

The Catholic practice is not in decline in the UK



I get the impression, unscientific as it is, that Catholic practice is not in decline. Since I inhabit the Westminster bubble, my local church is Westminster Cathedral in which is displayed the masked body of St John Southworth. It occasionally makes casual tourists jump a bit as they dawdle round taking selfies. I sometimes wonder what he thought of the fortunes of religion in England during his lifetime, which was cut short just as Oliver Cromwell was revving up the Protectorate. Even being an Anglican was hard enough in the 1650s. John Evelyn confided to his diary in 1656 an account of attending a Church of England service of Holy Communion broken up by soldiers, who interrogated him on how he “durst offend, & particularly be at Common prayers, which they told me was but the Masse in English”.

Just at the moment, when Westminster Cathedral is regularly full at Sunday Mass and sustains half-hour queues for Confession, I get the impression, unscientific as it is, that Catholic practice is not in decline. According to a report by John Bingham in *The Daily Telegraph*, the same can be said, with a little more scientific basis, of Christians in Britain at large. “New figures from Britain’s longest-running and most important barometer of general public opinion suggest that reports of the imminent death of Christianity may have been greatly exaggerated,” he wrote. He was referring to the *British Social*

Attitudes survey, which, from the responses of 4,328 adults, indicated that the “proportion of Britons who described themselves as Christian actually rose one percentage point in the last year from 42 per cent to 43 per cent”. As *The Tablet* noted last week, that was partly accounted for by a rise in the number of Catholics “from 8 to 9 per cent last year, the level it was last at in 2002”.

Well, “past performance is not an indicator of future returns”, as the financial advisers say. That cuts both ways with religious statistics: there is no inevitability in decline, nor need a revival last. No doubt

much of the Catholic growth, particularly in London, is helped by immigration, as it has been in previous eras.

In any case, you would never guess these healthy signs from a long piece in *The Observer* by Harriet Sherwood. The Church of England's "atrophy was graphically illustrated by data earlier this year showing that church attendance was set to continue falling for another 30 years. Today's figure of 18 people per 1,000 regularly attending church would drop to 10 per 1,000, with an 81-year-old eight times more likely to go to church than a 21-year-old." Does that mean, I wondered, that 51-year-olds are just as likely to go to church as each other, before progressing in piety towards the grave? Probably not.

But *The Observer's* Religion Correspondent put her black figures against a narrative of revival under Archbishop Welby of Canterbury, which might remind some of Labour's Cool Britannia under Tony Blair, "except, say critics, rather than taking the church into the mainstream, as Blair did with Labour, the focus on evangelism risks placing the church firmly on the fringe, in the hands of zealots! Zealots! That is an unfamiliar term in the modern Church of England. "One critic" – perhaps one of those already mentioned, who can say? – expanded on the dancing shadows of zealotry. "The diehards become more and more frenzied, while everyone else looks on in total incomprehension – and in many cases are repulsed."

Who are these repulsive frenzied diehards? *The Observer* quoted Martyn Percy, the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, saying that the Church of England "was in the grip of a 'small group of elite organisationally minded evangelicals'." That sounds like Harold Wilson's description of striking dockers' leaders in 1966 as "a tightly-knit group of politically-motivated men". The drift of the *Observer* article was that evangelicals (whose worship is, it explained, "characterised by rock music, swaying and arm waving") "risks alienating mainstream Christians". Perhaps, but I'm not sure that the label "evangelical" can't be applied to wider strands of spirituality, in Catholicism too, even that of Pope Francis. Nor is it as if CofE evangelicals walk naked as a sign through Westminster, as Samuel Pepys recorded Solomon Eccles doing, "with a chafing-dish of fire and brimstone burning upon his head, crying, 'Repent! Repent!'" That would certainly give the tourists something in front of which to take selfies.

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