



## The Death of Religion and the Fall of Respectable Britain

At the end of the nineteenth century, there were comparable levels of religiosity in Britain and the United States. The British lived in a culture in which the assumptions of Protestant Christianity were taken for granted. Few people believed strongly, but everyone believed a little. Throughout the population there was a somewhat vague general acceptance of central Christian beliefs, a strong respect for sacred things, a liking for church-based rituals to mark the turning points in life (and particularly its ending), a moral code of helping others that was rooted in Christian ethics, and a liking for and ability to sing hymns, both of which had been learned in Sunday School. Even football crowds sang “Abide with Me” or “Bread of Heaven”; today they sing songs full of thoughtless blasphemies, obscenities, and thought-out sexual and racial abuse to upset their opponents. Regular attendance at Sunday School was a standard part of most people’s youth, and it was the place where standards of respectability were inculcated. Britain’s was a society with a remarkably low and falling incidence of violent and acquisitive crime, illegitimacy, and addiction to opiates. Public drunkenness was a problem, but it was gradually ceasing to be so; by the 1920s it had all but disappeared.

This is the world Britain has lost. The first turning point was the First World War. Before that war there was already a degree of uneasiness about the strength of religion in Britain; after the war it was clearly in decline. The decline of religion was slow and punctuated by

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periods of recovery, such as the early 1950s. From the mid-1950s onwards, however, the previous prevailing religious culture collapsed, and by the millennium Britain was one of the most thoroughly irreligious countries in the world. Less than half the population believes in God. For many of those who do believe in God, their belief is not in a personal God who is a guide to conduct or a source of solace but a mere impersonal and irrelevant something-or-other.

In 1901–1911, half the British population under fifteen was enrolled in Sunday School; in 1957 three-quarters of those over the age of thirty had attended Sunday School at some time in their lives. By the end of the twentieth century, less than 10 percent belonged to a Sunday School. An entire culture had been lost. In England in 1913, 70 percent of all live births were baptized in the Church of England; in 1956, it was still 60 percent, but by 1997 it had fallen to less than a quarter. In the 1950s in Britain two-thirds of those questioned said they believed Jesus was the son of God and only a fifth expressed disbelief. By the 1980s, less than a half of those asked said they believed this and nearly 40 percent said they did not believe. In the 1950s most people believed in the central tenets of Christianity or at least went along with the dominant belief of their culture. By the 1980s, this was no longer the case. By the end of the millennium, many Christian denominations in Scotland, as well as in England and Wales, were predicting their own imminent demise in the twenty-first century. A few evangelical, Pentecostal, and fundamentalist groups thrive, but they lack numbers, have little influence on the wider culture, and are ignored and even snubbed and



discriminated against by the secular liberals, who control broadcasting

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and education.

One consequence of this, or at least a social change that is closely correlated with it, is the collapse of respectable Britain. By the standards of 1905 or 1925 or 1955 Britain is a criminal society, a society with a substantial minority of violent people and an even larger minority willing to indulge in planned dishonesty. In 1927, there were only 110 robberies reported to the police; there were thirty times as many in 1997. Most of this increase occurred after 1955. Even if some part of the recorded increase may be dismissed as merely greater reporting and improved recording, it remains a massive change. In 1927, one's chance of being mugged was absolutely negligible. Even today it is not all that likely an experience, but it has become one of the ordinary risks of life to be thought about and around which life is planned—enough to constitute an important qualitative change.

In 1957, half a million notifiable offenses were recorded by the police, but in 1997 it was 4,500,000; much of this is petty theft, but one crucial change to be noted is the shift over time in the ratio of violent to acquisitive crime. In 1900, violence against the person was 2.4 percent of all reported crime; by 1937 it had fallen to 1 percent and, in 1967, 0.9 percent, but by 1997 it had risen to 5.6 percent. Part of the change is due to the fall in binge drinking and public drunkenness in the early years of the twentieth century, due in part to the pressure from Protestant temperance groups, followed by a marked return of these problems in the latter part of the century. Drunken and often violent hooliganism is now a standard feature of Friday and Saturday nights in most towns; small towns that in the 1950s were remarkably peaceful are now unpleasant to walk through on those evenings, and their local casualty departments are busy patching up the victims of affrays with fist, boot, knife, and bottle. Baseball bats are widely in use in England, but not for playing baseball.

Another part of the change is due to the growth of an aggressive and violent underclass whose members are willing both to attack innocent passers-by and to settle their own disputes by violence and even murder. Murder remains a rare crime in Britain but its incidence is rising, and in particular the number of male victims is rising. The number of homicides in relation to population nearly doubled between 1967 and 1999/ 2000. The number of female victims has long been roughly constant—i.e., the number of domestic murders, sparked off by sudden emotional explosions within families, is not increasing. The significance of the rise in male victims is that these are murders in public, murders as a result of the general rise in violent crime. Liberals may quibble about the reporting and recording of violence but a corpse is a corpse is a corpse. But for the increased skill of the medical profession in saving lives, the number of murders would have risen faster; likewise Britain's doctors have to spend more of their time on patching facial injuries from fights, and staff in accident and emergency units have to be issued stab-proof vests. Britain



has become a violent society.

One consequence of Britain's slide into violence and dishonesty is that the prison population has grown massively. In 1937 there were only about 10,500 prisoners and only 800 male prisoners were serving sentences of more than three years (9 percent of the total number in jail at any one time). In 1997, there were 64,000 people in jail, 23,000 of whom were serving terms of over three years (half of the prison population at any one time). This growth in the volume of prisoners occurred despite an increasing reluctance on the part of the authorities to send people to prison. Britain has over time become far less punitive, and many offenders who in 1955 would have gone to prison are now given more lenient non-custodial sentences. The increased number of prisoners in Britain is entirely due to the rise in serious crime.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the incidence of illegitimacy in peacetime was very low, perhaps 4-5 percent of all live births and particularly low in urban areas. It began to rise in the mid-1950s, however, and by 1968 it was 8.5 percent. Illegitimacy has continued to rise to the point where over a third of all births are to unmarried parents, but many of these children are, in fact, being brought up by both parents. Nonetheless, at a time of declining fertility, the number of bastards born to traditional unmarried mothers rose from 41,400 in 1966 to 51,000 in 1996. A high and increasing proportion of these were born to mothers under twenty.

During the nineteenth century the consumption of opiates in Britain declined, and by the early 1950s, addiction was a negligible problem. In 1953, only 290 addicts were known to the Home Office, the lowest figure ever recorded, and there was no significant drug-related crime. By 1968, there were 3,000 registered heroin addicts, and by the beginning of the twenty-first century there were 20,000. In total there are probably between 200,000 and 400,000 regular users of heroin in Britain. There is a substantial black market in drugs; addicts commit robberies and burglaries to finance their habit, and gangs of drug dealers settle their disputes with violence; they may well badly beat up any addict who is heavily in debt to them, or thought to be an informer.

There has, then, been a series of linked changes in Britain, that I have termed the rise and fall of respectable Britain. In the late-nineteenth century, crime rates fell dramatically, as did drug and alcohol abuse, and illegitimacy became less common. All these indexes of deviance were fairly steady between World War I and 1955. After 1955 they all rose massively to create a U-curve of deviance, over the period from 1847 to 1997. Behind it lies the rise and fall of British respectability, of which the rise and fall of the Sunday Schools is both an index and a cause. In the late nineteenth century, the Sunday Schools grew rapidly in numbers and influence to a peak in the decade 1901–1911. After the First World War they declined slowly, and after a brief revival in the early 1950s, they collapsed

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totally in the last half of the twentieth century. The two patterns fit together very well indeed.



The story outlined above may well have many echoes in the American experience—but, given the greater religiosity of the United States, it might have to be told in a very different way. I leave that to American observers and historians to decide.

There is, however, another story to be told, and one that contrasts a totally secular Britain with a much more religiously diverse United States, substantial sections of which are intensely Christian. The only comparable region in the United Kingdom is the province of Northern Ireland, where both Protestants and Roman Catholics have retained an intense attachment to their religion.

This second story relates not to the daily behavior of the people but to a political phenomenon. The politics of homosexuality, abortion, and capital punishment have taken a very different form in Britain: there has been no American-style culture war, but rather an overwhelming and unchallengeable victory for the forces of secular liberalism.

Until 1967, male homosexual acts, even between adults in private, were illegal in England and Wales; in Scotland they remained so until 1980. There were only about one hundred prosecutions a year and none were brought after 1964. Nonetheless, the very existence of such a law stigmatized those who were practicing homosexuals. It was a relic of the even more severe days of the early nineteenth century, when in one particular year, 1806, six sodomites were executed and only five murderers.

Sodomy and bestiality are condemned in adjacent sections of the Book of Leviticus because they are sexual crimes that break down the natural categories of existence, human and animal, male and female, and cause confusion. In Britain, they were classed together in the single “abominable crime of buggery committed with man or beast.” Lonely rustics who had been caught having congress with a sheep or a goat were also liable to be sentenced to long periods of imprisonment, and at one time could be and were executed.

When, in the 1950s, it was suggested that homosexual sins committed in private should not be the subject of the criminal law, some of the bishops of the Church of England who sat in the House of Lords objected. They spoke out strongly against homosexuals and their activities, using the language of pollution, defilement, and crimes against nature, and appealed to the authority of the Bible in support of their arguments. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Geoffrey Fisher, was willing to exempt the less heinous homosexual offenses known as gross indecency between males (which had only been made criminal in 1885) from prosecution under the criminal law, but wanted sodomy, with its associations with God’s destruction of the Cities of the Plain, to remain a crime.

By 1966–1967 the Church of England’s leaders, either from loss of confidence or because they had come to doubt traditional morality, had ceased to oppose decriminalization. From then on the moral condemnation of homosexual conduct crumbled. Indeed, so strong is the liberal elite’s support for the enforced equality of homosexuals that in 2003, the Chief Constable of Cheshire, Peter Fahy, had Peter Forster, the Bishop of Chester, investigated for failing to celebrate diversity. (The Bishop had suggested that homosexuals ought to seek psychiatric help to reorient their desires in a direction more compatible with traditional religious teaching.) No one came to the Bishop’s defense citing Genesis and Leviticus, the fate of the Benjamites, or the views of St. Paul and St. Thomas Aquinas. Neither the revealed word of God nor the traditional understandings of natural law would have carried any weight with this very model of a modern full Chief Constable.



Britain steadily became an increasingly secular country throughout the last half of the twentieth century, and homosexuals became increasingly open about their proclivities and increasingly aggressive in their criticisms of those who disesteemed them. It was the latter that led to the only hiccup in the steady shift towards the greater acceptance of homosexuals in 1988. In that year, Section 28 of the Local Government Act was passed, which sought to prevent local councils from promoting homosexuality or homosexual propaganda, or promoting the teaching in schools of the “acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.” Radical activists, including homosexual activists, had been unwise to attack the family, an institution whose growing instability due to increased illegitimacy and divorce was causing widespread concern. Children were suffering very severely from

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the collapse of conventional family life; it was not a good time to be peddling radical alternatives to the family. The few remaining British Christians knew that the old arguments against homosexual conduct, rooted in religious teachings and the preservation of sacred order, no longer carried any weight, and so arguments about the need to preserve family life were deployed against the homosexuals for the first time.

The phrase “for the protection of children and vulnerable young persons” is the ace of trumps in secular late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Britain, which can be used to justify all manner of foolish claims and unjustified legislation, from the mass seizure of children and arrest of innocent citizens in Orkney (Satanic ritual abuse), Rochdale, and Cleveland, to gun control after children were shot at Dunblane. The Christians played the protect-children-and-families card because they had no other cards. Later, they were also forced to seek the support of Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu religious and community leaders, not only over Clause 28, but in relation to the question of whether gay and lesbian couples should be able, as a couple, to adopt children (they could already do so as individuals), or possibly even to marry. These are rear-guard actions by a tiny Christian minority looking for allies even among the heathens and the heretics. Family values is the last refuge of the upholders of a traditional morality that dare not speak its name.

Only in Northern Ireland has there been any strong opposition to this trend; indeed, hostility to homosexuality is one of the few issues on which the Protestants and Catholics of the Province agree. The laws of both Northern Ireland and of the Republic of Ireland (the old pre-1967 English law), however, have been struck down by the European Court of Human Rights, a secular institution of a secular Europe. In both parts of Ireland there was strong support for the laws against homosexual conduct on religious grounds, but Europe is an overwhelmingly secular continent and the Irish lost out. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland constitute an odd anomaly that in religious terms resembles the United States rather than Europe.

Ireland also remains one of the few countries in Europe where there is significant opposition to abortion being easily available. In Britain there is in effect abortion on demand, and women from both the province of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland travel there to obtain abortions. Attempts to prevent such travel by blocking the dissemination in Ireland of information about clinics in other countries, by the





government and courts of the Republic of Ireland (where the ban on abortion is built into the very constitution of the Republic), have been struck down by the European Court of Human Rights.

However freely available, abortion in Britain is not a right. There is no right to choose and no right to privacy. Abortion has been permitted in Britain on the utilitarian grounds that it would cause more harm to try to suppress it than to allow it; few people feel sufficiently indignant about its availability to want to change the law or to thwart its increasingly liberal interpretation by the medical profession. Even in 1967, when the law was liberalized, the only significant opposition came from Britain's (largely of Irish descent) Roman Catholic minority. It was not an important issue for most Protestants. In the 1980s the Roman Catholics tried hard to amend the details of the Abortion Act of 1967 in such a way as to thwart its liberal interpretation by the doctors, but the Conservative governments of 1979–1997 would never allow enough Parliamentary time in which their proposals could be fully debated, and new restrictions were agreed upon by Parliament. Conservative politicians in Britain have never made a political issue out of abortion; there are no votes in it, and few of these politicians have sufficiently strong moral objections to abortion to make them want to mount a crusade against it. Abortion is not a controversial issue in a society where the Roman Catholics have followed the Protestants into rapid decline. In the 2001 general election, the Pro-Life Alliance put up thirty-seven independent candidates on an anti-abortion platform. Its candidates obtained an average of 255 votes; the highest vote obtained was only 475. They came bottom of the poll in twenty-six seats, and in Cheltenham had fewer votes than the Raving Loony Party. Even in strongly Roman Catholic constituencies in Glasgow and Merseyside, the level of voting for the Pro-Life Alliance was derisory.

Abortion is not a possible source of political conflict in Britain, but capital punishment could have been, for it has—and always has had—the strong support of a great majority of the population.

By the end of the twentieth century, it can safely be said that neither those in support of capital punishment nor those against it were inspired by religion. It was not always thus. From 1837 onwards, when in practice murder was the only crime punished by execution, there was in England a religious dimension to capital punishment. The execution of a murderer was permitted by the articles of the Church of England. Indeed, for many of those connected with its administration, it was seen as a religious duty—the carrying out of God's commandment to Noah, the ancestor of all mankind, to shed the blood of the one who had shed blood. Only in this way could the land be cleansed.

When, in the 1860s, it was proposed to divide murders into capital and non-capital murders, the debate was centered on the question of degree of moral culpability; those in search of reform sought a formula for dividing murders into the particularly heinous ones, subject to capital punishment, and others not meriting the extreme penalty. It was treated as a moral issue. Much later, in 1957, the Homicide Act did divide murders into non-capital and capital murders, but it did so on purely utilitarian grounds that did not pretend to be drawing any moral distinctions. Even the Archbishop of Canterbury stated that the decision to employ capital punishment was one of expediency, not

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morality. Capital punishment in the late-nineteenth century had been discussed in terms of retribution, atonement, and expiation, but by the 1950s this very terminology and the moral thinking that lay behind it were seen as obsolete.

The 1957 Homicide Act lasted for only seven years. The leading English judges, who had always been strong supporters of capital punishment (on the moralist grounds that the supreme crime merited the supreme penalty), now became abolitionists. They had been forced to impose or withhold the death penalty from individual murderers, without any regard for the particular moral deserts of an individual—for whose category of murder the sentence of death was mandatory, relative to those of an individual who could not be sentenced to death, because his or her category of murder was seen by Parliament as one where the theory of deterrence did not apply. Murder in the pursuit of theft or robbery was always subject to the death penalty, regardless of aggravating or mitigating circumstances, whereas murder by a rapist or a thrill-seeker was not. Murder using a gun or explosion was capital; murder using a blunt instrument, a knife, or poison was not. The murder of a police officer or prison guard was capital; the murder of a child or old and frail person was not. The categories were reasonable and rational when viewed simply in terms of deterrence, but when capital punishment in Britain lost its moral underpinning, it ceased to be viable.

Many of those who had already come to oppose capital punishment in Britain in the 1920s were Protestant Nonconformists who saw it as un-Christian. However, the Nonconformists' support for abolition, in contrast with the support for capital punishment on the part of most Anglicans, reflected the ideological and institutional, as well as the theological, divisions between the two groups. The Anglicans, the upholders of the established Church of England, one of the hierarchies of the English state, had a corporate view of society and religion; the state could and should execute. The Protestant Nonconformists, by contrast, were not part of the establishment and saw themselves as outsiders; they tended to affiliate with the anti-establishment Liberal and Labour Parties. Those who were

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opposed to the traditional holders and wielders of “dominion” opposed the use of the power of the state to take life, whether it was the life of a murderer or a military deserter. When people of the same religious persuasion had emigrated to the United States, their social position changed; in America, they had become the dominant culture. In America, execution could be regarded as the will of the people and the voice of democracy, and not the mere exercise of power by a traditional elite. Yet, ironically, in Britain capital punishment was abolished and indeed placed beyond restoration by a secular liberal elite that felt able to ignore the widespread public support for the execution of murderers. By a curious convention adhered to by the main British political parties, capital punishment is not used as an electoral issue. Also, although a majority of the people are in favor of capital punishment, murder is a rare crime even in the violent and



increasingly violent Britain of the twenty-first century, and capital punishment is not a sufficiently important question for the majority—who would like to see it restored—to disturb the established convention that has kept it out of politics.

The Labour and Liberal politicians are strongly united against capital punishment on ideological grounds, and the Conservative politicians are divided and uncertain. If the Conservatives had campaigned strongly in favor of capital punishment in the last half of the twentieth century it would have gained them votes but split their party. The Conservatives did, however, refuse to sign Protocol 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which outlawed capital punishment permanently and completely on the grounds that it was a matter for the British parliament to decide. In 1998, the Labour government, which had come to power in 1997, did sign Protocol 6. It was a further step by which Britain was absorbed into the shared secular liberal ideology of Europe that sets that continent apart from a more vigorous and more religious United States.

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Christie Davies's latest books is

*The Strange Death of Moral Britain* (Transaction, 2004).

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