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Church decline and institutional anxiety: an authentic Christian response

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Abstract

What is the source of the decline in church attendance in western Europe? This article critiques contemporary narratives of decline from within church institutions, comparing them with models of secularization, particularly the work of Charles Taylor. This article argues that current narratives of decline, using the Church of England as an example, blame secularization on congregations failing to engage in mission. This narrative is shown to stem from twentieth-century missiology, much of which has been accepted wholesale, but is in need of critical reassessment. However, rather than a neutral paradigm, it will be shown how it creates unhealthy cultures of anxiety. The article instead asks what healthy and theologically informed models of mission and ministry might look like in a period of secularization and challenge, engaging the work of Andrew Root.

Keywords

anxiety, ecclesiology, ministry, mission, secularization

The church in western Europe is going through a crisis more calamitous than the Reformation: an almost complete collapse in attendance, resources and influence. The Church of England, like most European denominations, is in clear decline. What is less clear, however, is the source of this decline. This article argues that institutional churches situate decline as a *failure in mission*, and therefore understands the antidote

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as a need to increase their activity. This rejects other compelling models of secularization (such as that of Charles Taylor, explored below), and creates a trickle-down culture of anxiety, leading to unhealthy congregations and clergy. This article asks what a healthy model of ministry and mission might be in a period of challenge.

Mission discourse

Mission is the byword of current church vision, although its biblical basis is thin, occurring in translation only seven times in Scripture, mostly in reference to military campaigns.[1] The ubiquitous term *missio Dei*, 'the Mission of God', in its contemporary use stems not from Scripture or patristics, but from the twentieth century, popularized after the International Missionary Council Conference held in Willingen in 1952.[2] Its Latin rendering lends an aura of ancientness and reveals something that is the heart of current mission discourse: that a refocus on mission as the defining characteristic of the Church will uncover an ancient zeal, supposedly obscured by centuries of institution and tradition.

David Bosch's *Transforming Mission* remains highly influential, presenting mission as the Church's organizing principle. While valuable, Bosch casts the institutional Church as mission's antagonist: 'under the influence of Origen and Augustine, the expectation of God's reign in the future was made to refer to either the spiritual journey of the individual believer or to the church as the kingdom of God on earth',[3] whereby an original, lost, dynamic of mission falls into dormancy somewhere between the Acts of the Apostles and Origen.[4] The Church became:

> not life, but doctrine; not movement, but institution … it also lost much of its verve. Its white-hot convictions, poured into the hearts of the first adherents, cooled down and became crystallized codes, solidified institutions, and petrified dogmas … The prophet became a priest of the establishment, charisma became office, and love became a routine. The horizon was no longer the world but the boundaries of the local parish.[5]

Rather than a nuanced reassessment, the Church itself is polemically blamed for failure – an outlook shaped by late twentieth-century anti-establishment trends. The parish is seen as a *distraction* from mission, ignoring much of the history of evangelism through both parish and religious communities.

The Church of England *Mission-Shaped Church* report echoes Bosch, claiming that congregational life has become detached from culture, and thus ineffective in mission, negating much of twentieth-century anthropological and critical thought, such as the work of Pierre Bourdieu or Michel Foucault, who demonstrate how institutions are inextricably located within the culture in which they find themselves. The report suggests:

> This is also a moment for repentance. We have allowed our culture and church to drift apart without our noticing. We need … repentance if we are to receive a fresh baptism of the spirit for witness … If the decline of the church is ultimately caused neither by the irrelevance of Jesus nor by the indifference of the community but by the church's failure to respond fast

> enough to an evolving culture … then that decline can be addressed by the repentance of the church.[6]

Thus the report diagnoses decline as congregations' failure to adapt to rapid change, effectively blaming generations of worshippers, and its suggestions have become embedded in the adoption of 'mixed ecology' as the default model of the Church – a combination of 'traditional' church ministry and forms of church that attempt to throw off the perceived shackles of ecclesial form and content. The borrowing of ecological models is premised on the idea that the garden will and can grow, if only the Church is able to find the right ecological balance. Meanwhile, the language of *missio Dei* has become so ill defined that it sometimes becomes lost in its own self-definition, where any form of activity can be defined as missional: '*Missio Dei*, with its critical necessity, flawed Trinitarian basis, complex range, and lack of cohesion, conspires to create a concept that mires any constructive potential in a bog of elasticity.'[7]

Trickle-down anxiety

Alison Milbank's *The Once and Future Parish* argues that the language of mission has become a 'negatively panicked impulse', where every facet of our lives as Christians 'is held to be for the sake of mission', subsumed into utilitarian ends.[8] Milbank shows how ideology is aligned with secular models of management, funnelling vast resources, through competitive processes and targets, into multi-million-pound projects such as Resource Churches, and away from the front line of ordinary parish ministry.[9] This rebalance is evident in Truro diocese, which has nearly as many central staff as stipendiary parish clergy.[10] Leadership narrative reinforces this, such as Archbishop Stephen Cottrell's statement that 'if we led more Christ-like lives, then we would see our churches flourish', a worthy proposal but one with no basis in authentic Christian accounts of evangelism or growth. Archbishop Justin Welby's 2019 address to General Synod suggested: 'There is no magic answer. There is no single sentence, no single response that will enable the light to shine more brightly and force back these dark clouds… There has to be a portfolio of responses.'[11] In this, he comes close to diagnosing the problem, before jumping to a cure: do more. Such framing fuels unrealistic targets, such as doubling the number of children and young active disciples in the Church of England by 2030,[12] against an actual backdrop of 28 per cent decline.[13]

This anxiety breeds dishonesty and false expectations. The messaging around Bubble Church, a project from Southwark diocese that has engaged hundreds of families post-lockdown, provides a case study. A 2023 'Church support newsletter' opened with the story of Bubble Church leading a parish from 'zero children to over 100 children and families', and encouraged churches to follow the model.[14] There was a problem with the headline, however: it wasn't true. The parish's (publicly available) annual report demonstrates a first quarter 2020 (pre-Bubble Church) attendance of 40 children on a Sunday, alongside income considerably higher than most parishes. This is in no way a criticism of the project or parish, but instead shows how central institutions craft narratives of success, confusing encouragement with unrealistic or unattainable growth, while ignoring the

modest resources of most parishes. Similar dynamics are at work when children's choirs or cathedral Evensong are suggested as attainable models of growth, despite needing resources beyond most parishes. The anxiety drives unrealistic expectations, but it also requires competitive displays of success to compete in the marketplace of resources.

These projections cascade down. The *Times* 2023 Church of England survey showed that two-thirds of parish clergy expect their congregations to fall in numbers; only one in ten expect their congregations to grow; and one-third have seriously considered leaving ministry.[15] While these statistics cannot show causation, they do reveal the realism on the ground. Anecdotal experience of colleagues working with candidates for ordination has been that candidates often struggle with the question of how they would cope if their attendance declined, because decline is never presented to them as a possibility, merely a symptom of not working hard enough – even though, on a statistical basis, most parishes will decline in numbers.

The combination of diagnosing church decline as a failure of historical models of ministry and a lack of effort, along with unrealistic narratives of growth and success and competitive allocation of resources, has led to different models of church being made to feel that they are competing against each other. Rather than a balanced mixed ecology, we have something more like planting two plants alongside each other, expecting them to grow bigger than they are able to, while the tree in the corner sucks up the remaining resources in the garden; all the while, the head gardener is unable to recognize that winter has approached and so the conditions for growth are harder. Sir Robert Chote's 2022 review of strategic funding described the current processes as 'disruptive to the existing church ecology', leading to a 'lack of trust and the unity of purpose'.[16]

This pressure extends to laity. Milbank critiques the drive to turn lay people into unpaid church workers, discussing plans to start 10,000 lay-led congregations (launched at the same time as a separate plan to start 10,000 new worshipping communities, the coincidence perhaps suggesting the number 10,000 is plucked out of thin air)[17] as redefining the Reformation expansion of lay vocation as glorifying God in all work.[18] The strategy is not so much saying, as Luther would, that the farmer is as much glorifying God as the priest or monk; instead, it suggests that the farmer should spend less time farming and more time engaged in missional projects. Instead of church as the place that nurtures people for life and faith, the narrative suggests that we are holding back laity from 'mission', defined as activity for church growth, overlooking the reality of demanding lives ministering in work, family and community.

Alternative narratives

To locate the causes of church decline, we might look at a model such as Charles Taylor's work *A Secular Age*. Taylor distinguishes between different models of secularity: Secular 1, notably the separation between religion and state; Secular 2, 'the falling off of religious belief and practice'; and Secular 3, 'which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which … [b]elief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives.'[19] Taylor provides a genealogy of societal changes, from the medieval world defined by an enchanted cosmos, through the Reformation, which

individualized religious piety alongside a rejection of the superstitious, onwards to the modern era with an increasing sense of 'buffered identity' (impervious to the supernatural), working alongside socio-economic motives intent at driving order and industriousness. This led to the 'Great Disembedding', which gave primacy to the individual at the expense of the communal and transcendent.[20] Through these changes, he argues, we now live inside an *immanent frame*, where there is a 'natural' order contrasted to a 'supernatural' one, an 'immanent' world against a 'transcendent' one, created through western European theological ideas and changes, changing understandings of the self and identity, dovetailing with the growth of natural sciences.[21] In this world, 'exclusive humanism' can take hold:

> The rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true.[22]

This, according to Taylor, has been compounded as we have moved from the conformist early twentieth century, entering what he describes as the 'Age of Authenticity', where 'each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and ... it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority'.[23]

Andrew Root's 'Ministry in a Secular Age' series offers an extended dialogue with Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, asking how Taylor's insights might offer authentic modes of mission and ministry in the current age, particularly faith formation, congregational dis-ease, the problems of ordained ministry, and how churches face crisis, offering some limited proposals for how those in ministry might respond from *within* the immanent frame. Root's proposals do not attempt to 'fight' secularization, as if one could turn back the clock to a medieval enchanted reality; neither do they capitulate to a secular mindset that might be found in some twentieth-century liberal responses to the turmoil of decline. In *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, Root dialogues Taylor's work with Hartmut Rosa's work on resonance.[24]

Hartmut Rosa's *Resonance: a sociology of our relationship to the world* follows his previous work in exploring alienation and acceleration in late modernity, arguing that modern capitalism relies on constant growth and acceleration to reproduce itself, and that this changes the way we situate ourselves and relate in the world. This mode of being produces alienation from the natural world, from others, and ultimately from ourselves, so that subject and world confront each other with indifference or hostility. Even in a world where we have family, work and religion, these relationships no longer speak to us, leaving us lifeless or empty, ultimately leading to depression and burnout. Rosa pits resonance as the 'other' of alienation, a 'kind of relationship to the world' formed through affect and emotion, a way of relating where one's 'intrinsic interest' allows self-efficacy, 'in which subject and world are mutually affected and transformed'. He sees this as a 'responsive relationship', requiring

both sides to 'speak with their own voice' while 'remaining open enough to be affected or reached by the other'. For Rosa, resonance is a 'mode of relation' – one that can be found in horizontal axes (family, friends), diagonal axes (work, education) or vertical axes (nature, music, religion). All these things can produce alienation (for example, seeing work as a means to accumulate more), but they can also be moments of resonance, 'a vibrating wire between us and the world'.[25]

Rosa highlights religion as a particular site where resonance can be found along vertical, horizonal and diagonal axes: for example, in the Eucharist, with a deep vertical resonance between the individual and the divine, a horizonal resonance between the faithful communing together, and a diagonal resonance between the artefacts of bread, chalice and cross, each axis deepening and charging the other, rooted in the Trinitarian concept of *perichoresis*, a relational God. For Rosa, the Latin root of religion, *religare*, 'to connect, to bind', suggests a relationship 'not of alienation but of resonance': '[F]rom Solomon's plea to Jesus' cry on the cross, the Bible seems to be a singular document of human pleading, begging and praying, waiting and hoping, whispering and shouting for an answer.'[26] Prayer, for Rosa, is both inwardly and outwardly directed, where the self and the world become 'fluid', creating deep vibrations of resonance.

Root argues that in an age of acceleration, the Church is trying to emulate society (by doing more) in a desperate attempt to fill the void that a secular age leaves us with:

> What opens the church to despondency is that it is always trying to catch up, and we envision catching up as taking place inside or alongside technological change. Yet technological change is never disconnected from social change – and the timekeepers of Silicon Valley know this, which is what gives them such hubris, believing that a new app can change the world.[27]

Time has been hollowed out because '[r]evelation is encountered in the world; it is the unveiling of God's eternal being in time. But if the world is deadened and we feel only a faint connection to it, then believing the immanent frame is closed is the only obvious choice.'[28]

Root argues that cultures of 'doing more' have bought into a secular obsession with speed and resources; and so, as the Church continues to decline, it sees 'to do more' as the only option. But, Root argues, we can restore some sacredness to time: not by stopping, or putting our fingers in our ears, but by finding resonance.[29] Root proposes a church life centred around resonance that creates the space to rediscover the working of the Christ in each other, acknowledging that God can seem absent in our age, but that if we create space, acknowledge particularly our death moments, we discover God ministering. While this approach may feel to be a rather small one, in the light of the challenge the Church faces, resonance here does not mean simply having good conversations and seeing that as the entire work of the Christian body; instead, it offers a kind of organizing principle around which our entire mission and ministry can be reimagined and reconfigured, a principle that offers a genuine alternative to a secular world and allows transcendence to peek through.

Postscript

In 2024, I was part of a learning community of Church of England and Church of Norway dioceses, exploring contemporary mission and ministry, and across our differences the pressures of ministry in a secular age and the scarcity of resources were common threads. Through the encounter with each other and the work of Andrew Root, there was a striking sense of freedom in acknowledging that, despite good work in our congregations, secularization is outside our control, rather than a failure to work hard enough. This gave some permission to resist institutional narratives – and anxieties – and to recognize that drives to invest more resources or to work at hyper-speed leave our congregations tired and disaffected and make us – not God – the centre of our story. We need to find new ways to minister within the frame in which we find ourselves, not pretending that society is ready to come back to the Church if only we find the right way to invite them. The profound mode of resistance offered, and one that is a prerequisite to authentic prayer, was a deep listening which created resonance, allowing us to name the reality in which we find ourselves and to rewrite our own narrative, admitting that we are in a secular age (whatever theoretical framework one wishes to give as an explanation of this). This allowed us to notice where congregations and leaders feel fatigued, or unable to make sense entirely of the situation in which they find themselves, and, through all of this, to state that the providence of God is the overriding theological, ecclesiological, missiological framework. In the Church's history, renewal has always come not from strategy but from a return to the sources, which, from early monasticism to the Evangelical and Catholic revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has always involved a rediscovery of the poor, of Scripture, of the person of Christ, of the sacraments, of worship. Perhaps it is precisely in the frantic rush to do and grow that we might be doing the thing that is stopping us having the breathing space to find resonance, and in that to find the sources of new life.

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Notes

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