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Liberal Theology and the Collapse of Conventional Church Attendance in the Church of England

Abstract. Attendance in England at Church of England (CofE) services has collapsed in this century. Meanwhile, the CofE increasingly adopted new theology, revising the beloved traditional Book of Common Prayer so that its language reflected this new theology. The CofE also ordained women as priests in 1992 and then as bishops in 2008. Anglicans in Africa and Asia found these and other changes dis-tasteful. They exhibit a sincerity and a deep spirituality which earn them a high reputation, and they threatened to split the world-wide Anglican Communion. It might seem that opposition of the same kind at home in England itself also accounts for a decline in daily Anglican church attendance in England, but that places too much emphasis on changes in supply. This essay on the contrary emphasizes changes in demand. The revised theology and the ordination of women did not cause the decline in CofE attendance in England, this essay argues. Instead, changing theology and the ordination of women, on the one hand, and declining church attendance, on the other hand, were both dependent variables, and the independent and causal variable was the change in demand which in turn was caused by changes in English social structure. The decline in fertility, the decline in household size, the fall in the number of children, the rise in the number of elderly persons, the rise in single-person households – all these things changed demand, this essay says, and the liberalization of theology and the decline in Anglican church attendance were both results of diminished demand.

Key words: Bonhoeffer, Church of England attendance, Durkheim, Pareto, theology

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Либеральная теология и резкий спад конвенционального посещения Церкви Англии

Аннотация. В Англии XXI века посещаемость богослужений Церкви Англии (ЦА) резко снизилась. В то же время в ЦА всё более широко распространяется новая теология, происходит ревизия всеми любимой традиционной Книги общей молитвы, с тем чтобы её язык отражал эту новую теологию. С 1992 года ЦА рукополагает женщин в священники, а с 2008 – в епископы. Эти и другие подобные изменения кажутся отталкивающими многим искренним и подлинно религиозным членам англиканского сообщества в Африке и Азии, снискавшим глубокое уважение. Они грозятся нарушить целостность всемирного англиканского сообщества. Может показаться, что такого рода неприятие существует и в самой Англии, что в нём и кроется причина спада ежедневного посещения англиканских богослужений. Однако эта теория слишком большое значение придает изменению «предложения». В данной статье мы предлагаем, напротив, сделать акцент на изменении в «спросе». По мнению автора, пересмотр теологии и рукоположение женщин не являются причиной резкого спада посещаемости Церкви Англии. На самом деле, оба эти процесса, и изменения в теологии, и спад посещаемости – две зависимые переменные, а независимая переменная – изменение в «спросе», которое в свою очередь было вызвано изменениями в структуре английского общества. Спад рождаемости, сокращение размера домохозяйств и числа детей в семье, увеличение численности пожилых людей, увеличение числа одиночных домохозяйств – всё это, по мнению автора, изменило «спрос». В свою очередь, либерализация теологии и спад посещения англиканской церкви стали результатом снижения «спроса».

Ключевые слова: Бонхёффер, посещаемость Церкви Англии, Дюркгейм, Парето, теология

Here is a funny story but a true story. An American clergyman of The Episcopal Church heard this story from a colleague, a clergyman from a rival Protestant congregation – Methodist or Presbyterian. The Episcopal clergyman did not say which.

The Episcopal Church (TEC) by the way is the American branch of the worldwide Anglican Communion. Long known in the USA for its special role as the church of choice for many rich and socially prominent people, including many past US presidents, TEC originated from the CofE. The reformed (Protestant) CofE in its turn was established during the reign of King Edward VI in the 16th century. Edward was a child when he became king in 1547, and his father King Henry VIII had broken the papal power in England in 1534, but Henry did not break with most Roman Catholic doctrines, and above all he liked the doctrine that sacraments, sacred ceremonies of the church, were efficacious for averting divine wrath. Henry feared no man, but he feared God, and with good reason. Henry preferred to rely on Christian sacraments for procuring the mercy of God, therefore, and not on his own merit. When Henry lay on his deathbed, a priest came to him with bread and wine. The sick, crippled, corpulent king painfully got out of bed and lay flat on the floor, saying he could not abase himself too low before the holy sacrament. Many reformers took the severe view that the sinner had to stand face-to-face with God, doing so without the ameliorating intervention of the church's ministrations. With Henry's death, a Protestant church was first established by law under Edward but then abolished by Edward's sister Queen Mary I. She restored the Roman Church and the pope's authority in England, but she died in 1558, succeeded by Henry VIII's remaining daughter who became Queen Elizabeth I. Parliament then passed an act of uniformity [Act of Uniformity, 1559] which restored the Church of England as it had been established by a similar law under King Edward. This Elizabethan church was Protestant, but it was not Protestant enough for all Protestants. Later called Presbyterians and Independents, radical Protestants thereafter broke away from the established CofE amidst struggle and Civil War during the 17th century. Methodists broke away from the CofE in the 18th century, becoming especially successful and popular in the USA after the American Revolution of 1776. The CofE is still a national church, recognized as such by law, but there is no established church in America although lawyers sometimes argue that the United States is nevertheless a Christian nation, and certainly the many Christian denominations compete successfully with one another there [Opinions, 1892]; [Brewer, 1905].

Back to our funny story. The second clergyman had many people who went to his church, and not among them was a household or family who were registered and on his parish roll but who were not attending his church services. He visited them and asked them why they did not attend. They had fallen on hard times, and they could not afford nice clothes, so they felt shabby and embarrassed in church, they said. The clergyman arranged for them to buy new clothes, but still, they did not attend his services. He visited again and again asked them why. They said that they had beautiful new clothes now, so they had decided to attend TEC. They went to TEC in other words because they now had the right clothes for that more select and fashionable church. The implication of this funny story was that people attended or selected a church as they might select a club or a restaurant. The clergyman who told this joke to the Anglican clergyman thought this joke was funny because it implied that style, consumption, and display were too important in TEC. They should be subordinate and within another, separate, superior, and all-embracing system. There are other versions of this same joke. A famous and beautiful Episcopal church in a fashionable part of New York City is called The Church of the Heavenly Rest, but it is nicknamed The Church of the Heavenly Dressed.

In a famous book, Callum Brown said that Christianity is now dead in Britain. Christian religion is no longer the expression of a unified moral consensus in British society. Very few people regularly attend any form of Christian worship on Sunday, and even fewer of the young do so [Brown, 2009].

How to explain these lethal effects? We will argue that declining CofE attendance in England and revision of CofE theology were both caused by underlying shifts in English social structure. We will use the following scholarly apparatus to evaluate evidence for this claim.

If you please, first consider an article by economist Daniel V. A. Olson. It is very difficult to evaluate supply and demand with regard to religious participation, Olson said.

In religious situations, he said, it is often hard to distinguish demand from supply in economic terms. Precisely [Olson, 2011].

As reading Olson would lead us to predict, it is difficult to distinguish the impact of supply from the impact of demand with regard to CofE participation. We try in this present essay to emphasize the impact of demand on CofE church-going. We argue that changes in the structure of English society caused the drop in church-going. Social change, that is to say, caused the fall in demand. That will be our conclusion.

Please also consider Emile Durkheim's theory of religion. He thought religion was not about personal belief, so religion was not even necessarily about belief in God. This is a very important point. Please read the sentence again. Religion was not about personal belief, not even about belief in God, said Durkheim. Instead, religion consisted of rites and beliefs which separated the sacred from the profane, and religion united individual people into their overall group. This scholarly view is called a functional view of religion. Functionalism presented religion as a set of social functions and not as a set of personal beliefs. By this functional definition, Durkheim claimed Buddhism was a religion despite its being an atheist system. Communism was a religion, by this model, you might also argue [Durkheim, 1995].

We also borrow an idea put forward by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a German Lutheran pastor who was martyred by the Nazis. Consider his notion of cheap grace and expensive grace. He was talking about conventional church-going as opposed to deeply held Christianity. He foresaw that Christianity would decline in Europe after World War II. Conventional church-going would decline, he said, but deeply held Christianity would be as stable and as secure as ever. He was prophetic in these insights [Bonhoeffer, 1959, 46].

Finally, please consider the works of the Italian statistician and economist Vilfredo Pareto. He argued that twenty percent of landowners engrossed eighty percent of Italian agricultural wealth. He further argued that such an 80–20 imbalance between small elites and large majorities was not particular to Italy. That inequality was in general terms a recurring social distribution, a natural and an immutable phenomenon [Banfield, 1958].

When you read Pareto on the 80–20 distribution, you may think of Carl Friedrich Gauss, the great German mathematician. Gauss constructed what is now called a normal distribution. When he collected observations in nature and made a graph of them, the graph was often a bell curve. He found then that many observed values were collected around the center of the graph, and fewer observations were distributed toward the sides of the curve. It was a smooth curve.

Pareto's economic works were difficult reading, as he admitted himself. He eventually abandoned economics for sociology because of the difficulty. Nevertheless, when reading Pareto you immediately sense that there is something brilliant and correct in Pareto's economic analysis. On the other hand, you feel confused about precise details. He anticipated his readers' confusion, warning them as follows. "The instinct for combinations is among the major forces determining the social equilibrium; and if it sometimes manifests itself in ridiculous and absurd ways, that fact detracts no whit from its importance" [Pareto, 1935, 523].

It does not clarify things to read more in Pareto. The confusion remains. It might be helpful to see Pareto's theories in terms of what later twentieth-century French scholars such as Fernand Braudel called the long run. You have surface phenomena in the foreground in Pareto's work. Take the second volume of his *Mind and Society* where the material in the foreground was his discussion of sentiment. That surface argument seems very precise and very technical when you read it, although it is perhaps needlessly verbose and difficult, even turgid. Then you have the long run which consists of imprecise, erratic, shadowy, but long-running social arrangements and connections. The analysis of the long run is the brilliant bit in Pareto, but it is alas neither clear nor even nor regular [Braudel, 1988].

Let us come away from Pareto with the simple notions that combinations are inevitable in human society, that these combinations are long-running, and that these combinations consist of imbalances or inequalities. We might use words like division or subgroup for what Pareto called combinations. An 80–20 distribution is something to look for when you do social analysis. It is wrong to complain or to protest social inequality and

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division because it is hopeless to imagine a human society without inequality and division.

It is obvious that these simple notions from Pareto were correct at some basic level. No doubt we do need to divide society into unequal and imbalanced combinations, divisions, or subgroups. An elite division or subgroup tends to be small, the divisions or subgroup groups of ordinary people much larger. These insights were brilliant, but Pareto's presentation lacked precision.

Durkheim was also correct. Religion is the glue that holds society together. Religion makes individuals into society. We should not see this social function of religion as something that degrades the value of religion to individual people. Religion is a social glue. That is a valid aspect of what it is.

Bonhoffer was also right. Human personalities differ with regard to the intensity of their religious experiences, so churches always have a core of very sincere believers and also many people who are less intense in their religious commitment. There are always differences among church-goers, but these differences are not infinite, and it is useful to discern two overall types of church-goers. For people in the one group, religion is a dominant factor in life. For them, the role of religion as social glue is less important than the role of religion as the source of rules for personal behavior. For these people, conventional church-goers can be irritating and irrelevant. Church structures and church politics can be irritating and irrelevant, too. In the other group, that of conventional church-goers, people often regard intense belief as irritating and irrelevant. People in this group say proudly that they are Christians, but they are not fanatics. They have little need for transcendent supernaturalism. Their religion, to repeat the point, is their set of rites and beliefs which unite them into society. For people in this first group, that is enough. It is all the religion they need. It gives them sacred retrials which ensure correct observance of social norms, and that observance is the price for inclusion in the group.

Finally, Pareto seems to have been right again that things like income are surface phenomena which mark off elite groups from the rest of society. It is also plausible that complex surface phenomena in religious behavior mask two underlying types of personalities. These account for the two basic attitudes toward church-going. There are more than two basic differences in personality, in other words, but complex surface differences may mask a simple binary split over religious issues. Furthermore, as Pareto hinted in his discussion of sentiments, it is a two-way street. Different social structures may facilitate or favor the flourishing of different types of sentiment and therefore of different types of personality.

Now let us briefly discuss CofE theology. We can first discern three distinct periods in the history of CofE theology. The first period was from the reign of Queen Elizabeth I until approximately the decade 1830 to 1840. The second period lasted from 1840 until the last two decades of the twentieth century. The third period is from the year 1980 until the present day. So, the periods are approximately 1558 until 1840, 1840 until 1980, and 1980 until the present.

A basic general fact may be stated about the CofE's theology throughout all three periods. Sir Edward Coke, the famous 17th-century lawyer and sometime attorney general, stated the fact clearly. He said that Christianity was part of the common law of England. He meant that it was proper to include CofE theology as a basis of any legal process or consideration. It was also therefore true that English law regulated and prescribed which points of theology were suitable and authentic in English courts. That was what Americans call feedback on theology. English lawyers did not discriminate between ordinary parliamentary statutes and constitutional law, by the way.

Here are some comments to fill out the points just stated above.

The CofE's legal position as an established church is still of continuing importance. The legal establishment of the church gives it an unique influence in English life despite the church's declining attendance. You saw this influence at the recent coronation of King Charles III. His coronation service was profoundly Christian. The late Queen Elizabeth II was Christian and CofE, and the new king is also – and will be.

In the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the CofE restored its usage of the Book of Common Prayer which Archbishop Thomas Cranmer prepared first in 1547 and which he revised in 1552. That was during the reign of King Edward VI. Under Elizabeth, the CofE

also published Thirty-Nine Articles which prescribed its theology. Subsequent editions of the Prayer Book usually printed the Thirty-Nine Articles at the back of the book. Richard Hooker wrote and published his famous *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1593 and following), doing so at the request of the Elizabethan court. Finally, King James I, Queen Elizabeth's successor, authorized and gave his name to the 1611 translation of the Bible. That Bible became perhaps the most important book ever published in the English language.

Hooker's book became a great classic, and it remains the most famous source of CofE theology. Hooker borrowed much from Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Roman Catholic medieval scholastic. Aquinas in turn borrowed much from Aristotle. That Greek philosopher said that human reason was often a sufficient guide to moral judgments. Hooker said scripture and the tradition of the church should supplement reason. Scripture, reason, and the tradition of the church – that became Hooker's famous three-legged stool. He was similarly moderate concerning politics. John Locke, the 17th-century political philosopher, admired Hooker, calling him judicious. The public is always more pleased to hear the government criticized than praised, Hooker said. No matter how well a ruler does, people can always imagine that they might be still better governed. For that reason, it is hard to be popular when you praise those who govern. It is easier to be popular when you blame those who rule. Hooker supported the government of the church by bishops, doing so against reformers who wished to abolish the office of bishop. Queen Elizabeth craftily dealt with these reformers by appointing some of them as bishops themselves. These men wished to abolish the office, but somehow, they never got around to it.

The Prayer Book with the Thirty-Nine Articles at the back, reissued in an enduring edition in 1662, Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity*, and the King James Bible were all profoundly important in English life. These books were foundations for an overall Elizabethan settlement of English religion and as such they were symbols and parts of the overarching and triumphant system of Post-Reformation English culture. The CofE became a Prayer Book church, a King James Bible church [Miller, 2013], [Munz, 1971].

Coming from Scotland, which was Presbyterian, King James might tamper with the Elizabethan settlement, some English people feared. He might abolish the office of bishop in England, for instance. Hooker had a young protégé William Covel or Covell who wrote and published a summary of Hooker's great book. Covel did this when King James came to England. This summary not only supported the Elizabethan settlement with its bishops, but Covel also clarified points which some readers found obscure in Hooker's own text. The new king turned out to be a firm supporter of the Elizabeth settlement. "No bishop, no king", he said [Covel, 1998].

George Herbert, Edmund Spenser, Izaak Walton, and other great writers and poets decorated the Elizabethan settlement with beautiful written works, not equal to the Prayer Book in popularity or influence but more widely read, perhaps, than works of theology or law.

Then came a tectonic shift. In 1830, the Scottish lawyer and geologist Sir Charles Lyell argued that the earth was far older than many people believed, and he said that the ordinary process of weathering produced the changes in geology over that long period of time. He challenged the accepted view of natural history which was based on Archbishop James Ussher's 17-century dating of God's creation of the world. Ussher said that event had occurred in 4004 BC. In 1837, John Henry Newman attacked the authenticity of the CofE, and he himself eventually left the Cof E and converted to the Roman Catholic Church. In 1858, Charles Darwin and others made public their theory of biological evolution by natural selection. This theory again required the earth to be much older than Ussher had supposed it to be. In this circumstance, many leading English intellectuals lost their confidence in the CofE. This was especially true at the University of Cambridge. As the economist J. M. Keynes wrote,

"Within less than twenty years of Sir Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, before which even serious philosophers could take the first chapter of Genesis literally, the beliefs of ages had crumbled away and the whole educated world was acquiring a totally new outlook. A great gulf separated sons from parents. Metaphysical agnosticism, Evolutionary progress, and – the one remnant still left of the intellectual inheritance of the previous generation – Utilitarian ethics, joined to propel the youthful mind in a new direction" [Keynes, 1925, 9].

This loss of confidence was the background for the terrible suffering of World War I. Perhaps the loss of confidence was also a cause of the calamity. A more confident and more Christian England might have produced greater leaders than those stubborn commanders who sent the nation's sons to die on the Somme and at Passchendaele.

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
– Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, –
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

Wilfred Owen “Anthem for Doomed Youth” [Owen, 2023].

The point of all this is that a change in theology did not cause a decline in church attendance. Instead, the change in theology and the decline in church attendance were both themselves results of a second tectonic shift in English society. World War I marked this second tectonic shift. The spread of Marxism was one outgrowth of the loss of confidence after 1840, for instance. Another was the movement for women's suffrage.

There were several waves of feminism. Historians usually denote the late 19th-century suffragettes as beginning the first wave of feminism which failed at first but which then ended with the grant of women's suffrage after World War I. Then there was a hiatus in the women's movement in England. The first wave of feminism did not change much in CofE theology.

The second wave of feminism coincided with the success of the long-delayed push for racial civil rights in the USA after World War II. It was therefore a phenomenon which is still within living memory.

This second wave of feminism was important in England, too. The second wave of feminism coincided with the beginning of a third age in the history of CofE theology and church practice. Women pressed for ordination, and the church could not yield to their demand without changing its beloved Prayer Book and ultimately its theology. Such changes in turn required consent from politicians and lawyers. Ultimately the church reacted to changes in English society and in English law and culture.

The process of change began in the CofE with the issuance of tentative trial liturgies. The trial of the new liturgies opened Pandora's box. In the discussion of trial liturgies, it became clear that the whole English language had changed. England is a very old country. English is an old language. The authorities had in time past suppressed regional accents of which there are very many, and in Wales schools even suppressed the local language, Welsh. English children were corrected in school when they spoke a regional accent, and Welsh children were forbidden to speak their own native language in school. The schools and the BBC spread the received version of English; a posh version often called the Queen's English. The discussion of the new trial books of liturgy revealed that many people simply did not understand the archaic language of the old Book of Common Prayer or of the Authorized Version of the Bible. Never mind whether people agreed with the Thirty-Nine Articles. People could not understand them. They could not understand Morning Prayer or the Gospels either. The new liturgies became the occasion for popularizing translations into demotic English of the posh or received English of Thomas Cranmer's Prayer Book. The same thing happened with the King James Bible. Even Richard Hooker's *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* appeared in a new version translated into demotic English.

The English of the old books was very beautiful. The English of the new books was not beautiful. George Orwell – who chose to be buried in a CofE graveyard and with the old burial service of the Book of Common Prayer – wrote an essay “Politics and the English Language” about “swindles and perversions” as he called changes in the language of the Bible. Here is what Orwell wrote about a well-known verse from Ecclesiastes. He quoted the original. Here it is.

“I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all”.

Here is how Orwell changed it into what he called in modern English:

“Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account” [Orwell, 2023].

How does all this help us to discuss the connection of Anglican theology to English church attendance? Let us remember the two clergymen at the head of this essay. They were both examples of Bonhoeffer’s expensive grace. The two clergymen both thought of religion as a matter of personal belief. When they made their joke, they were discussing the separation between what Durkheim called the sacred and the profane. They thought that church attendance should nourish the personal faith of their parishioners. The clergymen cannot be blamed for that opinion, nor should we be surprised that parishioners, in contrast to the clergy, were of a different opinion.

The parishioners may never have read Durkheim, and they may never have heard of Bonhoeffer, but they acted out the theories of those two men. The parishioners thought of religion as the set of sacred rites that bound them to a social group. The parishioners sought cheap grace, in other words, not expensive grace. They thought of their church attendance as being about a sacred ritual in a social group. Proper clothing was necessary for the rite. Clothing was part of a ceremony, and by participating correctly in that ceremony they achieved and acted out their own sacred identity. Proper clothing enabled and empowered them. The new clothes therefore made them feel they were part of an important group, but in this case, they wanted to be part of a new and more fashionable group. Also, maybe they thought that the new group would not know much about them and would not wonder where they got new clothes. The new group would accept them at face value.

With all this in mind, let us speak of a post-Christian England. For much of the twentieth century, many people in England were nominally Christian, and many of them went to church. Remarkably, Pareto’s 80–20 balance appears in those data. The Church of England recently had about twenty percent of those who attended Christian worship in England, and other Christian denominations took the rest. Remarkably also, that 80–20 balance held steady while overall church attendance dropped by almost half. Here are some data. In the United Kingdom the decline in church attendance has been dramatic [Church Attendance, 2023].

There is not space enough in this essay to compare the decline in CofE attendance in England with the decline of TEC attendance in the United States although no doubt the two phenomena connect somehow. Please allow a mere faint suggestion, therefore. England is ahead of America by about sixty years. That was so in most cultural matters in the past. It may be so now. We may see in America later what we see in England now. This essay is about England but keep America in your mind as you read it. Church attendance in the United States remains relatively high by contrast to England, but the matter is complex, and US church attendance, while still high, is declining [New Statistics, 2009; Bradley, 2017].

So now we come to the middle point of this essay. Three social factors seem especially important in the collapse of overall UK church attendance. These social factors may account for the decline in CofE attendance in particular.

First, demographic changes strongly affected many of those among the English population whose ancestors had lived in Britain from the earliest times. Let us call them the aboriginal English population. The household structure of this aboriginal demographic group greatly altered. Their expectation of life lengthened while their fertility rate became lower. Mothers and fathers lived longer, but the mothers bore fewer children than their mothers did, and of the children who were born fewer of them lived with both biological parents. Older people increased in proportion while the proportion of children declined.

More adults lived alone. More of these older adults lived alone. Older adults living alone can be vulnerable. They may find such simple things challenging as transportation, exercise, entertainment, access to emergency medical care, and even daily food and house cleaning. Technology is very important in daily life now, and computers are important for instance, but older people may not have computer skills. Household size diminished in other words. Older people may replace children to become the principal dependent population in English society. One of the odd things about Britain is that the demand for housing remained strong even while the population growth petered out. (By the way, these same phenomena are now occurring in America. That substantiates the earlier guess that TEC attendance in America will fall in sympathy with the prior fall of CofE attendance in England) [Riquier, 2019].

The point is that these UK demographic changes accompanied a diminished role for conventional attendance at Christian religious worship in the aboriginal English population, and many of these people were – had been before – conventional CofE attenders.

Second, divorce may be the main cause. among the demographic causes of declining CofE attendance. Divorce may seem so closely related to household size that it hardly deserves separate mention, but divorce does require and deserve its separate discussion. Acceptance of divorce opened the floodgate to acceptance of other previously unaccepted social behaviors.

Divorce is a complex and difficult historical topic. Divorce became accepted and commonplace in Britain only after 1960. Before that date, divorce was so rare that skilled statisticians could ignore it when they computed the nation's social data. Divorce bore a social stigma, and the late Queen Elizabeth II for instance did not at that time receive divorced persons. Her sister Princess Margaret did not marry the man she loved, Group Captain Peter Townsend, in part because of the strictures which her sister the queen had to observe [Aronson, 1997].

As already said, the impact of divorce was not simple. While divorces rose in number, they may not have increased the rate of household breakdown. In past time, people had shorter expectations of life, and many households were broken up by death in much earlier stages of life than now. Also, communication was difficult in the past. If you fled an unhappy marriage, you could go to America or to Australia and your spouse would not be able to trace you. Now it is much more difficult to disappear. Therefore, the fall in deaths and desertions partly explains the fact that divorces rose in number without an equal rise in the rate of broken homes [Stone, 1990].

In sum, divorce may be key to declining church attendance. The rise of divorce directly correlated with the decline in church attendance. Divorce was more celebrated and more significant than most other similar social changes.

New secular tolerance for divorce put the CofE in harm's way. Divorce was harmful to the reputation and persuasive power of those clergy who argued for a strict connection of CofE theology to Holy Scripture. Scripture provided no support for divorce, and many clergy had therefore long bitterly opposed divorce. When the church at last accepted divorce, there was a subsequent relaxation of other scriptural prohibitions. This was all much easier once divorce was accepted. Still, divorce is the big one. For a long time now, the rise in divorce has remained an ever-present subject in popular discussion. Look at any tabloid newspaper, and you will see how important divorce still remains as a topic of discussion. Such notoriety undermined the security of marriage. It also undermined the authority of Holy Scripture in English society [Eberstadt, 2013, 217].

Divorce ushered in many other changes in household structure. Whatever the nature of changes in the structure of the household, they all had the same result: many people in the aboriginal English population stopped going to church. That was especially true of younger people. If you talk to Christian clergy in Britain or America, many of them will tell you that they observe a pattern by which people come to church as a family, and when the children grow into adolescence then they become less enthusiastic about church attendance. However, when these same children become adults, marry, and have their own children then they become again regular attenders at church. They

return to church because church gives them as new parents a secure social environment for their new children. However, there are fewer such new parents returning to church. That is because there are fewer such new children and fewer stable and conventional households. That means fewer regular church-goers.

The many recent changes with regard to church attendance do not mark the end of Christianity in England. They are part of a long line of such changes. At first, Christianity was a religion of slaves and women. Christians then were noted for their chastity. Christianity in its scriptures was partly hostile to households and family life. Early Christians lived in their own faith communities, not in autonomous extended households, and disciples such as St Paul encouraged young people to remain chaste, not to marry. This was a doctrine of emancipation. Christian young women found that chastity and the single life freed them from the endless cycle of pregnancy, childbirth, and death which was otherwise their lot in the ancient world. Christian doctrine about chastity was therefore very popular with young people, and monastic institutions eventually evolved to accommodate them. This all helped the Christian religion to grow in numbers and to spread in territory, but many Pagan and Jewish heads of households feared the early Christians precisely because the heads of households wanted their young people to marry and to stay within the confines and the authority of their extended families. Pagans associated docile obedience within households to loyalty to the emperor. Heads of households also pointed out that without sex and marriage there would be no new people. See especially an ancient novel, "The Acts of Tecla" [Ehrman, 2003, 113–121].

Bonhoffer argued that the early medieval Christian authorities saved Christianity by permitting the rise of monasticism. The historian Peter Brown supplied additional proof for this argument. In his account, Constantine the Great faced the following challenge. Julius Caesar offered a dole of grain to support the lives of all Roman citizens. In Constantine's time, this dole still also operated in many cities of the western Roman Empire. That meant that these cities had rich elites but then the cities also had many proud citizens who were comparatively poor. They would struggle or even starve without the free grain still given to them at this point by imperial tradition. The cities also had many slaves, but they at least were within society and therefore somehow housed and fed. Furthermore, hordes of people were on the outside of this society. The challenge was to maintain this imperial Roman system, and the Diocletian reforms did that by taxing commerce and by binding people to follow the trades in which they had been born and bred. Constantine shored up the system, but he disregarded the plight of those people who stood entirely outside the Roman system. It is no surprise in retrospect that, at the end, so many men and women outside the Roman system were willing to overthrow the Roman system entirely [Brown, 2012].

History may have made the CofE especially vulnerable to changes in divorce and household structure. That may have been so because of the origin of the CofE in the English Reformation. Sixteenth century Protestant reformers taught a new doctrine. They closely associated their reform of Christianity with a new attitude toward family and marriage. They abolished monastic life, and they closely associated themselves with the rise of the nuclear family, parents and children. Roman Catholicism was connected to extended households, and parents there arranged the marriages of their children. Parents and children lived in a large grouping with several branches and several generations. An older male was head of each household. Before the sixteenth century, extended households were the norm. After the Protestant Reformation, Protestants often allowed children to marry for love, and some Protestants regarded marriage as a civil contract, not a sacrament as it was for Roman Catholics. Nuclear families thus became commonplace among Protestants. Extended families made it difficult for young adults to make financial decisions based on expectations of profit and self-interest. The way out for individuals was to accept chastity and life in a religious institution such as a monastery or nunnery [Todd, Garrioch, 1989].

The Protestant Reformation led to the abolition of so many monasteries and nunneries that English-speaking young people had far fewer alternatives if they were disinclined to marriage. The nuclear family made flexible economic decisions easier, but it meant the only choices single young men had otherwise were to run away or to join the army.

Abolition of monastic and other religious houses also usually meant a reallocation of land. Medieval land use had been varied and complex. English law distinguished between chattel property and real property. Chattels were owned outright. People could dispose of chattels at will. Real property was land, and ownership of land was very complex. The old legal adage held that property was nine tenths of the law. That meant originally that young students of the law had to spend almost all their time studying land law. Poor people could thus have complex customary rights to use land although they did not own the land itself. They might pasture animals on common land for instance. With the abolition of monasteries, ownership might mean parliament might impose a simpler and, in many ways, a harsher system of land use with eventually the introduction sometimes of cash payments. Wool could be sold for cash, but food usually could not easily be transported to any great distance and therefore food was usually consumed locally and without cash payment. Wool was a cash crop, but wheat was not. You could not mix sheep and wheat. You had to enclose land to run sheep on it [Knowles, 1949–1959].

The matter was complex because the Black Death caused a catastrophic fall in the population. When that plague raged in the period before 1400, very many of the population died in various parts of England. Of course, this fall in population meant a fall in the demand for food so many landowners diverted the use of their land from food to sheep. Furthermore, after the year 1400 there was a rise in real wages. Fewer people meant fewer workers. Those who remained could demand higher wages. That was an additional incentive for landowners to put sheep on land because sheep required fewer hands and less skilled hands to tend them. Then soon thereafter the population began to recover its losses. Wages then fell. Unemployment then rose. These factors were not well understood at the time however. You get a graphic description of it all in the first part of Thomas More's *Utopia*, 1516. More was unaware of changes in population, and he blamed social distress on greed [More, 1895].

More's *Utopia* is a good book to read if you are interested in the Protestant Reformation in England. If you read it, then please remember Bonhoeffer's discussion of expensive grace. Remember Pareto also. Only a small proportion of early sixteenth-century people would have been sincere believers in religion. More was one. He remained a Roman Catholic. Queen Anne Boleyn and her daughter Queen Elizabeth I were also among the sincere believers, but they were Protestants. If you want to read more about them, then a recent book will give you a new and at the same time an accurate account of Anne Boleyn. This book showed the central role of sincere Protestant belief in Henry VIII's court. "Sad, high, and working, full of state and woe," said William Shakespeare of the court of Henry VIII. Anne Boleyn and Thomas More met the same fate. The best book on More was the 1956 biography of him by his son-in-law William Roper [Roper, 2003; Nolan, 2019].

This ferment among the religious elite was all a spur to the formation of nuclear families. People – especially those close to London – were tempted to move into cities where they could find work, mostly in domestic service. This mobility weakened the ties of rural people to the extended households in which they were born. There was a price. London death rates were higher than those in the countryside. Moving to London therefore exposed rural migrants to much higher risks of disease and death [Laslett, 1965].

Let us return to the present day. Many adults today now live in single-person households. Some of them have more than one dwelling in which to live alone. Many parents never marry. Many adults (and even children) live with whomever they please. If people do marry, they do not necessarily have children of their own.

Many people in England have lost even the memory of the nation's Christian beliefs. British popular culture is now overwhelmingly secular. It is about display. It is about consumption. It is also about being rich and cool. Remember that such changes took place many times in the past. And all that is anyway in conformity with Christian teaching.

If you read that things in the CofE have changed for the worse lately, be not afraid. You may remember the words of the third chapter of the First Book of Samuel. "The word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision". Yes, the CofE underwent a loss of conventional church attendance, but that loss has not diminished the church's importance for its core believers. Many of the people who left thought church-

going was about having the right clothes and meeting the right people, but it is wrong to disparage entirely the emphasis on clothing and social display as reasons for going to church. Clothing and social display play important roles in raising children. Sincere, good Christian people can think clothing and display are important parts of going to church. Sincere, good Christian people can disagree. The church will continue strong and well so long as it has its core of sincere believers. Nor can the loss of conventional church-goers diminish the truth of the Gospel.

If theology is not a main determinant of CofE church attendance, theology is nevertheless still important. Supply is still important in economic terms. Let us recommend a change in CofE theology, therefore, a change which may better situate the church in the present day.

The CofE has too little room for celibacy. Celibacy has a firm basis in scripture and in the life of Jesus himself. Celibacy has for two thousand years attached intensely religious Christian men and women to one another and to the church. If Bonhoeffer was right that the medieval church saved itself by allowing monasteries to flourish, that might be something which Anglicans could remember now. Celibacy is not for everyone, of course, but it is for some people. As the CofE is losing many of its conventional church-goers, the church would do well to make some changes. It must attend in various ways to the comfort of those intensely religious people who remain and who will remain. Remember the two American clergymen at the beginning of this essay. They thought that the mind is more than the body, the body more than the clothing.

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