

Changing Britain: Whilst the non-religious are growing, new religious life is flourishing in urban areas

*Grace Davie's 1994 book **Religion in Britain Since 1945** has been one of the leading resources in the field of the Sociology of Religion. A revised edition, published in 2015, describes the religious situation in twenty-first century Britain, taking into account the changes that have taken place in the last two decades. Here Davie explores the nature of these transformations.*



Image: Flickr, jordi.martorell

Twenty years after I published *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* an extensively revised edition appeared under the title *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*.

The paradox can be summarized as follows: at one and the same time Britain is becoming steadily more secular (no serious scholar disputes that), but the significance of religion as a topic in public debate is rising rather than falling. In short – and like many of our European neighbours – we talk more about something that we do less. The consequences of this situation are worked through in the revised text.

Quite apart from this, a twenty year gap between the two editions permitted an assessment of the wider changes taking place in modern Britain. Some of these I had anticipated, others caught me by surprise. I will deal with each of these in turn.

I expected and found a mixture of continuity and change, which has resulted in a broad spectrum of activity, ranging from the religiously committed (of different faiths) at one end of the spectrum to articulate unbelievers at the other. Both religious and secular views can at times be sharp – unsurprisingly the extremes provoke each other. Much grey remains, however, not least the blurring of the lines between nominal believers and their secular equivalents. That said the proportion of people placing themselves in the **no-religion category** continues to grow, mostly at the expense of nominal Anglicans.



Broadly speaking, therefore, the picture is one of overall decline offset by some notable success stories. Among the latter are two very different kinds of churches: on the one hand charismatic evangelical congregations of many shapes and sizes and on the other the cathedrals and (some) city centre churches. Both tendencies were visible in the 1990s but the growth of cathedrals has become more noticeable in recent decades. So also has the effect of migration, which not only grew through the 1990s, but gained a new dimension following the expansion of the European Union in 2004. The financial crash of 2008 checked the flow, but not enough to diminish the growing diversity of religion in this country. Migration, moreover, remains a **hot political issue**.

So much for what I had expected. Less easy to predict have been the changes in fortunes between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom.

In the early 1990s, Wales, and even more Scotland, were markedly **more active in terms of religiousness than England**. This was so across a wide range of indicators, but is no longer the case. Both have suffered from late but rapid secularization, but for different reasons. In the Scottish case, **devolution** plays a part in that it has provided a forum in which Scottish people can discuss Scottish affairs, a role formerly filled by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. In Wales, historic overbuilding of chapels is clearly a significant factor as ever-decreasing congregations struggle to maintain their denominational heritage.

Rather more positively, the **Good Friday Agreement** was signed in 1998. Nobody saw this coming in 1994 at which point the situation in Northern Ireland remained bleak. It is still tense at times, but markedly less so than in the mid-post war decades.

A rather different kind of reversal can be found in the contrasts between rural and urban parts of the country. Some twenty years ago the conventional wisdom still held sway: that rural churches were stronger than their urban equivalents. They were, moreover, sustained by the loyalty of a generation born before World War 2 – a cohort that is now passing and is not replacing itself. Conversely, in some – if not all – urban areas, in-migration is bringing new (and younger) people to religious organizations of all kinds, both Christian and other faith.

London offers the clearest illustration of this shift. No longer a beacon of secularity, it has become an area of **noticeable religious growth**. The easiest way to grasp what is happening is to appreciate that London is no longer displaying the characteristics of a European city in terms of its religious life: that is a receding state church only partially compensated for by new initiatives. Instead London is beginning to manifest the features of the global city that it is. Migrants bring new forms of religious life to the capital almost on a daily basis; the existing churches are stimulated rather than inhibited by this influx; and the relative successes found elsewhere (charismatic churches of various kinds, not to mention the major cathedrals) thrive in the growing market.

The question that follows can be articulated thus: is London the exception that proves the rule, or is London a foretaste of what is to come? Time will tell, but either way I did not anticipate this shift as I prepared my revised edition.

About the author



Grace Davie is Professor emerita at the University of Exeter



November 3rd, 2016 | [Featured](#), [Latest](#) | [3 Comments](#)

