

## **Religion in Britain has changed, our categories haven't**

**Linda Woodhead**

Look for the religion section of almost any bookshop in Britain, and you'll find it's been subsumed under 'spirituality' or 'mind, body and spirit'. The reason is simple: what we call 'religion' has changed dramatically. Yet we go on talking as if it is a matter of belonging to a clerically-led community, affirming unchanging dogma, and holding conservative social attitudes. I call this way of looking at contemporary religion fundamentalising, and I want to explain why it's so prevalent, and so wrong.

My lifetime coincides with the shifts I want to explore. Since the 1980s, I've watched nearly everything about being religious change. Take belonging. Being religious used to be about local and national belonging. Now it's more about association with like-minded people by way of real and virtual networks which cut across local and national boundaries. A British Muslim, for example, may associate face-to-face with a few like-minded friends, spend a lot of time reading and chatting on the web, feel part of a global ummah, and long to go on Hajj. And you can say something similar for young Catholics, evangelicals, neo-pagans and others.

The statistics on church attendance confirm how old forms of religious association have declined. Between 1950 and 1980 Sunday church attendance halved, and between 1980 and 2005 it halved again – down to 6.3% of the population (Christian Research). The breakdown of attenders has also changed – less than one third are now Anglican, less than one third Catholic, and over a third (44%) charismatic and independent. That's a massive internal realignment within Christianity which is hardly ever commented upon.

What we believe has changed too. Belief in 'a personal God' roughly halved between 1961 and 2000 – from 57% of the population to 26%. But over exactly the same period, belief in a 'spirit or life force' doubled – from 22% in 1961 to 44% in 2000. Forty-one per cent of us now believe in angels and 53% in an afterlife – that's higher than when records began in 1939 (British Religion in Numbers).

As for identity, 72% declared themselves Christian in the 2001 Census, yet fewer and fewer claim to belong to a religion, and the number declaring 'no religion' has grown from 31% in 1983 to 51% in 2009 (British Social Attitudes). There's also a lot more 'mash-up' religion around – plenty of Christian Buddhists and even Christian atheists, for example. Every religious identity today is an essentially contested achievement, forged in an exploding market of offers.

So what's going on? The fundamentalising interpretation is that *real* dogmatic religion is declining, leaving people with a muddled and fuzzy residue. I think the exact opposite is true. Turn it on its head and you see it the right way round: real religion – which is to say everyday, lived religion – is thriving and evolving, whilst hierarchical, dogmatic forms of religion are marginalised.

Why be surprised? In democratic, consumerist societies we believe that we are responsible for our own choices, and that our participation counts. No surprise that we don't want to be preached at any more. No surprise that we don't want pre-packaged religion, but something personally meaningful. And no surprise that we want to test things out for ourselves, not take them on trust.

Take Pakistani-Danish Saif, an entrepreneur in his mid-30s educated to school level, interviewed as part of a project on ‘everyday Islam’ which I’ve been involved with on the Religion and Society Programme. Saif abandoned the religious practices of his family in favour of Thai boxing, Chinese martial arts and meditation. The meditation became increasingly important to him, up to the point when it started to make the traditional forms of prayer in which he was raised more meaningful. Now, he says:

When I pray, then I am represented with Allah. I am physically standing on a prayer rug, but I am actually standing in his house. [...] Before, I prayed and then I was off the rug in an instant, because now I had done my duty, right? [...] Now the prayer can last much longer because I have an understanding that when I pray my five times a day, then I pray *to* Him. ...Sometimes I tear up because it affects me in a spiritual way... And now I understand the point of living life and what it means that there is a greater power...above me there is something much larger, so who does that make me? [...] And I think that is a super great feeling: because with being humbled comes a lot of benefits, like...I think all of these issues of being a good person have become more clear to me [...] I feel a stronger obligation to doing the right thing. (Courtesy Nadia Jeldtoft)

So it’s not that people are abandoning tradition. But they want to discover it for themselves, and they reinterpret it in the context of their own lives. They want it to touch their bodies and emotions, not just their intellects. That’s why angels, cathedrals, pilgrimages and retreats are all doing well. It’s why so many still tick ‘Christian’ on the Census. Why young Muslims know more about the Qur’an than their parents, and young Catholics turn out to cheer the Pope. But they don’t do everything that the traditional mediators of religion tell them, and they certainly don’t swallow whole packages of truth.

Pulling back the focus to Britain as a whole, what it all means is that the religious landscape has become vastly more diverse. It’s nonsense to think now in terms of six or nine world religions, pre-packaged ‘traditions’ into which individuals can be wholly subsumed. The monopolies have broken down. Claims by male leaders to represent religious communities are more tenuous than before. Religious identity is more individual, more idiosyncratic, more interesting than that.

So why continue to asphalt it over with simplistic, fundamentalising categories? In part, because we love to create monsters so we can fear them – and fundamentalism is a wonderful, multi-purpose monster. Also, simply because religious education in this country has been badly neglected, because it’s a lot easier to pigeonhole people and think we’ve got it all wrapped up, and because the media love a sharp, simple profile. And finally, because we’re stuck in dreadful, clanging moment in which religious and secular extremes are shouting much louder than the more extensive middle-ground – and each has its own reasons for presenting religion as dogmatic, socially conservative and *unchanging*.

I feel as if I’ve been fighting two battles throughout my career. The first was to get religion taken seriously – and there’s been progress. The second is to get the way we talk about religion linked up with the way it’s actually being lived – and that’s proving much harder.