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# Radical hope:
## Reimagining church and society in Scotland

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**Abstract**

This article proposes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the factors that have led to the Church of Scotland's current programme of reorganisation of its presbyteries and parishes in the face of a steep decline in its membership and recruitment to ordained ministry. Drawing on sociological, philosophical, and theological sources, it argues that the Kirk is experiencing the devastation of its local parish culture and way of life as an integral part of modern, industrial Scotland under the impact of hyper-individualism in a post-industrial and post-modern Scottish society, but like the Crow tribe, it can find radical hope in its traditions.

### Introduction

How do we make sense of the rapid collapse of the Church of Scotland's national system of local parish churches since the 1990s? This essay puts forward the thesis that the Kirk had developed a way of life in the industrial era of modernity that ensured vibrant local congregational cultures within a predominantly Christian society as late as the 1980s. With the demise of that industrial economy and its communitarian ethos that aligned well with the Kirk's Presbyterian social ethic, replaced by what sociologist David McCrone describes as a maelstrom of individualism since the 1990s, the Kirk has experienced a cultural devastation akin to that of the nineteenth-century Crow tribe in the account of the philosopher Jonathan Lear, where

its way of life no longer made sense. But like the Crow, I would argue the Kirk can find in its traditions a radical hope to reimagine church and society in Scotland.

## Hot and cold explanations of decline

This essay is a response to the sociological analysis of Scottish society presented by David McCrone at a New College event in November 2023, which he compared to his earlier analysis of a changing Scotland at a conference on the Future of the Kirk at Aberdeen University in 1996. But why turn to a sociologist to think about the Kirk's future, then or now?

The title of the New College event, 'A Future with Hope', was taken from lectures given some years ago at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary by Barbara Wheeler, a leading researcher on the mainline churches in the United States. Wheeler offered two types of explanation as to why the membership of the Presbyterian Church USA had gone into numerical decline since the 1950s. The first type she called hot explanations. Hot explanations for decline operate across the theological spectrum. They all see it as some kind of failure on the church's part: a lack of prayer and evangelism for some or a lack of commitment to social justice and prophetic ministry for others. Cold explanations look instead at the profound social and cultural changes in society to make sense of the church's numerical decline: the world just changed from the 1960s on and with it the patterns of family and community life that supported widescale church membership into the 1950s began to unravel.

This cold explanation has been movingly documented by the environmental writer and campaigner Bill McKibben. In his memoir of growing up in Massachusetts in a churchgoing family in a Methodist congregation, *The Flag, The Cross, and the Station Wagon*, the subtitle says it all: *A Graying American Looks Back on His Suburban Boyhood and Wonders What the Hell Happened*.[1] The cold explanation connects what happened to the families, churches and communities of McKibben's youth to wider social trends in American society. Hot explanations have their place. McKibben describes the efforts of local pastors to organise the community

[1] Bill McKibben, *The Flag, The Cross, and the Station Wagon: A Graying American Looks Back at His Suburban Boyhood and Wonders What the Hell Happened* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2022).

on local civil rights issues only to be outvoted by the town electorate, many of them their own church members. But the story he tells of the cross is inseparable from societal changes in American politics and family life, the flag and the station wagon of his title.

Hot explanations of numerical decline have their place in making sense of some things. They can explain the local microclimate. But I am persuaded of the importance of the cool explanations offered by the social sciences for the societal equivalent of climate change. What exactly has happened to the Kirk in a changing Scotland since the 1990s? For that we turn to McCrone's analysis.

## 1. The Loss of the Social: McCrone's sociological analysis

David McCrone is the leading social scientist in the development of a sociology of Scottish society. McCrone pioneered a field of empirical study that barely existed in the 1970s but has flourished under his leadership in the decades since then, culminating in his magnum opus, *The New Sociology of Scotland*.[2] In the paper McCrone gave at that earlier Aberdeen conference on the future of the Kirk in 1996, he set out the reasons for the late emergence of a sociology of Scotland.[3]

Essentially, McCrone argued that Scotland was previously subsumed under a sociology of Britain as a homogeneous advanced industrial state in the era of modernity. It was only with the emergence of new social trends in Scottish society in the later twentieth century that sociologists became interested in Scotland as a field of social-scientific study in its own right. Among the now familiar characteristics of this shift from a modern to a post-modern Scottish society, McCrone identified the shift from a heavy industrial to a service economy, changing gender roles, the decline of mass-membership organisations like political parties and trade unions, and the move from uppercase Religion (with its own mass membership in the Church of Scotland's case), to lower case spirituality. The old certainties of the modern era from the early nineteenth century to the mid-

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[2] David McCrone, *The New Sociology of Scotland* (London: Sage, 2017).

[3] David McCrone, "The Post-modern Condition of Scottish Society", in *The Future of the Kirk: The proceedings of the conference held at the University of Aberdeen on 16 September 1996*, ed. D. A. S. Fergusson and D. W. D. Shaw; *Theology in Scotland* Occasional Paper no. 2 (St Andrews: St Mary's College, 1997), 11–20, https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v31i2.2817.

twentieth century were giving way to what he called a post-modern Scotland. Instead of loyalty to an imperial state and a patriarchal culture embedded in an industrial economy and organised religion, post-modern Scots valued political autonomy, gender equality, personal choice, and a freeform spirituality.

Those of us in Aberdeen that day found McCrone's reading of these social trends highly illuminating in making sense of our experience of parish ministry and congregational life in the late twentieth century. He helped us see that we would increasingly be serving two cultures within church and society. Most church members would be wedded to that modern culture of organised religion, given their age profile, while the post-modern lives of younger generations would increasingly be divorced from that same modern culture in the Kirk.

McCrone's analysis gave us a brilliant insight. It was not the Church of Scotland that was in decline so much as the modern Scotland of which the Kirk was an integral part. We were going down with the ship called modernity – 121 George Street as much as the Ravenscraig steelworks. Both were institutional legacies of that modern Scotland.

I think it would be true to say that David McCrone and I were hopeful in 1996 about the possibilities of this post-modern social turn for a more participatory democracy in Scotland and, in my case, for a more participatory approach to mission in Scotland, replacing yet more top-down national schemes with local church initiatives. Almost thirty years on, when David McCrone gave his updated social analysis of a changing Scotland last November at our first 'A Future with Hope' New College event, he was not at all hopeful as a social scientist about the ways in which that post-modern turn has actually worked out in Scottish society. He identified two major developments since 1996:

### (i) Holyrood

The Scottish Parliament that was the institutional expression of the post-modern political turn to self-government of the 1990s has not lived up to all its hopes for democratic renewal, McCrone argued. The Parliament chamber became an arena of bitter contestation after the 2014 referendum. It entrenched binary views on the constitutional question and eschewed the consensus building on public policy issues through non-partisan deliberation in cross-party committees that the founders saw as key to its

success. Yet Holyrood has established itself as the primary site of Scottish public life, replacing the Kirk's General Assembly among other civic forums as the focus of national debate. The dominant role of Holyrood has clearly had an impact on the public concerns of churches and other faith communities in Scotland.

**(ii) Individualism**

In his paper of November 2023, David McCrone notes the development of a society of self-contained and mutually hostile silos as the key feature of Scottish (and western) society in the opening decades of the twenty-first century rather than the more open, connected, and participatory society we anticipated with post-modern social trends in 1996. McCrone asks: 'How did it come to this? My view is that it derives from losing the sense of the social in this maelstrom of individualism.'[4]

McCrone sees particularly egregious forms of what I would call this hyper-individualism in the polarisation and populism of contemporary politics and the cancel culture of academic life. Overall, he laments the 'loss of the social' with its recognition of common truths beyond the clustered preferences of those in alarmingly anti-social media silos. It is worth repeating his supporting argument to that effect from the American political philosopher Michael Sandel:

> If we understand ourselves as free and independent selves, unbound by moral ties we haven't chosen, we can't make sense of a range of moral and political obligations that we commonly recognize, even prize. These include obligations of solidarity and loyalty, historic memory and religious faith—moral claims that arise from the communities and traditions that shape our identity. Unless we think of ourselves as encumbered selves, open to moral claims we have not willed, it is difficult to make sense of these aspects of our moral and political experience.[5]

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[4] David McCrone, "The Owl of Minerva Takes Fright", *Theology in Scotland* 31, no. 2 (Autumn 2024): 21–31, https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v31i2.2803.

[5] Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 220.

The full implications of this critique are far-reaching for our understanding of church and society in contemporary Scotland. Sandel and McCrone are arguing as social scientists that hyper-individualised selves cannot even make sense of the moral obligations we have hitherto prized, never mind reject them. Those obligations including solidarity and loyalty, historical memory, *and religious faith*. Their words, not mine. During discussion of that sobering sociological analysis last November, McCrone (not a church member) saw the churches positively as one of the last remaining institutions in Scottish society committed to nurturing that social sense of being shaped by the moral claims of communities and traditions, rather than inventing ourselves *ex nihilo* as those free and independent selves.

This social analysis of McCrone and Sandel gives us a different way of understanding those plummeting statistics of church decline. Drawing on their insights, we can reimagine the relationship between church and society in Scotland in their terms. At root, we are not talking about numerical decline to describe the fate of the Kirk. That is only the most visible symptom of something far more fundamental going on in church and society. Nor are we talking about the Kirk's failure to turn things around. We are talking about grief and mourning for a Kirk and Scotland that have gone. We are talking about cultural devastation.

What have we lost? The virtue of the modern Kirk was that it formed its ministers and members in a communal sense of solidarity with their neighbour. Perhaps the last flowering of that modern Kirk as an influential body within industrial Scotland was in the 1980s. It was the decade when industrial chaplains and Maxwell Craig, the convener of the Kirk's Church and Nation Committee, marched to London with the Gartcosh steelworkers to present their industry's case to those in power. If David McCrone's conference paper alluded to Hegel's famous image of the owl of Minerva landing at twilight, reminding us that we only gain the wisdom to make sense of an era towards its close, we can be proud the modern Kirk finally marched in solidarity with working-class communities at the close of the industrial age.

The Kirk's public stance of social solidarity in the 1980s may be seen as the legacy of the theologian John Baillie's leadership in the wartime General Assembly in the 1940s, shaping the Kirk's social vision of a more equal society in post-war Scotland.[6] As someone whose life was formed

[6] See Doug Gay, "The Witness of the Baillie Commission", in *A Practical Theology*

by that Kirk in the postwar era, I am grateful for its influence and mourn its passing. The sheer number of obituaries of accomplished Scots in the *Herald* and *Scotsman* which record their churchgoing and eldership in this era is remarkable. But there can be no restoration of that modern Kirk. Its culture has collapsed. Its only hope is resurrection.

## 2. Facing Cultural Devastation: Lear's philosophical analysis

How then we do we make sense of the Kirk's current predicament as the devastation of a Christian culture and way of life based on a shared sense of social bonds in church and society? The cool explanation says we are now in a very different kind of Scottish society constituted by individual selves who recognise no authority beyond their own free choices.

To understand what it means to frame our experience in the Kirk as one of cultural collapse, we turn briefly to another American philosopher, Jonathan Lear. In his book, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Lear tells the story of the Crow Indian tribe in the United States from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.[7] The Crow way of life was based on a nomadic culture of hunting buffalo and game, and warring with neighbouring tribes like the Sioux. Within that culture all aspects of the Crow way of life from cooking meals to caring for children were given meaning by preparing for the hunt and being brave in battle. Warriors distinguished themselves not only by fighting the enemy with weapons but also by striking them with a symbolic stick, a 'coup stick', which humiliated the enemy and made them recognise the borders of the domain of the Crow people, their way of being in the world.[8]

Lear explores the extent to which that whole Crow way of being in the world collapsed with the western destruction of the buffalo and the US Government's military action in breaking the warrior cultures of the tribes

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*of Church and World: Ecclesiology and Social Vision in 20th Century Scotland* (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2006), 61–134.

[7] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). See also Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022); and for a theological perspective on cultural loss and renewal in religious communities, see Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Grieving for Change: A Spirituality for Refounding Gospel Communities* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991).

[8] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 13–21.

and confining them to reservations under a government bureaucracy. If there was no more nomadic hunting or free-ranging battles with rival tribes to affirm the Crow ethic of courage, then the whole Crow way of life collapsed and no longer made sense. As Lear documents, the oral histories of the defeated Crow people recorded in that period speak of their life on the reservation as one where 'nothing happened'.[9] Nothing could happen because their old way of life was no longer viable or even intelligible. You cannot sustain the Crow warrior ethic of collecting coup sticks through the symbolic striking of the enemy if you are now restricted to life on a reservation, subject to a government bureaucracy and with no buffalo to hunt. Everything in that Crow way of life that gave meaning to daily existence had now ended. After that, nothing happened of any meaning or purpose in terms of the Crow way of being in the world.

I think this brilliantly illuminates the dilemma of a modern Kirk in a post-modern era. With the end of 'modernity' in Scotland, the Kirk's historic culture and way of life as a National Church has collapsed into incoherence. It no longer makes sense to many of our ministers and members, faced with the closure of their buildings and amalgamation of their parishes and presbyteries into ever larger and more distant units in response to falling numbers.

That is why, despite wave after wave of national schemes for mission and evangelism from 'Tell Scotland' in the 1950s to 'A Church Without Walls' in the 2000s, 'nothing happens', like the Crow experience of life on the reservation. The models of ministry and mission we have been operating with since the mid-twentieth century and into the twenty-first assume a shared sense of the social in the wider society. That no longer makes sense as a way to engage the people of Scotland if the nation itself is a now characterised by McCrone's maelstrom of individualism. It is no longer intelligible to those for whom individual choice is everything.

As Steve Bruce has written in McCrone's *New Sociology of Scotland*, 'It is possible to extract from what may seem a bewildering mass of information, a single theme to Scotland's religious history and that theme is not "decline" […]. It is choice.'[10] The real crisis for the Kirk is one of cultural

[9] Lear, ch. 1, "After This, Nothing Happened", 1–52; see also Plenty Coups' response, 148–52.

[10] Steve Bruce, "Religion: Have the Scots Become a Godless People?", in McCrone, *The New Sociology of Scotland*, 367.

devastation: the end of our modern way of life as a National Church. We have no ‘hunting grounds’ for national mission and mass evangelism and no common ethic of excellence in parish ministry because they were all based on a model of church and society that only makes sense in modernity’s culture of social bonding and moral obligation.

Without assuming the ecclesial grass is greener on the other side, I suspect the other denominations in Scotland are relatively better placed to weather this new cultural reality of hyper-individualism, because they have more self-contained and longstanding, institutionally-constituted religious cultures of their own: for example, the Catholic Church with its own schools and global connections; the Scottish Episcopalians with their liturgical tradition and global Anglican identity; the Free Kirk with its Highland and Calvinist roots; or the Baptist churches with their evangelical ethos and international networks.

The problem for the Church of Scotland is that we have little common culture beyond the way of life of a National Church with a centralised administration and a stubborn adherence to the Third Article Declaratory, claiming to represent the Christian Faith of the Scottish people through a territorial ministry. That claim is not so much rejected by post-modern Scots as unintelligible to them. And the Kirk’s institutional culture as a National Church is itself breaking down under the internal strain of current attempts to reorganise its pre-modern parish and modern presbytery structure to maintain the facade of a ubiquitous presence across Scotland with a collapsing number of ministers, members, and resources.

In other words, the problem is not numerical decline, with its concomitant wishful thinking of ‘growth’. It is best understood as one of cultural devastation and loss. Our way of being as the Kirk is no longer viable and no longer makes sense. The challenge for the Kirk is to recognise and accept our impending institutional death as the way of life of a modern National Church, then find in Scripture and a reimagined Reformed tradition sources of hope for the future.

## 3. Between Cross and Resurrection: Lewis’ theological analysis

What then? Well, Lear’s account of the Crow people does not end with the cultural devastation of their nomadic hunting and warring way of life. At the heart of Lear’s case study is the remarkable story of a visionary tribal leader named Plenty Coups, who offers his people what Lear calls a radical hope: a way of being Crow after their traditional way of life has ended and

nothing of the old ways can happen.

As a boy, Plenty Coups had a dream of the one bird in the forest that survived a terrible storm which destroyed every other kind of bird. That bird was the chickadee. It was well known in Crow culture as a bird that always listened and learned from the world around it. This wisdom enabled it to survive the storm. The young Plenty Coups shared his dream about the chickadee with the tribal elders who recognised it as an authentic vision from God. But how was it to be interpreted? Therein lay the radical hope that Plenty Coups offered the Crow people when he grew up to be a respected chief.

Like the chickadee, Plenty Coups told the Crow people that they must accept the inevitable storm of the White Man and learn from his ways if they were to survive, while remaining sceptical of the US Government's repeatedly broken promises. At the same time the Crow must reimagine their traditional way of life in a radically different environment. In that way they will keep enough of their own lands to sustain a re-imagined culture in ways that were still recognisably Crow. In that he was successful, as the Crow alone retained their lands. Jonathan Lear leaves aside the question of the authenticity of Plenty Coups' response to contemporary Crow leaders, yet he does offer this assessment of Plenty Coup's legacy:

> But I can say that Plenty Coups has bequeathed them [the Crow] the wherewithal to reinvigorate a genuine tradition. In this context, Plenty Coups' haunting statement, "After this, nothing happened," takes on a new meaning. Plenty Coups had to acknowledge the destruction of a *telos*—that the old ways of living a good life were gone. And that acknowledgement involved the stark recognition that the traditional ways of structuring significance—of recognizing something as a happening—had been devastated. For Plenty Coups, this recognition was not an expression of despair; it was the only way to avoid it. One needs to recognize the destruction that has occurred if one is to move beyond it.[11]

That is the spiritual challenge facing us in the Kirk today. We need to recognise the destruction that has occurred to our Christian culture and way of life as a National Church if we are to move beyond it. But how?

[11] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 152.

On that question, Lear sees an important distinction between the kind of religious imagination exercised by Plenty Coups in his dream of the chickadee and that of Sitting Bull, who was led by the religious vision of the Ghost Dance movement that swept through his Sioux tribe to think the US Army would disappear from his lands: 'From Plenty Coup's perspective, Sitting Bull deployed religious imagination in the wrong sort of way. […] Sitting Bull used a dream-vision to short-circuit reality rather than to engage with it.'[12]

Radical hope for Plenty Coups was the courage to face the Crow present in all its devastating reality, not to wish it away, and yet to find in the spiritual resources of the Crow people a way of living after the cultural collapse of their old way of life that was recognisably Crow. Lear concludes his account of Plenty Coups' radical hope with these comments:

> Plenty Coups was able to draw upon the traditional icon of the chickadee. Through his dream-vision, Plenty Coups was able to take a valued and honored spiritual force and put it to creative use in facing up to new challenges. Thus, although Plenty Coups was advocating a new way of life for the Crow, he was drawing upon the past in vibrant ways. And thus I think a case can be made that Plenty Coups offered the Crow a *traditional* way of going forward.[13]

In closing, what kind of Christian imagination can we deploy in the Kirk to engage with the social reality of a siloed society of hyper-individualism rather than imagine we can short-circuit it in the wishful thinking of old-style growth, based on patterns of social life that are long gone?[14] Each year in the Season of Lent we remember that other experience of cultural devastation which lies at the heart of our Christian story. It is called Holy Saturday, the time between Cross and Resurrection. Unlike the chickadee, the iconic figure at the heart of Holy Saturday did not survive the storm of Good Friday and the Cross. He died and his dead body was buried in the tomb. With his burial the culture of hope in Jesus of Nazareth that had grown up among his disciples was devastated and collapsed in fear, despair, and denial.

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[12] Lear, 150.

[13] Lear, 154

[14] See John McIntyre, "Imagination as a Theological Category", in *Faith, Theology and Imagination* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1987), 41–64.

No one has pondered the meaning of Holy Saturday for the Christian life of the Church with greater spiritual honesty and realism than the late Alan Lewis, a former teacher of mine here at New College. In *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*, Lewis writes:

> not even […] the most Christocentric and trinitarian discussion of "the end of days" can evade the haunting implications of the church's identifying three-day narrative, centered upon Easter Saturday. For that insists — and nothing in our contemporary experience contradicts its awful truthfulness — that the God of Jesus Christ does not intervene to prevent catastrophe and rupture.[15]

Where then is our radical hope as the Kirk of Easter Saturday? It turns out that like the chickadee in the Crow story, we must learn the wisdom of listening and learning from our Christian story of the storm that felled the One on the tree. As Lewis bears witness:

> The word of the cross […] effects the creation of a community of listening faith. They not only hear the narrative of vulnerable love's abundant creativity, but are constrained to think that story through, expound and conceptualize its meaning, and by bringing it to think-ability make it a viable stimulus to hope, courage, and encouragement for the frightened and despairing of this and every generation.[16]

That is what we did at the 'A Future with Hope' conference at New College in March 2024. We listened to the narratives of vulnerable love's abundant creativity in local case studies, ecumenical reflections, and diaspora testimonies from fellow Christians who have been constrained to think that Easter story through in different contexts across Scotland. We heard remarkable stories of courage and encouragement. By bringing the story of Holy Saturday to thinkability, these local storytellers are reimagining church and society from the ground up. They are creating local communities of listening faith from Methil to Stornoway. They are our future with hope.

[15] Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 282.

[16] Lewis, 295.