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Holistic spirit

The Tablet Interview Linda Woodhead

One of Britain's leading sociologists of religion, Linda Woodhead, tells Theo Hobson of the vital choices the Church must make to survive



We all know what is going on in terms of Britain's religious culture. Churchgoing has been declining, yet "spirituality" seems to be increasingly popular. What is one to make of this? Upbeat bishops often point to this interest in spirituality as a sign of hope: it suggests a widespread aversion to materialism and atheism, a hunger for the sacred.

And that must mean, mustn't it, that a revival of "proper" religion is just round the corner?

Linda Woodhead's work helps us to think more clearly and honestly about what is going on. Instead of remaining satisfied with vague generalisations, she is determined to root the discussion in hard evidence. She is a sociologist of religion and has recently co-led a research project examining this shift in the popular conception of the sacred. Its findings will be about as welcome to the average bishop as a course of aromatherapy, but he ought to study them nevertheless.

When I ask Dr Woodhead, who is in her early forties, about her own religious roots, she says: "I grew up in rural Somerset, at a time when Christianity was still a central part of the culture. My parents were cultural Christians; to me it was an unquestioned part of life, that there was a God, that religion was provided by the Church." She went to a convent school, but not because of any family attachment to Catholicism: "It was a place for middle-class girls to learn nice manners. But it was a strongly Catholic atmosphere, hardly touched by Vatican II: lots of statues and Sacred Hearts."

In the early 1980s she studied theology at Cambridge, under Don Cupitt and Rowan Williams. After a PhD (in the Edwardian reception of Eastern religion), she taught at Ripon Cuddesdon, the Anglican ordination college. By

then she knew that her core interest was not theology but the sociology of religion. “I was always frustrated studying theology; it was so disembodied.” She moved on to Lancaster University, where she is now head of department and professor at the Department of Religious Studies, when she is not indulging her love of drag racing.

Her weighty tome of 2004, *An Introduction to Christianity*, concludes by questioning whether the social liberalisation of the Churches has ever really been more than half-hearted. The hierarchical habits of the major Churches serve to cut them off from the surrounding culture, she argues.

“I think the liberal experiment lost confidence and has now practically disappeared,” she says. “I think that’s insufficiently appreciated: there’s an idea that theology has just liberalised and liberalised, but actually since the 1980s theology has got more and more conservative, and the liberal voice has practically disappeared, in theology and the Church. This shift doesn’t really represent opinion in the Churches – most people in the pew are still sort of liberal-humanistic. So it’s a response by the leadership. It’s a fearful reaction to a very real threat – the Church is in serious trouble, and that’s how its public face is reacting. The problem is, there’s only a very niche market for a conservative Christianity, and that market won’t grow; it’s probably exhausted already.” So Christianity won’t become mainstream again by that means? “Never.”

Sociology of religion is largely concerned with defining “secularisation”. The old idea that developed societies move away from religion towards secular rationalism won’t wash any more – so what is going on? Woodhead’s approach to this question is to emphasise “the subjective turn” as the key cultural shift of recent history. It is a turn away from external authority and prescribed roles, and towards a belief in the freedom and uniqueness of the self. For Woodhead, it goes a long way to explaining two things: the decline of organised religion, and the rise of spiritualities that emphasise self-expression.

For her latest book, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, co-written with Paul Heelas, Woodhead and her team focused on Kendal in the Lake District, where they asked whether alternative spirituality has begun to compete with churchgoing. You might think that Kendal has little to offer in the way of pagan spirituality beyond a few Wordsworthian hikers: think again. It is rich in practitioners of feng shui, homeopathy, reiki, therapeutic massage, rebirthing, yoga, and various other things that promise spiritual healing. Every week hundreds of people participate in “the holistic milieu” by attending a yoga class or submitting to some form of New Age therapy. There are still many more churchgoers, five times as many, so a “spiritual revolution” has not occurred. But churchgoing is declining, and holistic culture is growing: if trends continue there will be a revolution in 30 years’ time.

Her account makes churchgoing seem more counter-cultural than mainstream, I suggest. “Yes, definitely. Christianity has become a counter-cultural world. That includes the Anglican Churches: what goes on in them is

strange to the majority of the population, and they are self-consciously counter-cultural; the sermons often talk about standing against the culture.”

She says that holistic spirituality is in some ways more culturally mainstream than Christianity: consider the “wellbeing” supplements in newspapers. Would she say that a spiritual revolution has already occurred in terms of mainstream public culture? “Probably yes, though I’m wary of treating ‘mainstream public culture’ as a single thing. It’s already dominant in female-focused cultures such as health and beauty, and magazine and book publishing, but there are other forms of public culture that strongly resist it. But young people are now more likely to have heard of feng shui, chi and yoga than the Trinity, the Ascension and the Resurrection. In everyday discourse Christian concepts have become rare.”

However, Christians are often surprisingly open to the holistic, says Woodhead. And Catholics are especially open. “Catholicism is more open to the body, different spiritual powers, sacred sites. Protestantism eliminated a lot of that, and holistic spirituality goes back to it. So it sometimes looks like a return to Catholic forms of religiosity, but without the Church.”

Of course there is not a simple opposition between Church, which emphasises external authority, and holistic spirituality, which emphasises the subjective. Many forms of Church, such as the charismatic movement, are expressions of the subjective turn: they put huge emphasis on each believer’s experience and spiritual growth. These forms of Church are doing comparatively well. Their trick is to appeal on two fronts, Woodhead explains. They appeal to the desire for orderly community, for a tight counter-culture that resists the subjective turn, and they also express the subjective turn in their focus on the unique development of each soul. But surely no form of Christian Church can go very far down the “subjective” road, for all Churches need to appeal to some form of external authority? “Well, some forms emphasise the working of the Holy Spirit in each person; authority is located within. But yes, the vast majority of church culture is wary of too much subjectivity.”

Many in the Churches would say that this subjective turn sounds like a fancy name for selfishness – it’s about putting one’s own inclinations first, and neglecting the common good. How would she try to persuade such people that it’s less simple than that, and that they should be trying to see the subjective turn more positively? “I’d say: whose common good is it that you’re talking about, and why do people leaving the Churches, and perhaps getting involved in the holistic milieu, not feel that it’s their common good? Perhaps your common good is actually quite a narrow common good; and there’s a big group of people, mostly women, for whom it hasn’t been very good, and you have to understand why they are going elsewhere for the spiritual, which they’re still deeply engaged with. There’s a big gender element: I think the Church needs to be much more aware about the message it has given women about being selfless, and think hard about why many women feel that’s an unfair burden that’s been placed on them.”

Does she feel she has an agenda: to show the Churches the seriousness of their predicament? “Yes. I think ... the thing that appeals about spirituality is that it gives you space to reflect and be silent, and engage with a mystery – that’s been edged out. There’s an anxiety to tell people more precisely what we believe, to produce more words ... Eastern Orthodoxy has become popular partly because people don’t understand the language the liturgy is in; they can engage on a more emotional level. Maybe that’s how the Catholic Church did so well for so long.”

Theo Hobson is an author and theologian.

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