worries or enquiries about religiosity on whether or not people attended a church or chapel service, with the assumption that those who did not attend were not religious. There is in fact a great deal of archive evidence that the various societies and organisations linked to churches and chapels were well attended for most of the period by working-class people, who thereby came under the influence of the churches even if they did not attend services, and presumably some who attended no church-related activities had a religious commitment or faith, as in the present day. Traditionally, though, the favoured approach was the reductionist separation of churchgoers from non-churchgoers, and church/chapel members from non-members to assess religiosity, presumably because it was an external, objective and measurable indicator, thereby lending itself to analysis in an age increasingly obsessed with scientific objectivity.<sup>19</sup> This approach has been reinforced because of the paucity of records left by the people

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<sup>17</sup> C.F.G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London, 1909; new edn, 1960), pp. 15, 91; W.L. Courtney (ed.), *Do We Believe? A Record of a Great Correspondence in “The Daily Telegraph”, October, November, December 1904* (London, 1905); R. Mudie-Smith (ed.), *The Religious Life of London* (London, 1904); G. Haw (ed.), *Christianity and the Working Classes* (London, 1906). Two examples of later historians examining the issue of informal, “folk” religion are J. Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825-1875* (Oxford, 1976), and more recently S.C. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark, c.1880-1939* (Oxford, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> H. McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe 1848-1914* (Basingstoke, 2000), p.4. Particularly relevant here is his view that the current dominant version of the “narrative” is that which sees the central theme as secularisation.

<sup>19</sup> C.G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London, 2001; reprinted 2003), p.12.



themselves, so that until relatively recently historians have seen little option other than to use the records of religious organisations and those of social commentators and journalists. This has been useful in gauging the latter's attitudes and objectives, but those of the working classes (apart from a very few who left their own written records, or became sufficiently well-known to attract biographies) have been surmised, often through a quantitative analysis of their actual attendance at churches and associated activities. It has meant that for a century historians have tended to use the criteria of the clergy rather than the very different criteria of the people themselves in gauging how religious the latter were, and in assessing the relationship between them and the churches.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the assessment was largely made by "insiders", often clergy seeking an answer to their worries about what had gone wrong.<sup>21</sup>

One advantage of counting attendances at services—despite Horace Mann's problems of how to record those who attended twice a day at the same establishment or at different ones, and the omission from the statistics of many of those who attended regularly but infrequently (and not on the day of the census)—was that the presumed objectivity of a quantitative assessment lent itself to a control of the variables. Numbers attending could be compared between churches, between incumbents, between neighbourhoods. Those who did not attend could be sought out. Solutions could be sought to the problem of non-attendance. Counting attendances could itself be a form of social control.

More recently, some historians have looked at the qualitative evidence of the discourses employed, and the subjective meanings attached to contacts with churches and clergy by the people themselves, though even as recently as 1998 Kenneth Hylson-Smith found it necessary to caution

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<sup>20</sup> H. McLeod, *Religion and Society in England, 1850-1914* (Basingstoke, 1996), p.55.

<sup>21</sup> For example, S.C. Carpenter [Dean of Exeter], *Church and People 1789-1889* (London, 1933); [Reverend] E.R. Wickham, *Church and People*. Wickham, writing of Sheffield from his background as an industrial missionary, saw attempts at evangelisation of the urban poor, with its emphasis on personal morality, alienating many of them. He suggested that the way in which their lives were viewed through the prism of the temperance issue, Sabbatarianism, concerns about popular culture, and sexual morality, made them "a target for the darts of evangelical moralism". He pre-empted later historians and sociologists in seeing this as a conscious or unconscious attempt at social control which had mixed effects: *Church and People*, p.194.

against an over-ready acceptance of the figures, suggesting that historians needed to continue to explore what religion meant to people, rather than accepting the definitions of clergy and commentators of the time.<sup>22</sup> As late as 1992, though, Callum Brown made a strong case for counting attendances and church membership, suggesting that they are “the most obvious outward measures of the social significance of religion”, although he did stress that after examining these measures, historians must couple with them the role of religion in popular culture and politics, and its individual significance for people. It is difficult to argue with his point that in assessing religious social significance, there must be a starting point such as the degree of religious adherence and practice (presumably at a particular point in time) before one can start to assess the more subjective dimensions.<sup>23</sup>

For much of the twentieth century, those trying to analyse religion’s interrelationship with the working classes assumed that there had been a golden age that had at some point come to an end. By the 1960s, though, increasingly studies were being carried out by academic historians rather than by clergymen, with a growing interest in assessing the meaning of religion within a cultural and societal context. Because the historians came

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<sup>22</sup> K. Hylson-Smith, *The Churches in England from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II, Vol.III, 1833-1998* (3 vols, London, 1998), p.17. Those using qualitative evidence have included Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark*; Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*; McLeod, *Religion and Society in England*, with a strong dependence on the work of oral historians.

<sup>23</sup> C.G. Brown, “A revisionist approach to religious change” in S. Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization. Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford, 1992), p.40. Almost equally persuasive, though, is the point made by sociologist David Martin who, in warning of the “ideological loadings” inherent in the concept of secularisation, suggests that the whole thesis relies upon “a point in the past where religion was powerful and all-pervasive and a point in the future where it is weak and a mere leisure pursuit”: D. Martin, “On Secularization and its Prediction: a Self-examination” in G. Davie, P. Heelas, L. Woodhead (eds), *Predicting Religion* (Aldershot, 2003), p.30. Sarah Williams made a similar point with her suggestion that even revisionists such as Cox, Green and Brown had allowed the concepts of secularisation and the decline of religion to shape their agendas, viewing them as objective historical processes rather than part of the ongoing discourse: Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture*, p.4. See J. Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth, 1870-1930* (New York, 1982); S.J.D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organisation and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire 1870-1920* (Cambridge, 1996); C.G. Brown, “A revisionist approach to religious change”.

from a different tradition (and were presumably less emotionally involved) they raised interesting questions, different to the hand-wringing of the clergymen. So, for example, Kenneth Inglis rebutted the idea of a golden age when most working people attended church services; he suggested that when it was customary (for instance in a small community) to attend worship, then individuals did not want to be different to the majority. With industrialisation and the move to towns, and for subsequent generations born in towns and cities, the habit of churchgoing for many never developed.<sup>24</sup> This raises the question (explored further below) of the numbers of children attending church or denomination-based day and Sunday schools, and other church-related clubs and societies, who might have been expected to develop a church-going habit in later life, and even if they did not, had a grounding in the general messages being promulgated by the churches.<sup>25</sup>

Although a layman, Inglis did reflect the concerns, almost panics, of churchmen (clergy of all denominations, and all levels of the various ecclesiastical hierarchies) about low attendances in the industrial areas of the country, and suggested the same reasons as those given by the clergy and by Horace Mann following the 1851 census—poor rents, inconvenient

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<sup>24</sup> K.S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London, 1963). A similar point is made by J. Kent, "Feelings and Festivals. An interpretation of some working-class religious attitudes" in H.J. Dyos and M. Wolff (eds), *The Victorian City: Images and Realities* (2 vols, London, 1973), vol.2, p.858; by S. Meacham, "The Church in the Victorian City", *Victorian Studies*, 11 (1968), 359-378, p.362; and by O. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church, Part Two, 1860-1901* (London, 1970, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 1987), p.268. However, the difficulties of retrospectively attributing motivation and meaning are illustrated by the fact that Obelkevich makes the contrary point that poor church attendance in the northern industrial towns, including Leeds, was at least partly due to the fact that they "drew immigrants" from the surrounding rural areas where churchgoing had been lax for generations: J. Obelkevich, "Religion", in F.M.L.Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950* (3 vols, Cambridge, 1990; reprinted 1996), vol. 3, p.338.

<sup>25</sup> Pelling, in his 1964 critique of Inglis, specifically draws attention to the point, querying when a working man is "under religious influence"; can he be said to be no longer under religious influence if he does not attend services, but does have a background of Sunday school and knows the vicar or minister of his neighbourhood? Pelling notes that according to the Census the man is not religious, but he himself would very probably have defined himself as Church of England, Methodist, or other denomination: H. Pelling, "Religion and the Nineteenth-Century Working Class", *Past and Present*, 27 (1964), 128-133, p.132.

location of churches, not wishing to be different from one's neighbours, lack of smart clothes.<sup>26</sup> For most denominations, missionary activity intensified in the urban areas of the country amongst the "heathens".<sup>27</sup> Primarily, the mission was to evangelise in order to draw the working classes into the churches and chapels, and Inglis saw this as the foundation for the plethora of clubs, societies, and charitable activity, as well as the hectic religious revivals, of the Victorian period. He adopted Mann's, the clergy's, and the middle classes' definitions of religiosity, and using these definitions the outcome of all this activity over many decades was a negative one.<sup>28</sup>

Whilst traditional studies, like that by Inglis, continued, from the 1960s the impact of the discipline of sociology grew, influencing the move from "top-down" analyses of religious organisations and their relationships with their members. The institutions themselves started to be subjected to functional analysis, first by sociologists and then by historians following the same approach.<sup>29</sup> In examining the issues of how the religious

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<sup>26</sup> The Roman Catholic hierarchy in England were similarly concerned about what they termed "leakage" from the Catholic Church—Catholics ceasing to practise the formal aspects of their faith by not attending Mass regularly or performing Easter duties, and this in spite of, or because of, the large numbers of Irish Catholic immigrants throughout the nineteenth century. But the reasons suggested for non-attendance by Mann, Anglican clergy, and Inglis were less relevant for Roman Catholics, since their churches or missions tended to be in the middle of a Catholic community, so the location was convenient, the neighbours belonged to the same church, and the fact that the churches and missions were deliberately established in poor communities meant that lack of smart clothes need not be an inhibiting factor in attending Mass: M.A.G. O'Tuathaigh, "The Irish in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Problems of Integration" in R. Swift and S. Gilley (eds.), *The Irish in the Victorian City* (London, 1985), p.25; R. Samuel, "The Roman Catholic Church and the Irish Poor" in Swift and Gilley, *The Irish in the Victorian City*, p.271.

<sup>27</sup> Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes*, p.4.

<sup>28</sup> It has been noted that "the identification of religion with church attendance narrowed the criteria for judging the success or failure of the mission": G. Parsons, "A Question of Meaning: Religion and Working Class Life" in G. Parsons (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain* (2 vols, Manchester, 1988), vol. 2, pp.65, 68.

<sup>29</sup> For example, B.R. Wilson (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism* (London, 1967); R. Robertson (ed.), *Sociology of Religion* (Harmondsworth, 1969); B.R. Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (London, 1982); S. Yeo, *Religion and Voluntary Organisations in Crisis* (London, 1976); A.D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society*; A.D. Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain* (London, 1980). Wilson has remained loyal to the functionalist approach, reiterating its key usefulness as late

organisations served a function, what that function was, and whether they ceased to be functionally appropriate, the question raises itself of the link with decline, and, if there was a decline in functional usefulness, when that began. Sometimes the sociological approach was underpinned by the premise that the concepts being studied had “either disappeared or at least greatly decayed in prestige. This is why they are easier to isolate and analyse”.<sup>30</sup> Certainly as the twentieth century progressed, the fact that religion and religious discourse no longer permeated the formal structures and networks of society made the former easier to study as a separate entity, and those carrying out the functional analyses considered they were able to take a more objective view than the churchmen and clergymen who had gone before them.

## Changing Approaches

Bridging the divide between traditional, ecclesiastical historians and functionalism is Alan Gilbert, with clear definitions linked to observable acts and practices, and concepts such as “growth” and “decline” related to observed social behaviour.<sup>31</sup> For Gilbert, industrialisation and urbanisation are key to religious decline, changing societal patterns and allegiances, leading ultimately to increasing secularisation after the First World War. He views churches and chapels as service organisations, filling various needs until they began to be met by other means.<sup>32</sup> At the same time he sees the relationship between religion and social change in the Victorian period and up to 1914 as a product of the conflict between the Established

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as 1992: B.R. Wilson, “Reflections on a Many Sided Controversy”, in S.Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization*, p.199.

<sup>30</sup> K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth, 1973; reprinted 1984), p.800.

<sup>31</sup> Gilbert, *Religion and Society*, p.24. Gilbert’s involvement the following year in a publication mainly comprising statistics of church attendance and growth patterns underlined his affinity to a social science perspective: R. Currie, A. Gilbert and L. Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles Since 1700* (Oxford, 1977). Observable behaviour brings its own difficulties in making comparisons over time; Owen Chadwick interpreted the figures differently, noting that “many more people went to church in 1901 compared to 1837, but fewer people relative to the population”: Chadwick, *The Victorian Church, Part Two*, p.423. He is talking about actual attendances, whereas in *Religion and Society* Gilbert is largely referring to formal attachment, presumably those baptised into the Church of England, but not necessarily attending thereafter.

<sup>32</sup> Gilbert, *Religion and Society*, p.69.

Church of England and Dissent.<sup>33</sup> Gilbert views this conflict as central to religion's role in society at this period, and yet it is likely that it was of no more than passing interest, and then only if it surfaced at a local level, to the bulk of the population—and certainly to those who are the subject of this study. Unlike other historians, rather than working-class indifference and apathy leading to low involvement with religious organisations, Gilbert perceives “cultural and social antipathy” towards the churches.<sup>34</sup> This seems to be a misinterpretation of the situation; antipathy suggests a definite, considered, stand whereas for many, religious observance just did not form a part of their lives. “Indifferent” seems the more appropriate description for those who saw the churches as irrelevant to themselves, as does “apathetic” for those who either could not be bothered to attend churches, or to find out what their message was. Gilbert sees this lack of relationship between churches and people as having a crucial long-term effect, in that increasingly “working class cultural values” superseded religious values, with society becoming dominated by the mass media and popular culture—redolent of Wickham's view, twenty years earlier, that pluralism was an effect rather than a cause of working-class alienation from the churches, and indeed seeming pertinent to present-day society.<sup>35</sup> For Gilbert, this trend accelerated around the time of the First World War, and was therefore crucial in its effects towards the end of the period of study here. By 1980, Gilbert had referred in the title of his latest publication to “Post-Christian Britain”, a strong indication that he thought the process was complete, and that he was now writing about *after* the effective decline of Christianity.<sup>36</sup>

Although embracing a functionalist approach with similarities to that of Gilbert earlier, Jeffrey Cox takes a refreshingly positive view. Rather than judging the churches' success on the proportion of the working classes who attended services, he looks at the overall activities of the churches, and also views in a different light the comments of the clergy in the late nineteenth century. “Would any other voluntary institution which attracted several million people to an ordinary weekly meeting be judged a failure?” asks Cox.<sup>37</sup> He admits that the working classes, certainly the poorer section, generally did not go to services, but points to the provision

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.vii, a view shared to some extent by Hugh McLeod: McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe*, p.85.

<sup>34</sup> Gilbert, *Religion and Society*, p.137.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p.138. Wickham, *Church and People*, p.12.

<sup>36</sup> A.D. Gilbert, *The making of Post-Christian Britain* (London, 1980).

<sup>37</sup> Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society*, p.5.

of “a vast parochial and philanthropic network” which provided social welfare, the sacraments and rites of passage to the working classes, with the churches’ role in the former being eclipsed by the state only after the First World War, and it is his stress on the ubiquity of this network which is particularly relevant in this study.<sup>38</sup>

According to Cox, the concerns expressed by the Victorian clergy about working-class lack of religiosity have been misinterpreted. They were not admissions of failure, but rather “appeals for support” (and some of the evidence of Leeds given below bears this out).<sup>39</sup> In fact, he suggests, the clergy depended on the irreligious for their continued existence—without them they had no purpose. This of course rather depends on how the clergy role was perceived. Yates describes how the role of the Anglican clergyman changed during the nineteenth century, shifting between that of missionary and that of pastor at different times.<sup>40</sup> It is, though, feasible that clergy and influential lay people may have seen good opportunities for attracting more funds in the way Cox suggests. He notes that, in areas with large working-class populations, the latter’s non-attendance at church has been used as evidence of religion’s unimportance. Again he turns this round, by insisting that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century urban religion was even more important just because it attracted the wealthy and the influential decision makers, rather than the poor, though he stresses the way in which peripheral activities attracted people of all kinds into the churches.<sup>41</sup> Church-related or church-sponsored

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.6. Stephen Yeo, however, sees these very efforts by the churches, viewed as indicators of success at the time, as leaving a legacy of burdensome structures which probably later contributed to the churches’ decline: Yeo, *Religion and Voluntary Organisations*, p.143.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.6. McLeod later made a similar point, suggesting that public accounts of religious apathy played on fears of social disorder in an attempt to gain public or private funds for the Christian “mission”: McLeod, *Religion and Society*, p.141.

<sup>40</sup> W.N. Yates, “The Only True Friend: Ritualist Concepts of Priestly Vocation” in D. Baker (ed.), *Religious Motivation: Biographical and Sociological Problems for the Church Historian* (Oxford, 1978), p.407. This again illustrates the difficulties of retrospective interpretation and attribution of motives.

<sup>41</sup> Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society*, p.32. He describes how in Lambeth the Wesleyans had a regular Sunday school for members’ children and a “rough” one for the other children, and at the Anglican church there were billiard rooms and a gym for “working lads but the ‘better sort’ belonged only to the Young Men’s Friendly Society”: p.62. Hylson-Smith, writing some sixteen years after Cox, shares his view that the Christian faith permeated the whole social and cultural life of the country, refuting the traditional concerns of churchmen (at least

activities on the part of all denominations, even when they did not draw in new members, at least contributed to a general “moral influence” on non-churchgoers, and this was a large part of the churches’ civilising mission to the working classes, so again for Cox a failure turned into a success. And it was this general influence which was a main component of what Cox terms “diffusive Christianity”, a passive acceptance of Christian belief, which nonetheless brought with it a moral and social code which affected the way in which people lived their lives.<sup>42</sup>

Cox very definitely sees this somewhat informal relationship between churches and the working classes breaking down by 1920, the increasing involvement of the state in private life and welfare provision playing a large part in this, accompanied by a willingness on the part of the churches to return to a concentration on their religious function. With “functional differentiation” and focus once more on spiritual welfare, the churches became of interest only to a minority, competing with other organisations for the attention of the people. Though for some time the legacy of respect and influence gained through their involvement in identifying and addressing social problems remained, what had previously been a pervasive religious discourse gradually withered away and the churches were edged to the periphery.<sup>43</sup>

Many of the historians working within a functionalist paradigm came from a Marxist, or at least left-wing, perspective. Accordingly, for some of these, the issue of working-class religiosity was reduced to one of class differences, viewing the general trend throughout Europe from the French Revolution onwards as one of accelerating secularisation. For Eric Hobsbawm, for instance, the socialist movements of the later nineteenth century, in England as elsewhere in Europe, had their roots in the rationalism of the Enlightenment, and secularisation was unstoppable, although it was fanned by the failure of the major denominations to cope with the issues surrounding industrialisation.<sup>44</sup> He is aware of the concerns

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since the 1851 census) about the extent of working-class alienation from the churches—though he suggests that they never were much involved: Hylson-Smith, *The Churches in England*, p.13.

<sup>42</sup> Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society*, pp.82, 83, 93.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, pp.182, 273. For Bruce, this functional differentiation was a part of modernisation, logically leading to secularisation: S. Bruce, *God is Dead: secularisation in the West* (Oxford, 2002), p.8.

<sup>44</sup> This last point was shared by Yeo, who in examining the function of organised religion within its social context in one particular town, felt that “blame” for



of churchmen and leaders at the time of the 1851 census regarding the indifference of the working classes to religion, whilst seeing it as an inevitable evolution: for the rising middle classes in the nineteenth century religion could be a powerful ally and justification, and for them and the upper classes could provide social stability—if only the working classes would embrace it.<sup>45</sup> Unlike churchmen at the time, and sociologists and historians of his own time, however, he considers that “religion in our period [writing of 1848-1875] is of comparatively slight interest, and does not deserve extended treatment”.<sup>46</sup>

The view of religion as a means of social control, hinted at by Hobsbawm, was particularly influential within the left-wing functionalist approach. Its use in this way was often seen as necessary by nineteenth-century commentators and religious leaders concerned about the concentration of masses of people in the rapidly expanding towns and cities and the consequent potential for disorder, immorality and irreligion.<sup>47</sup> Functionalists writing in the 1970s and 1980s tended to see the growth of church and chapel activity, missions, and different church-related organisations as part of an attempt to civilise the working classes, though their analysis has often been rather one-dimensional, avoiding the complexity of a probable genuine desire, on the part of many nineteenth-century clergy, to convert individuals to Christianity for the latter’s spiritual benefit, or to improve their physical lot.<sup>48</sup> A particular emphasis

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religious indifference had been unfairly placed on the people rather than the religious institutions themselves: Yeo, *Religion and Voluntary Organisations*, p.18.

<sup>45</sup> E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolutions* (London, 1962; reprinted 1995), p.229.

<sup>46</sup> E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital* (London, 1975; reprinted 1995), p.271. His conclusion seems to reflect the more dismissive approach of the time at which he was writing, for there is plenty of evidence of contemporary debate and concern about religion at all levels—newspapers, periodicals, and popular novels, many of the latter analysed by R.L. Wolff, *Gains and Losses. Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* (London, 1977).

<sup>47</sup> A.P. Donajrodzki (ed.), *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London, 1977); P. Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England* (London, 1978); S. Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth, 1889-1939* (Oxford, 1981); F.M.L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society* (London, 1988).

<sup>48</sup> Certainly one left-wing functionalist, though, warned of the danger of “overpoliticizing leisure as an arena of [class] struggle”, pointing out that those leisure activities which the working classes viewed as important to them, for whatever reason, have survived, giving the example of public houses, whilst others

was placed by these historians on the role of Sunday schools and other organisations aimed at the young, although Stephen Humphries insists that there was widespread resistance on the part of children to the efforts of schools and churches to influence them through religious teaching, and indeed suggests that the resulting resentment and detachment on the part of children and young people led many of them, when adults, to be completely disaffected by religion.<sup>49</sup> To some extent McLeod, though taking a wider view, agrees with Humphries, noting that, as now, many children were “reluctant scholars”; he does, though, make the point that Sunday schools tended to be popular with children, certainly as they developed their skills in mixing “religion and education with entertainments and outings” to maintain their attraction.<sup>50</sup> The various denominations’ efforts to attract and keep young people will be described below, though in terms of the churches’ attempts to invest in the young, rather than impose a social control on them.

Much of the debate about the churches and the working classes had taken class as the main category for analysis, including Marxist assumptions that had fed into the ideas of the functionalists. This stress on the concept of class began to be questioned in 1983 at a History Workshop entitled “Religion and Society”, when non-religious historians, most of them from a left-wing tradition, accepted that religion was something to be taken seriously and not dismissed as “false consciousness” in the Marxist tradition adopted by Edward Thompson twenty years earlier.<sup>51</sup> Many of those who had embraced the functionalist approach began increasingly to view religion as an aspect of culture, to be understood in terms of its

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have not because they have come to be seen as pointless by those involved: G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class. Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983; reprinted 1985), p.88. This point could similarly be applied to religious organisations.

<sup>49</sup> Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels?*, p.33.

<sup>50</sup> H. McLeod, *Religion and the Working Class in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1984), p.41; Brown has suggested that it was in the Edwardian period that the young “were the main object of interest to organised religion”: C. Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow, 2006), p.54. There is in fact a great deal of evidence to demonstrate growing interest during the nineteenth century: see below.

<sup>51</sup> The papers of this History Workshop were later published as *Disciplines of Faith*, ed. by J. Obelkevich, L. Roper and R. Samuel (London, 1987); E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963; reprinted Harmondsworth, 1974).

meaning to the various participants, eventually to become part of a social/cultural history approach.<sup>52</sup>

In the mid-1960s, running alongside the functional approach, a different strand of sociology had emerged, epitomised by David Martin. Moving away from a study of religion based on religious institutions themselves, Martin focuses on the cultural meaning of religion. He makes it clear that he has reservations about the secularisation thesis that had grown from the concerns of churchmen about attendance and membership of their institutions. In doing so, Martin cites both the difficulties of making comparisons—for example, the different criteria of membership used by the various denominations, and the different meanings given to similar practices in different churches—but more importantly he stresses the fact that “popular” religion was as much a part of the culture as it ever was.<sup>53</sup> He sets out a position: “far from being secular our culture wobbles between a partially observed Christianity, based towards comfort and the need for confidence, and beliefs in fate, luck and moral governance incongruously joined together”, a view particularly pertinent in the reports of soldiers’ religiosity during the First World War, noted below.<sup>54</sup> Martin’s emphasis that “it is clear that whatever the difficulties of institutional religion they have little connection with any atrophy of belief” separates out institutional decline from the meaning of religion in cultural and individual terms, suggesting a way forward for those historians who were beginning to be influenced by this branch of sociology, and to concentrate

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<sup>52</sup> The concept of social control applied to the function of religion remains attractive to some historians, however. As recently as 1995 Watts found it necessary, in writing about Dissent, to debate the arguments again: M.R. Watts, *The Dissenters* (2 vols, Oxford, 1995; reprinted 1999), vol. 2, pp.625-656. In 2000, Simon Gunn stated categorically that churches and chapels represented an attempt by the middle classes of the nineteenth century to “regulate the urban environment”, with the ecclesiastical organisations embodying “a continuous denominational tradition of spiritual and moral authority”, with a key role in reproducing and maintaining the social order, particularly in the towns and cities: S. Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class. Ritual and authority and the English industrial city 1840-1914* (Manchester, 2000), pp.106-107.

<sup>53</sup> D. Martin, *A Sociology of English Religion* (London, 1967), pp. 35, 76. From a slightly different, though related, perspective, Berger was treating religion itself as a social/cultural construction in analysing its significance: P.L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (Harmondsworth, 1973).

<sup>54</sup> Martin, *A Sociology of English Religion*, p.76. It is noteworthy that this seminal work was published in the period when Brown and McLeod considered religion to be in its death throes.

on the social/cultural history of religion.<sup>55</sup> Those historians specialising in social and cultural history now began to move away from viewing the study of religion as an aspect of ecclesiastical history to recognise it as a part of social history.<sup>56</sup>

Obelkevich, for instance, suggests that the competitive environment within which the urban churches of the nineteenth century operated spurred them on to be key players in the social and political changes of the period.<sup>57</sup> Obelkevich links what he sees as the decline of the churches around the turn of the century with the withdrawal of the middle classes from formal religion, having seen them as “pivotal” in religious institutional life in the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>58</sup> Given the evidence of Leeds (below) it is difficult to argue with his dating of the start of decline of formal religious observance. However, organisations and movements which the working classes wanted did survive, often very successfully; if they had wished the religious organisations to survive in their contemporary form, it seems likely they would have taken steps to bring this about.<sup>59</sup> Indeed Obelkevich makes the point that working people took from religion and religious organisations what they wanted, and what seemed relevant to them, including contacts through organisations and societies associated with the churches, as opposed to attendance at Sunday

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> For instance, Obelkevich, in *Religion and Rural Society*, considers the interrelationship of the older “popular” religion with the contemporary beliefs and the rituals promulgated by the main denominations, as did Williams in *Religious Belief and Popular Culture* some twenty years later for Southwark. Implicit in Obelkevich’s thesis is the idea that the careers of religious institutions were dependent on changing social contexts, so that many of the actions of churches had unforeseen social consequences. McLeod, having concentrated on religious statistics, was progressing to the meaning of the church for the people in his study of later nineteenth-century London: H. McLeod, *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City* (London, 1974).

<sup>57</sup> Obelkevich, “Religion”, p.311. Simon Green, writing at the same time, similarly notes the churches’ “responsiveness” to social changes: Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline*, p.384.

<sup>58</sup> Obelkevich, “Religion”, p.329. Similarly Jeremy Morris, in his study of Croydon, examined the connections between the power wielded by the middle class there and their apparent religious beliefs: J. Morris, *Religion and Urban Change. Croydon 1840-1914* (Woodbridge, 1992).

<sup>59</sup> See for example E. Hopkins, *Working-Class Self-Help in nineteenth-century England* (London, 1995).

services as the clergy wanted.<sup>60</sup> Strangely, Obelkevich suggests that in the long run the working classes were sufficiently influential to have converted the majority of the middle classes to share their own “spiritual destitution” by the end of the century. This does not quite follow from his view that it was the withdrawal of the middle classes that led to the decline of the churches, implying that it was they who took the lead.<sup>61</sup>

In spite of the rise of the middle classes concomitant with industrialisation, and Obelkevich’s view of the importance of the withdrawal of their allegiance in the decline of religion, he does not see industrialisation as sufficient cause in itself of secularisation. As evidence, he points out the continuing success of churches in North America and also suggests, with some justification, that in 1850 religion seemed “more relevant to British society than it had been a century earlier” because of the “energy and determination” of the churches’ response to industrialisation (in contrast to the *mea culpa* approach of the clergy historians such as Wickham, and the pessimism following the 1851 religious census). Rather weakly though, Obelkevich, having discarded other possibilities, suggests that the “moral critique” of religion, the discrediting of the concept of hell, and particularly the gradual loss of social pressure to be involved in church or chapel life, or to demonstrate one’s moral credentials through church/chapel membership, led to secularisation.<sup>62</sup> Some of Obelkevich’s views reflect those of McLeod more than twenty years before, particularly the increasing revulsion of people generally from the idea of hell and a judgemental deity, but also, for McLeod, an increased awareness of the impact of social inequalities and an impatience with “puritanical” restraints.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Obelkevich, “Religion”, p.339. Gareth Stedman Jones makes a similar point in *Languages of Class*.

<sup>61</sup> Obelkevich, “Religion”, p.341. Rather differently, McLeod points to the declining participation of the upper middle classes (the people of influence in local and national life) in religious activity as sounding a death knell for the role of religion in society generally: McLeod, *Religion and Society*, p.178. Hylson-Smith similarly sees a decline in religiosity due to the withdrawal of middle-class allegiance from the churches, so that their energies, influence and financial support were no longer available, like Obelkevich dating this from the turn of the century, accelerating through the First World War: Hylson-Smith, *The Churches in England*, p.15.

<sup>62</sup> Obelkevich, “Religion”, p.347.

<sup>63</sup> McLeod, *Class and Religion*, p.286.

Over much the same twenty-year period as Obelkevich, McLeod had in fact epitomised the gradual incorporation by many historians of a social/cultural approach, though at different times he demonstrates both strands of sociological influence—indeed his publications demonstrate the historiography relating to the working classes and religion over the period. A class emphasis often runs through his analyses, often, at least in the early years, linked to the social control thesis fashionable in the 1970s. For example, he sees that “the concept of respectability [of which regular church attendance was a part], potentially a great social leveller, was more often an instrument of middle class ideology”.<sup>64</sup> His 1974 study of London makes full use of attendance statistics and church records, as did the earlier “ecclesiastical” historians, but he combines these with autobiographies and newspaper reports to give an attitudinal and cultural context. He increasingly takes on the social/cultural mantle, by 1996 using mainly oral history sources to gauge attitudes and beliefs.

Whilst McLeod accepts that a dramatic decline in religiosity happened, the timing he attributes to it again reflects the general historiography. He suggests that the decline began in the 1880s, with the First World War a significant point, reflecting Alan Wilkinson’s perception that the War itself led many to question their faith and the role of the churches leading up to and during the war.<sup>65</sup> By 1996 he is of the view that up to 1914 “a

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p.14.

<sup>65</sup> In 1974 McLeod suggested that by the 1880s the urban working classes were completely alienated from formal religion, though this was demonstrably not so: Ibid, p.x.; A. Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War* (London, 1978; reprinted 1996). McLeod’s view that the 1880s were a time of sharp religious decline contrasts with Green’s suggestion that the decade was one of success for the churches: Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline*. Hylson-Smith raises the interesting point that the churches’ concerns were more understandable from the 1880s, with more public awareness of the working classes and their lives, when the numbers of people were greater and more visible, crowded together in unsalubrious areas through which the railways passed (so that railway passengers were able to see at least the external conditions of working-class localities), and giving rise to moral panics through newspapers and journals, census results, popular novels, and of course the interest aroused by Mearns’ 1883 publication: Hylson-Smith, *The Churches in England*, p14. Examples of popular novels giving a bleak picture of urban working-class life include those of George Gissing, for instance *The Unclassed* (London, 1884; new edn, 1930), and *Thyrza* (London, 1887; new edn 1974), and A. Morrison, *A Child of the Jago* (London, 1896; new edn 1969). In *Workers in the Dawn* (London, 1880; new edn, 1985), Gissing parodies the contemporary debates about the deserving and the undeserving poor,