

# RELIGION AND COMMUNITY: FRAMEWORKS AND ISSUES

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*The history of religion in Britain has been dominated by the concept of secularisation. This suggests that the working classes in the cities led a move away from the churches in the second half of the nineteenth century, if not before. Recent work, however, presents a growing challenge to this account, instead stressing continuities of religious practice and belief into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This article reviews this revisionism. It asks why revival occurred when and where it did, which groups were associated with 19<sup>th</sup> century denominations and how religious identities changed. In doing this it also suggests areas for further local research. The periods before the 1840s and after the 1910s, regions and localities outside London, and the patterns of everyday religious practice and belief, are themes on which community historians can address a host of under researched issues.*

A narrative lurks behind the concept of community, one that poses a shift from a close-knit ‘community’ to a more anonymous ‘society’, with disastrous consequences for the church (Green 1997). This simple narrative of the declining role of the church echoes the notion of secularisation, a theory that has cast a long shadow over historical writing on religion in Britain. However, the timing and nature of secularisation are now subject to major revision as earlier accounts of the role of religion, particularly in the 19th century, are questioned and replaced. Here we discuss some of this revisionism while at the same time suggesting potential issues for investigation by the community historian.

David Hempton (1996a: 1) poses two questions for the historian of religion. First, why did religious practice change and new denominations emerge; and, secondly, what was the experience of those people who joined these denominations.

In addition, we might add a third key question: which social groups were associated with religious institutions? The remainder of this article reviews these questions within a historical framework of religion since the 18th century. We begin by looking at the revival from the 1730s to the 1830s. We then turn to the context of institutional pluralism in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, we pursue the issues of changing religious identities and 20<sup>th</sup> century secularisation.

### *Revival*

In the 1730s widespread revivals flared across Protestant communities in northern Europe and north America. First reaching mass hearers in Britain through the preaching of Howel Harris and Daniel Rowland in Wales, the message was extended to England by George Whitefield (Ditchfield 1998: 58). But it was John Wesley who took loosely-linked local revivals and organised them into a ‘connexion’, with lay preaching, class meetings and local societies grouped into Circuits. Methodists brought ‘method’ to evangelical religion and in so doing took it out from the physical fabric of the church into the homes and communities of the people. At the centre of evangelical religion was the act of conversion, as the sinner accepted the saving grace of Jesus Christ. But, as Bebbington (1989: 5-17) points out, evangelicalism was also marked by a relentless activism, which transformed religious practice in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, an Anglican minister in the Cornish mining parish of Gwennap complained in 1744 that ‘there is a constant succession of [Methodist] teachers, that run up and down the country’ (Brown 1962: 7).

Evangelical religion was not limited to Wesley’s Methodists but infused parts of the Church of England as well as the dissenting sects, particularly the Baptists and Congregationalists. Some of the latter were adopting itinerant preaching from the 1780s, as did Benjamin Francis at Nailsworth in Gloucestershire (Urdank 1990: 85-96). This evangelicalism was based on aspects of traditional society but linked to newer ideas associated with the Enlightenment. Evangelicals urged religious toleration, freedom of conscience and the right to voluntary association; and also appealed to the use of evidence, rather than tradition, in order to support their religion. Yet, they were also sensitive to superstition and divine providence (Ditchfield 1998: 32-33, 67). It was this reconciliation of the new and the old, this chameleon-like

mediation of the world of learning to the people, combined with an ability to absorb elements of popular culture, that was the strength of evangelical religion and particularly Methodism (Ditchfield 1998: 76).

However, some communities were quicker to embrace Methodism than others. Two elements recur in historical explanations. Certain environmental factors aided the implantation of Methodism, and changing structural conditions encouraged its growth after the 1780s. Opportunities for Methodists lay in inverse proportion to the strength of Anglicanism. Thus, Walsh (1994: 30) argues that Methodism moved into the 'yawning gaps of the Anglican parochial system'. Parishes where Anglicanism was in a strong position also tended to be parishes with the most entrenched landlord paternalism. In consequence, the most conducive environments for Methodism were 'interstitial and marginal areas where traditional hierarchical structures were either absent or perceived to be antithetical to new interests' (Hempton 1996a: 27). Sometimes, such marginal regions of large parishes, scattered settlements and independent populations were also regions of early industrialisation (Everitt 1972).

Methodism saw its greatest gains where structural change coincided with areas of fractured paternalism (Hempton 1996b; 2). Indeed, Hempton suggests that the upsurge in Methodist membership after the 1780s is associated with wider changes, including population growth, the commercialisation of agriculture, and the impact of wartime conditions. These changes were undermining the place of the Church of England. For the Established Church it was a vicious circle. As communities committed themselves to Methodism, traditional ties of deference and dependence became much more friable. As such ties loosened, so the likelihood of Methodist and other dissenting success increased.

Nevertheless, the move away from the Established Church was not the inevitable consequence of its inadequacies and neglect. Local studies of 18th century Oldham and in Wales show that the Church of England did respond to the needs of its parishioners in these areas (Smith 1994; Jenkins 1978). Indeed, Royle (1997) questions the idea that Methodist growth was due only to a process of filling gaps in thinly churched areas. In a case study of York he concludes that Methodism grew out of a failure of the Church to contain its own success. Evangelicalism in the Church of England stimulated Methodism and old dissent by spilling over the institutional boundaries of the Church. Nevertheless, this implies that the problem the Church faced was a lack of institutional flexibility that meant it was unable to benefit from the

evangelical revival. In explaining dissenting success in Huddersfield, Royle uses a telling metaphor: 'Methodists and Baptists were like guerillas in rough terrain compared with the regular troops of the Church' (Royle 1997: 144)

For a generation after the 1780s networks of evangelicals broke free from clerical control and embedded themselves in independent labouring communities. This produced a period of 'cottage religion'. Deborah Valenze (1985) has convincingly restored the agency of labouring families in this remarkable explosion of domestic piety in rural Britain from the 1780s to the 1830s. Cottage religion, she argues, was the result of labourers struggling to maintain their independence. It elevated the domestic space and reaffirmed the value of the cottage economy. In doing this, it also constructed a new role for women. For instance, in 1771 Ann Gilbert of Gwinear, in west Cornwall, was 'going one day to preaching in the adjoining village [but] the preacher happened not to come'. She gave out the hymn and was then 'constrained to intreat and beseech them to repent, and turn to the Lord. The people were melted into tears, and many were convinced of sin' (Taylor, 1795, 44). Ann, almost totally blind since the early 1750s, found in Methodism a role that granted her respect and status within the local community (Figure 1).

However, in the adoption of cottage religion, local and regional differences remained (Ditchfield 1998: 23). In some regions, such as the West Riding of Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and in Cornwall cottage religion flourished; in others it did not. Furthermore, by the 1830s, despite the emergence of explicitly revivalist sects, such as the Primitive Methodists, mass revivals, which involved recurrent generational pulses of conversions indicative of a deeply entrenched folk religion, were confined to Wales, Scotland, Cornwall and Ulster (Hempton 1996b: 30). The 'eclectic and variegated' paths that evangelicalism took in different parts of the British Isles (Hempton 1996b, 154) calls for more detailed local studies of evangelical religion in the period before the 1830s, less well served than the later 19th century.

### *Organisation and pluralism*

The dramatic change during the first half of the 19th century was the transformation of the Church of England to become just one of a number of competing

denominations (Gibson 1994: 1; Knight 1998: 4). This, in turn, was part of a wider process in Victorian church life whereby well-organised denominations operated, increasingly, in a context of religious pluralism. Denominations became more 'respectable' and preaching more formal, especially in the towns where ministers mingled without embarrassment with an increasingly confident middle class. With professionalisation went institutional expansion, as the various denominations threw themselves into church building, partly in order to compete in a more pluralistic environment, but mainly to seek out and evangelise the unchurched masses. Even the Established Church shared in this process. For example, in Sheffield Anglican accommodation rose from fewer than 1,000 seats in 1821 to around 15,000 in 1841 (Gibson 1994: 91).

At the same time, new devices promoted the attachment of the people. Sunday Schools had emerged in 1780 and were enthusiastically adopted by both dissenting and conforming churches in the early 19th century. The motives of Sunday School promoters have been the subject of some debate. Were they the agents of middle-class values (Joyce 1980; Crowhurst 1997) or were they examples of working-class self help (Lacqueur 1976)? Recent research by Snell (1999) finds that it was in the most paternalistic and closed parishes that the largest proportions of Sunday scholars were enlisted. But Snell also discovers a strong relationship between Sunday School attendance and child labour (Snell and Ell 2000: 290), suggesting that working-class parents were attracted to these institutions for instrumental as well as religious reasons. Sunday Schools, according to Snell (1999), 'among the most neglected of research subjects', were merely the first of a wave of voluntary associations that cascaded out from the denominations during the 19th century. Mission societies, tract distribution societies, temperance societies, musical bands, even football clubs in the later part of the century resulted from the attempt by the denominations to influence society (Kent 1997).

In parallel with this development of new religious voluntary institutions came increased choices for the churchgoer. In 1788 John Wesley ordained his first minister in England and, after his death in 1791, the Wesleyan Plan of Pacification of 1795 marked the beginning of the formal split with the Church of England (Gibson 1994: 151). Methodist secessions were regular features from the 1810s to the 1850s. Some view these as lightning conductors for political and social tensions, reflecting a more fragmented class society (Hempton 1996b: 134). Others note the role of the

congregational drive for independence in style of worship and internal divisions over teetotalism, sabbatarianism and the operation of Sunday Schools in triggering secessions (Gowland 1979). While secessions within new dissent helped the growth of nonconformity there was a simultaneous expansion of Roman Catholicism. The numbers of Catholics increased more than four-fold between 1780 and 1840, even before the massive immigration from Ireland after the Famine. Meanwhile, in Scotland the Great Disruption of 1843 split the established Presbyterian Church and indicated a new pluralism in Scottish religious life (Ditchfield 1998: 92).

The ubiquitous presence of religious voluntary associations across differing regions has helped promote a revisionist historiography of later-19th and early-20th century British religion. Taking issue with the old narrative of secularisation, working class alienation and urban religious no-go areas, revisionists now put greater weight on the influence of religious institutions in industrial-urban areas (McLeod 1995; Green 1997). They downgraded the significance of the link between urbanisation and low church attendance. In the most radical revisionist re-assessment Brown (2001: 148-149) claims that the *Daily News* census of churchgoing in London in 1902-03 under-recorded by as much as 40% and argues that under-recording was more of a problem in towns than the countryside in this and previous surveys. His conclusions are supported by recent quantitative re-workings of the 1851 Census of Religious Worship. Snell and Ell (2000: 400) cast doubt on the pessimistic view of urbanisation. They found that outside the very largest cities, as the degree of urbanisation of parishes rose, so did attendances.

In a similar manner the idea that the working class deserted the churches is also questioned. Evidence from Halifax, from Glasgow and from Oldham suggests that 19th-century churches enjoyed a social comprehensiveness (Green 1996: 200-205; Hillis 1981; Smith 1994: 126-130). The revisionist conclusion is that social class on its own fails to explain church attendance; indeed, turning the traditional myth of the middle-class church on its head, Brown concludes that 'in every major study ... the working classes were in the majority' (Brown 2001: 155).

The direct founding of a plethora of voluntary associations by the churches may not have converted the whole of urban society. But these voluntary organisations established a dense network of activity, as the columns of any 19th-century newspaper testify. Studies from Norfolk, Wiltshire and Durham tend to support the view of a vigorous church culture continuing its impact to 1900 (Bent 1994; Hunt 1995; Carr

1999). Recently, this has recently been described as a 'salvation industry', aggressively seeking out converts; and, in the process, imposing a collective moral code that produced a popular religiosity, informal and domestic, that historians, in their focus on religious institutions, have tended to ignore (Cox 1982; Williams 1999).

However, revisionism has not replaced the clear link found between social class and denomination. Gilbert (1976: 63) studied almost 11,000 English dissenters in the period 1800-1837 and found that 59% were artisans. A series of other local studies repeat this finding. Thus Jaffe (1997), in a study based on a detailed survey of religious practice by a local clergyman in the parish of Whickham, County Durham, found skilled workers were more likely to be Methodist, while the social class distribution of Anglicans was more even. Similar results have been found in Sussex and Shipley in West Yorkshire (Edwards 1997; Flood 1999; Uren 1995). Nevertheless, local differences in social composition occurred, even within the same denomination (Probert 1995). Moreover, while artisans and skilled workers dominated chapel membership, wealthier people were more prominent as trustees; and, especially in the towns, they exercised 'subtle influences over the tone and form of Methodism' (Gibson 1994: 81).

Most social composition studies, with the exception of Gilbert (1976) and Field (1977), are restricted to particular localities over limited time periods. Field (1992) provides a more dynamic picture of the long-term trend of Church of England attendances using an 'unjustly neglected source', the clergy visitation returns. He concludes that church attendance in the Diocese of Oxford fell in the 18th century but that the vast majority attended. By the early-19th century, there was less absenteeism but more irregularity of attendance, which remained high until the 1850s. By the 1890s new leisure opportunities were tempting away the young and the middle classes. This shift was exacerbated by the First World War, which had a major negative effect on attendance. Furthermore, declining attendances after the 1870s were markedly gendered. Men stopped attending rather than women. It also became clear from Field's study that, from the 1850s, men favoured the morning service whilst women attended in the evening.

It has been clear for some time that women have been more likely to become members of dissenting denominations- a finding consistent from the 1760s onwards and across regions for Wesleyans, Baptists and Congregationalists (Field 1977). Evangelicalism offered active roles to women, not just caring for the sick and

domestic visiting, but as preachers in the period of cottage religion. Although the Wesleyan Methodist Conference in England prohibited female preaching in 1803 (Ditchfield 1998: 103), women constituted a significant proportion of lay preachers in the Primitive Methodist and Bible Christian churches until the 1840s when they disappeared from Circuit plans (Hempton 1996b: 39).

Brown notes another dimension to this gender division. Around the 1790s and 1800s, there occurred a dramatic change in the discourse of men, women and religiosity. Piety in these decades became feminised as women's religiosity became privileged (Brown 2001: 58-87). At the same time, male susceptibility to temptation became a threat, both to religious piety and to the household. The growing alienation of men thus produced a crisis of male leadership. For example, the proportion of male Sunday School teachers fell from 80% in the 1840s to less than 30% in the 1880s (Brown 2001: 96-97). By 1900 gender had become the dividing line within active lay religious involvement (McLeod 1993: 48-49). Consequently, in the 1902-03 survey of London churchgoing, Brown finds that high churchgoing rates were 'strongly associated with highly feminised communities'. In working-class boroughs women tended to attend church in the evening and took their children. In the morning, they were less likely to attend; and when the women stayed at home, so did their men folk. As a result, the holding of church services at a time when Sunday lunch was being prepared 'emerges as a most significant cause of the variation in churchgoing habits between Britain's social classes' (Brown 2001: 161). Brown's conclusion about the centrality of women, rather than urbanisation or social class, in 19<sup>th</sup> century patterns of religiosity, needs testing on local communities elsewhere - especially outside London, where, hitherto, a good deal of the historical work has been focused.

The connection between religion and cultural regions has recently been explored through detailed work on the 1851 Census of Religious Worship (Snell and Ell 2000; Snell 1991; Ell and Slater 1994). By studying the distribution of church attendances and seating provision at Registration District level across England and Wales, Snell and Ell explore in detail the relationship between denominations on the ground, between churchgoing and urbanisation, and they have compared patterns of nonconformity in the 17<sup>th</sup> and mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. While in some localities the accuracy of the 1851 Religious Census may still be questioned (Burton 1997), Snell argues for its basic internal consistency when used for comparative purposes, 'provided the unit of geographical analysis is sufficiently large' (Snell 1991: 52; Field



1997: 201). But he also suggest that Registration Districts may be ‘slightly too large’, failing to do justice to small towns in particular. In this context, it is interesting that adopting a spatial level intermediate between Registration Districts and parishes highlights relationships other than inter-denominational ones. For example, when we use the smaller Registration *Sub*-district, tests for significant differences between the Index of Attendance in 1851 and occupational structures in Cornwall suggest that there was a closer relationship between occupational groups and denominational strength than between the denominations in 1851 (Table I).

TABLE I: Relationships between selected denominations and proportions of the adult male population engaged in selected occupations in Cornwall.

	<i>mining/fishing</i>	<i>Agriculture</i>
Church of England	-0.622	+0.186
Old dissent	-0.400	-0.397
All Methodist	+0.260	-0.059
Wesleyan Methodists	+0.309	-0.261

*Source:* Census of Religious Worship, 1851; Census enumerators’ books, 1851.

The strength of some of these correlations might suggest that occupational differences still provide a strong explanation, at least at mid-century, for local denominational geography.

### *Experience and identity*

In some regions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century certain denominations were able to merge into the occupational culture, so that they became part of a folk religion (Ward 1972: 245-246; Holmes 1994). Here, evangelicalism set new standards, educated the young, provided rituals, informed values and altered oral traditions. It changed local cultures, but in doing so was appropriated by that culture in a process of community formation (Hempton 1996a: 58; Rule 1998). The fusion of some types of dissent with popular culture in these communities dominates the literature. More generally, the comparative texture of religious experiences has been less researched (Knight 1998:

6. But see Obelkevich 1976; Clark 1982; Urdank 1990). Kent (1997) in consequence calls for more anthropological studies of religion and a turn away from the obsession with Christianity's institutional struggle for survival. In constructing more local case studies of religious experience historians could also pursue variations within denominations (Hargreaves 1999).

Responding to the observation of Hempton (1988) that working class Anglicanism is 'strikingly under-researched', Knight (1998) provides an account of the lay experience of the Church of England over the period from the 1830s to the 1870s, based on a study of the Diocese of Lincoln, using popular religious literature, letters and diaries as sources. Similarly, private-survey evidence from Whickham in the 1830s reveals that 22% of families said regular prayers, a practice more common amongst Wesleyan than Anglican families, while 24% took communion. But a high proportion of families, as many as 80%, owned a copy of the Bible, such ownership being found across the social spectrum. At the same time 13% of households attended both church and chapel, a practice particularly prevalent among Wesleyans (Jaffe 1997).

Evidence such as this implies that there were ambiguities in denominational identities. The boundary between Anglicanism and Wesleyan Methodism was particularly porous; Wesleyans continued to attend parish church as well as chapel (Knight 1998, 24). But, as the 19th century proceeded, there was a slow but steady transformation from relatively loose adherence to stricter denominational commitment (Gibson 1994: 82). Hopkins (1998) provides an example of distinctive Protestant identities in County Leitrim, Ireland by the end of the century. Growing organisational structures and the increasing professionalisation of dissenting denominations were part of the reason for this; and, increasingly, religious needs could be met within the bounds of a single denomination. But also crucial were the changing attitudes among the Anglican hierarchy. In the 1820s, bishops began to demand double duty, services in both morning and evening (or afternoon). Double duty became the norm in towns by the 1850s and two decades later in rural parishes. It then became less usual for churchgoers to hop between denominations. In consequence, the former dual allegiance to the Establishment Church and to Wesleyanism was replaced by more clearly marked denominational affiliations. (Knight 1998: 32 and 72).

Other developments had also begun to bring Wesleyans together with old dissenting congregations. The emergence of Ritualism in the Church of England in the 1830s was one factor that served to clarify denominational identities. It appears that a wider fear of Catholicism brought old and new dissent together in the 1840s. In Wales, it has been claimed that ritualism politicised and radicalised Welsh dissent, drawing both old dissent and the distinctive Welsh Calvinistic Methodists – the majority denomination throughout much of Wales - into renewed agitation against church tithes and rates and to demands for the disestablishment of the Anglican church (Freeman 2001).

In Wales, nonconformity and Liberal politics fused into a national identity. The ‘energy of Methodism, the rejuvenation of Dissent and growth of literacy were formative forces in the making of modern Wales’ (Jenkins 1987: 342). In this way, religion informed people’s national, regional and local identities (Hempton 1996b: 178; Everitt 1972: 7; Robbins 1982: 468). Indeed, Hempton sees ‘religious differentiation’ as allowing ‘peripheral’ regions to express their identity without resorting to demands for political separation (Hempton 1996b: 175). Just as nonconformity fused with Welsh identity, so did Anglicanism become, for some, the cultural expression of an English identity (Gilbert 1976: 207). At the same time the rise of public religious identities after the 1840s and their interaction with political identities also acted to draw nonconformists into a wider Protestant British nationalism, with shared anti-Catholic, imperialist and chauvinist values (Hempton 1996b: 71).

Religion thus had a multi-faceted relationship with national, regional and local identities. In an intriguing observation Snell and Ell have noted that the regions with the lowest attendances in 1851 were situated in the borderland areas of England as well as in the metropolitan areas. All of these can be regarded as regions with an ambiguous and weak sense of identity. In contrast, the highest attendances were associated with areas where ‘national and cultural identities were least ambivalent ... in west and north Wales, or in the southern and south Midland English counties beyond the metropolis’. These were regions where national commitment took its ‘most adamant and unquestioning forms’ and was not confronted either by alternative identities of Welshness, Scottishness or Cornishness or by the heterogeneity of London (Snell and Ell 2000: 416-417).

### *Secularisation*

As we have seen, the former account of a religious collapse setting in during the 19th century is now challenged. Previous accounts of secularisation had relied heavily on evidence that church attendance began to fall in the later-19th century, a decline now dated to somewhere between the 1880s and 1900s. Such evidence therefore points to a secularisation pushed forwards in time but still located in the social changes of the 1880s to 1910s (McLeod 1996; Bush, 1994).

However, membership statistics for many denominations remained high until the eve of the World War I. Indeed, the overall peak of membership did not occur until 1910 (Currie, Gilbert and Horsley 1977: 25). In the Church of Scotland membership peaked in 1925 (Brown 2001: 163). Similarly, studies of belief systems have led to conclusions that, while attendances may have slipped, this did not signify a shift to outright agnosticism. Instead, there was a ‘diffusive Christianity’ as people continued to believe in God, put a high value on the Bible and accepted a notion of the afterlife (Cox 1982: 94). This produced, according to Brown (2001: 105) a ‘society of religious belonging without high worshipping’. Moreover, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century commitment to religious rites of passage – baptisms, marriages and funerals – remained high, as did Sunday School enrolment (Brown 2001: 166). In part of inter-war Liverpool, Monaghan (1994) found that the Church of England remained the focus of a vigorous parish life. Examining belief rather than attendances leads Brown to conclude that ‘a vibrant Christian identity remained central to British popular culture’ until the 1950s (Brown 2001: 169). It was not until the 1960s that all the indicators of religious practice and belief took a sharp downwards turn.

### *The research agenda for community historians*

Community historians have an important part to play, with much potential, in testing this new revisionist narrative. What are the local and regional particularities of the late-20th century religious decline? That secularisation is not the most appropriate term for this decline is implied, surely, by the history of Islamic and Hindu communities in Britain, of which more studies are needed. The chronologies of what may be more accurately termed de-Christianisation might vary considerably from place to place, as did the chronologies of revival in the 18th and early-19th centuries.

Detailed local studies can also recover local differences in the narratives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century salvation industry; and the ways these impinged on areas of secular life, most notably political identities. Moreover, there should be more work undertaken on the relationship between institutional contexts and everyday religious life and beliefs. All such explorations need to be placed in a comparative framework. And that comparative framework need not stop at the edges of these islands. Whilst formal church attendances in Britain are lower than the European average it does seem that contemporary belief in God is actually quite close to the norm (Davie and Hervieu-Léger 1996: 54-55).

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