



The Spiritual Revolution: A Response from the Parish

G. Russell Barr

As I understand it, based upon an extensive research project in Kendal, the thesis is that a spiritual revolution is taking place in contemporary Britain. This revolution can be described as a turning from organised religion as expressed in the different Christian churches to holistic spirituality as expressed in aromatherapy, reflexology and yoga, to name but three.

This revolution is set within a cultural context characterised by a subjective turn, that is, a movement away from life as obligation to some external or higher authority – God, the Bible, the Church – to subjective life experience where the emphasis lies upon inner and personal sources of meaning, significance and authority.

The conclusion reached is that the subjective turn is not just *a* but *the* major cause of secularisation in the post-war period and helps to explain the decline in the organised religion of the churches and the emergence and rise of the various forms of spiritualities.

I want to offer brief comment on three aspects of the argument: firstly on the validity of drawing universal conclusions from the research project itself; secondly on the claim that the subjective turn is something new which can be used to describe the decline in the churches; thirdly on the categorisation of congregations into congregations of humanity, of difference, and of experiential humanity and difference.



Kendal

When he published his ground-breaking work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* in 1912, Durkheim sought to study religion in its simplest form and based his analysis on the Arunta people of central Australia, a tribe of nomadic aboriginals. The evidence he unearthed led him to draw conclusions of a universal nature. One of

the criticisms made of Durkheim's work was just that: the difficulty of drawing conclusions of a universal nature from the case study of one group as confirmation of his general theory. And to the extent to which that criticism was valid of Durkheim's research, I want to ask if it is valid of this research.

Although the book goes to some length to demonstrate Kendal as typical in a variety of social, religious and cultural categories, it would appear, for example, that none of the congregations of whatever category were experiencing significant growth. In a different study of the Diocese of Durham entitled *The Healthy Churches' Handbook*, Robert Warren describes a cross section of congregations that have experienced significant growth.¹ I will return to Warren later: for the moment I simply want to place a question mark against the assumption that what is true in Kendal is necessarily true elsewhere, that the evidence unearthed in this particular research can be used to draw universal conclusions applicable to the life of the churches or of spiritual groups throughout the UK.



The Subjective Turn

The second question mark I want to place is against the claim that the subjective turn is either a *new* factor or *the* factor that can be used to explain the decline in the churches.

In their book the authors cite the French philosopher Rousseau who described the subjective self in the following terms: "I know my heart and understand my fellow man. But I am unlike any one I have ever met. I may be no better, but at least I am unique."² In their view Rousseau's statement, with his emphasis on the unique self, is critical to an understanding of modern culture, the subjective turn being the cultural expression of Rousseau's uniqueness. What concerns me however, is that although Rousseau was unique, he was but one of a number of philosophers who placed the self at the centre of a great deal of philosophical, intellectual (not to mention theological), scientific and psychological enquiry.

Now to the extent to which that is true, I want to ask whether rather than being something new, the spiritual revolution as so described by Heelas and Woodhead is instead a further manifestation of a much older tradition. To say that is not in any way to deny its validity or its importance, it is however to place it within a philosophical and theological context with roots stretching back through the existential movement³ to seventeenth century Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am)⁴. And one consequence of setting this emphasis on the unique self within a wider context is to place a question mark against the claim that the subjective turn is *the* factor capable of explaining the decline of the churches.

In 1997 *Theology in Scotland* held a conference in Aberdeen entitled *The Future of the Kirk*. At that conference a different analysis of institutional decline was offered by David McCrone, Professor of Sociology at Edinburgh. McCrone's analysis sought to describe the postmodern condition of Scottish society as something with which the Church of Scotland, as typical of many modern institutions, was struggling to adapt. My suspicion is that, as described by the authors, the subjective turn is one aspect of this postmodern condition and, as such, one of a number of factors rather than *the* factor which helps explain the decline of the churches.



Categories of Congregations

My final comment is on the categorisation of Kendal's congregations into congregations of humanity, difference, and experiential humanity and difference.

I found this the most difficult part of the book because, having been a parish minister in three congregations in Glasgow, Greenock and Edinburgh, I am able to recognise elements of each of the categories in each of the congregations. But I would find it hard to be able to place any of the congregations into only one of the categories. Of course, that may well be because I do not understand fully the categories or the research methodology. So, bearing these categories in mind, and

the bleak future which the authors predict for each of them, let me return to Robert Warren.

In his account of the growing congregations in the Diocese of Durham, Warren was impressed by what he described as the sheer variety of social settings: urban, suburban, inner city, rural, ex-mining communities, as well as by the wide range of personality types and leadership styles. Warren's conclusion was that "No context, no size of church, no church tradition, no leadership style seemed closed to the possibility of significant growth." To the extent to which Warren's conclusion is true, do the very broad-brush categorisations of Kendal's congregations do justice to the often complex and diverse nature of congregational life? And given that complexity, to what extent does the subjective turn alone offer any kind of meaningful insight into their future prospects?



Conclusion

In offering these what are intended to be provocative comments, that is, to provoke comment, discussion and debate, let me conclude by thanking the authors for their work and recommending the book. While I would take issue with some of the conclusions drawn from the research, the description of the subjective turn offers a valuable tool, not I think to better understand the decline of the church, but to better understand the culture in which the church seeks to minister.

As it happens, chance or providence – depending upon your theology, the lectionary readings for Sunday include John 10 with Jesus' wonderful saying about life in all its fullness. The challenge and opportunity with which the spiritual revolution leaves me is to find ways of making that claim alive and meaningful for people today.

- ¹ Robert Warren, *The Healthy Churches' Handbook* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).
- ² Heelas and Woodhead, *op. cit.* p. 11.
- ³ Existentialism as defined in *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*: 'A term covering a number of related doctrines denying objective universal values and holding that a man must create values for himself through action and by living each moment to the full.'
- ⁴ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (1637).