

What Went Wrong in England



Only 1.5% of the English population attends Anglican Sunday services, and a former Archbishop of Canterbury gives the church just one more generation before extinction. How did this happen?

Christianity is dead in England - or at least it could be in a generation, says former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey.

“In many parts of Britain churches are struggling, some priests are diffident and lack confidence; a feeling of defeat is around. [...] The burden seems heavy and joy in ministry has been replaced by a feeling of heaviness.”

His comments come in response to a report given at the Anglican Church’s recent General Synod which warned that shrinking congregations are an existential threat to the centuries-old national institution. According to the report, only 807,000 Englishmen attend Anglican services on a typical Sunday. That number represents just 1.5% of England’s population of 53 million.

In the land that built the beautiful Westminster Abbey, helped evangelize Europe, and inspired the Inklings, what went wrong?

The Irrelevance of Relevance

“[T]he Church of England is dying because it has opted for the course taken by liberal Protestantism,”

says Paul Gondreau, Professor of Theology at Providence College, “which is to say a course that conforms itself more and more to the modern secular world.”

“Rather than acting as an agent of evangelization, the Church of England, no doubt eager to demonstrate its modern ‘relevance’, has gone too far to the other extreme and has compromised its Christian identity (the ordination of openly homosexual ministers and the ordination of women provide two obvious examples). It is well known, for example, that the principle draw and defining element of Anglican liturgy is nothing at bottom theological, but aesthetic only. That the new Archbishop of Canterbury seems extremely favorably disposed to Catholicism, and even willing to take the Church of England in a more ‘Catholic’ direction, indicates that he sees the trend to secularism in the Church of England as spelling its doom.”

Academic Dean of Evangelization for the Diocese of Paterson Allan Wright also puts the blame for the decline of Christianity on Christians not staying true to the faith. “We can point to cultural changes and attitudes, an increased secular culture but more pointedly Christians themselves share in the downfall of Christianity through poor catechists, lack of family involvement in faith formation in the home and through Church leaders who seek the approval of the current social leadership rather than being disciples and witnesses to Christ.”

“The Church of England as an institution will survive future longevity due to well maintained endowments but the faith adhered to and died for by great leaders in the past is indeed dwindling. They have sold their souls to secular ideals and held tolerance as being the highest value in the land.”

Author John Zmirak sees the decline of the Church of England as part of the fallout from traumatic events in the 20th century. “Peter Hitchens does the best job of analyzing the death of Anglicanism, in his brilliant book *The Rage Against God*. He attributes much of the decline to the bitter suffering imposed by World War II, and the long economic stagnation that followed after it. The Anglican church was closely tied to the political establishment, the school system, the military and British patriotism, and in the grim postwar years, people became disillusioned with the whole lot.”

“They threw the baby Jesus out with the bathwater. It didn't help that the Anglican church was founded by Henry VIII to serve as an agency of the state. So any disdain for the state would also tar the church.”

Not Just Anglicans and Not Just England

But Catholics shouldn't feel too smug. Wright says the situation is bleak not only for Anglicans but also for Catholics and Christians in general across Europe. "Christianity, as practiced by both Catholics and Anglicans has been on a steady decline since 1990.... Across Europe the statistics of practicing Catholics in particular is under 5% which makes the estimates of Catholic attendance in the United States, about 23%, seem lavish."

"Christianity has already ceased being a force in politics and in the religious consciousness of people across Europe going so far as to even deny the role of Christianity in the history of Europe. When the European Union's constitution was being drawn up in 2004 there was a proposal to include a reference to Europe's Christian roots but it was, predictably, thrown out."

Zmirak agrees the Church of England is not the only Christian community with problems. "Outside of the Ordinate, which creamed off the most orthodox and zealous Anglicans and set them up in a safe place where the Catholic bishops couldn't wreck their liturgy, the Catholic Church in England is doing little better than the Anglicans - and only because Catholic immigrants keep coming from healthier countries such as Poland."

Though the number of practicing Catholics in England is small, Gondreau says his experience of English Catholicism was that it was thriving and growing. "Based on my experience of having lived in Oxford, England for 10 months recently, I would say, yes, the Church of England is dying in England, but not Christianity. Catholicism, in particular, remains rather vibrant (again, based on my experience) and continues to attract more and more members to it."

Let the New Evangelization Begin

"It is still the case that people are essentially looking for spiritual fulfilment," Lord Carey points out.

The Catholic Church can meet that need if Catholics maintain the integrity of the faith, says Gondreau. “What Catholics can learn is that we must remain true to ourselves, that is, true to our Gospel values and to the mission of the Church to evangelize an increasingly secular world. We sow the seeds of our own demise if we conform to the values of the modern secular world at the expense of Gospel values. It is madness to condone such obvious moral deficiencies as the homosexual lifestyle, particularly when they run contrary to the objective moral law and to unambiguous biblical teaching.”

Zmirak emphasizes the importance of maintaining the transcendent aspects of the faith. “We need to avoid identifying the church exclusively with worldly causes, whether it be economic egalitarianism, a particular monarchy, or a given ethnic group. Those ‘bad’ reasons for being a Catholic are brittle and fragile. They are easily eroded.”

Wright reminds us that the Catholic Church of late has been emphasizing the need for evangelization. “Last year Pope Benedict XVI gathered bishops for the Synod on the New Evangelization which encourages Catholics to return to the charism of our founder, Jesus Christ, to again focus on the Church's essential mission which is evangelization. If we do not share the Good News with renewed ‘ardor and vigor’ in new and traditional ways and allow the Holy Spirit to empower us for witness then we will soon be in the same situation as the Church of England.”

“As we eagerly anticipate Pope Francis' first apostolic exhortation titled *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), the message must be to return to the person of Jesus. While there is no perfect program for evangelization, there is a perfect person: Jesus.”

The following Aleteia Experts contributed to this article:

Paul Gondreau is a Professor of Theology at Providence College and is the Faculty Director of Providence College Center for Theology & Religious Studies. He is also an associate editor of the journal Nova et Vetera.

Allan F. Wright is the Academic Dean of Evangelization for the Diocese of Paterson, NJ.

*John Zmirak is the author, most recently, of *The Bad Catholic’s Guide to the Catechism*. His columns are archived at *The Bad Catholic’s Bingo Hall*.*

Brantly Millegan - UK Catholic/Mazur