

WHO PRAYS? A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Sociologists of religion have sometimes attempted to analyse patterns of private and public prayer in Britain, but have seldom examined the significance of these patterns for society as a whole. That is to say, evidence is gradually amassing about the extent of private prayer and public worship, and about which sections or groups within society are most or least likely to participate in them. Yet this evidence often remains uninterpreted.

This article will fall into two parts. In the first part I will examine some of the statistical evidence related to private and public prayer in Britain. This evidence results from a number of questionnaire-surveys that have been conducted in Britain over the last twenty years. Their value lies chiefly in their ability to explore variables, rather than in their ability to give an 'objective' picture of how many people actually pray in Britain. This point is quite crucial, but is all too often ignored. Questionnaire-surveys on personal issues, such as people's religious beliefs and practices, are always faced with the difficulty of allowing for bias. It is generally assumed that people tend to become more 'religious' when they are confronted with an interviewer asking questions about religion than they actually are in their daily lives. Alternatively, they refuse to answer the questions at all. In one recent survey on religion¹ only half of the sample were actually interviewed, and as a result the data from that particular survey are difficult to interpret, since it is not known whether or not those who refused to be interviewed differed significantly in their religious beliefs and practices from those who did not. Nevertheless, the questionnaire-survey remains an indispensable tool for measuring such variables as age, sex and class.

In the second part I will draw some tentative conclusions about the significance of these findings for people's attitudes in general. The problem of 'secularization' is particularly relevant here, since many assume that religion is on the decline in Britain, and that private and public prayer are becoming increasingly irrelevant to the majority of the population. It is clearly important for all those who are seriously concerned with liturgy to know how far society views their concern as epiphenomenal.

I

Church-going statistics are better established for England than they are for Scotland. Sadly there has as yet been little sociological

research into religion in Scotland, despite the unique situation that the Church of Scotland represents as 'a national church which is established yet free'.² W. S. F. Pickering estimates that whereas about 36% of the English population attended church on a non-festival Sunday in 1851 about 10% would represent the current situation.³ However, he does agree with David Martin's suggestion⁴ that about double that number may attend church at least once a month. The most recent survey, though, conducted by the Opinion Research Centre poll in September of 1972, suggested that only 3% of the sample actually attended church on the previous Sunday.⁵

On the basis of his 1959 survey John Highet⁶ estimated those who attended church at least once a week in Scotland to be as follows:

<i>Denominational grouping</i>	<i>Estimated weekly attendance</i>	<i>% adult population</i>	<i>% church membership</i>
Presbyterian	472,160	13.5	22.8
Other Non-R.C. Churches	104,540	3.0	5.0
Roman Catholic	334,300	9.6	16.1
TOTAL	911,000	26.0	44.0

Highet's figures are estimates and were derived, not from a questionnaire-survey of a sample of the population at large, but from a survey of ministers. As a result they may be somewhat over-estimated. Nevertheless, it seems clear that church-attendance figures are higher for Scotland than for England.

It seems likely, however, that church attendance may be declining in Scotland. Certainly the communicant roll for the Church of Scotland has shown a significant pattern of decline during this century, as the following chart shows:⁷

CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

<i>Date</i>	<i>Total on rolls</i>	<i>% total adult population</i>
1901	1,163,594	46.0
1921	1,277,634	43.6
1931	1,280,620	41.3
1941	1,268,839	38.1
1951	1,273,027	36.5
1961	1,290,617	36.7
1970	1,154,211	33.3

In addition, total admissions to the communicant roll, baptisms, Sunday School scholars and Bible Class pupils, within the Church

of Scotland, have all at least halved during the course of this century.⁸ By 1971, Peter Sissons' Falkirk survey suggested that an estimated 8% of Church of Scotland members attended church every Sunday, whereas 26% attended church at least once a month.⁹

The almost universal finding of both English and Scottish surveys is that the variables of age, sex and class are directly relevant to church attendance. Pickering expresses this as follows: 'The person least likely to be found in the churches is a married man, 24-45 years of age, of unskilled occupation, living in a large urban area.'¹⁰

Perhaps the most confusing piece of evidence relates to those who claim to watch religious programmes on television. The 1970 ITA survey suggested that 35% of the population said that they 'often saw' *Songs of Praise*, 20% *Meeting Point*, 16% the *Sunday Service*, and only 8% the *Epilogue*. By contrast, only 39% claimed to watch *Coronation Street*.¹¹ Bryan Wilson dismissed this evidence with the observation that one can never be sure how attentive viewers are when they watch these programmes.¹² More to the point in the present context is the question of whether or not *Songs of Praise* is to be identified as a form of worship. Most of those who responded to the ITA survey thought that it was a 'religious' programme, though they did not see it as a substitute for going to church. Nevertheless, it remains a fact that it is precisely the non-sacramental forms of evening worship which have declined the fastest in Britain. In England it is particularly the Methodists and Congregationalists who have declined most in this way. It is not possible for the sociologist to say with any certainty whether the relative popularity of programmes like *Songs of Praise* is a cause or an effect of this pattern of decline. Yet the popularity cannot simply be ignored in any survey of prayer.

Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, the practice of private prayer apparently persists in Britain at a time when public prayer does not. The 1964 ABC survey¹³ showed that 43% of the sample claimed to say their prayers 'regularly'. Men (33%) were less inclined to pray 'regularly' than women (53%) and the working classes (42%) slightly less than the upper classes (48%). Churchgoers were almost twice as likely to say prayers 'regularly' as nominal church members.

The 1971 Birmingham survey¹⁴ showed a similar pattern, as the following chart shows.

It is clear from this that people are almost twice as likely to say private prayers regularly as public worship, and that females are almost twice as likely to participate in both as males.

The discrepancy between public and private prayer and between the practices of men and women was highlighted again by the 1972 Opinion Research Centre poll. This poll suggested that, whereas

BIRMINGHAM SURVEY

Sex and Church Attendance

<i>Sex</i>	<i>Regular</i>	<i>Irregular</i>	<i>Not in last year</i>
Male	20%	32%	48%
Female	36%	27%	37%

Sex and Prayer

<i>Sex</i>	<i>Weekly</i>	<i>Occasionally</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Prayer very important</i>
Male	37%	19%	20%	24%	26%
Female	56%	27%	10%	7%	42%

only 3% of the sample said that they visited a church on the previous Sunday, 28% claimed that they prayed then. Only 2% of the men visited a church, in contrast to 4% of the women; 20% of the men claimed that they prayed, in contrast to 36% of the women. This poll also suggested that age determined the extent of private prayer: whereas only 17% of the 16-24 age-group said that they prayed on the previous day, 55% of over-65 age-group made the same claim. Churchgoing too was directly related to age.

To summarize these findings, it is apparent from the recent surveys that far more people are inclined to say private prayers and watch *Songs of Praise* on television than are prepared to go to church. It seems likely that more people go to church in Scotland than in England, but in both countries figures are declining in most of the major denominations. Further, it appears that women do seem more inclined than men both to go to church and to say private prayers. In addition, it seems that age and class both have a direct relation to private prayer and public worship; the elderly and upper class are more inclined to participate than the young and working class.

II

What significance do these findings have for those who are interested in the general attitudes of the British? More specifically, how relevant are they to the assumption that Britain is currently undergoing a process of 'secularization'? These questions relate to the very social context of liturgy.

A caveat is necessary at this point. It is important to state that, as with the psychology of religion,¹⁵ the sociology of religion is not concerned with the validity as such of religious beliefs and practices. Doubtless sociologists are seldom value-free, yet few of them today

would consider that verification or falsification of particular ideologies is a legitimate part of their discipline.

Three features of the evidence seem particularly relevant to the aims of this article.

(1) It seems clear that the Roman Catholic Church in Britain is declining at a slower rate to that of most other non-Roman Catholic Churches. In addition, certain smaller religious groups, such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, may in fact be growing. Nevertheless, an over-view of religious bodies in Britain leaves the strong impression that their attendance rates are dropping steadily, and have been dropping during most of this century. It is tempting to see this as clear evidence of 'secularization'.

However, too facile conclusions at this stage tend to be a-historical.¹⁶ Something is known about church attendance during the nineteenth century, but little is known about that in the eighteenth century. In addition, S. Yeo's research in Reading suggests the possibility that *all* voluntary associations, whether religious or not, may have declined during the last century.¹⁷ Decline in church-going would then appear to be an associational, rather than religious, decline. Doubtless this will provide little comfort for those concerned with public worship, but it does at least suggest the possibility that general attitudes in Britain are not actually antagonistic towards such worship.

(2) This impression is confirmed by an analysis of the comparative popularity of *Songs of Praise* and related hymn-singing programmes on television. Since most people do in fact identify such programmes as 'religious' the usual claim that this popularity is simply an expression of 'nostalgia' may be misplaced.

It is possible instead that the relative popularity of hymn-singing programmes, as opposed to religious discussion programmes, may indicate a shift in general attitudes. The shift may be away from the dimension of belief toward that of experience. Recent questionnaire-surveys do seem to indicate that general beliefs are becoming less 'orthodox' in relation to Christianity. Yet the evidence from Television and from a number of contemporary movements – such as the Pentecostals and even perhaps the drug culture – suggests (no more) that there is a current emphasis on religious experience.

(3) The persistence of private prayer may also be evidence against particular theories of 'secularization'. Again the churches may not be too happy about this persistence outside a liturgical or community context. Theologically it may be possible to identify it as 'superstition'. Sociologically, however, it is more important, since theories of 'secularization' usually, though not always,¹⁸ assume that Western man is becoming progressively more 'rational' and less dependent on any transcendent agency.

It is possible, though, that religion in Britain is increasingly becoming a matter of private rather than public concern. The individual it seems is more likely today to pray or worship on his own or in front of television rather than in church. This trend may or may not persist. It is too easy to assume that the current decline in church attendance is an irreversible trend: the surprising increase in church attendance in the United States during the mid-1950s should warn against such an assumption. Likewise it is too easy to assume that higher attendance rates, whether in the U.S.A. today or in Victorian Britain, are correlated with a high degree of religiousness or religious activity.

To summarize, the findings of sociologists on public and private prayer may supply a mixed blessing for the liturgist. On the one hand, the persistence of private prayer as opposed to public worship must surely offend notions of corporate or community worship. However, on the other, it seems unlikely that the British are actually antagonistic towards the liturgical enterprise, contrary to some theories of 'secularization'. It is for the liturgist to decide how to act in this situation; the sociologist can only suggest what the situation is.

NOTES

1. G. K. Nelson and R. A. Clews, *Mobility and Religious Commitment* (1971).
2. John Highet in *Western Religion*, ed. Hans Mol (1972), p. 249.
3. W. S. F. Pickering in *The Social Sciences and the Churches* (1972), ed. C. L. Mitton.
4. David Martin, *A Sociology of English Religion* (1967).
5. *The Sunday Times*, 22 April 1973.
6. John Highet, *The Scottish Churches* (1960).
7. See *The Church of Scotland Yearbook* 1972, etc.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Ph.D. Thesis, Edinburgh 1972.—Now published—Peter L. Sissons, *The Social Significance of Church Membership in the Burgh of Falkirk* (1973).
10. Pickering, *op. cit.*, p. 195.
11. *Religion in Britain and Northern Ireland*, ITA (1970).
12. Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (1966).
13. *Television and Religion*, ABC (1965).
14. Nelson and Clews, *op. cit.*
15. Cf. A. V. Campbell in *Liturgical Review*, Nov. 1972.
16. Cf. David Martin, *The Religious and the Secular* (1969).
17. See David Martin in *Theology*, Feb. 1973.
18. Cf. P. E. Glasner in *op. cit.* ed. Mitton, note 3

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