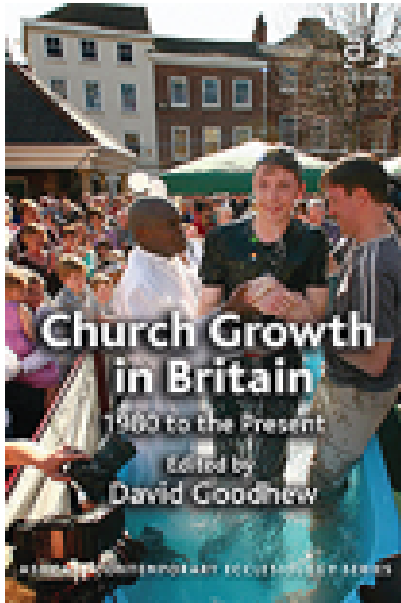




BOOK REVIEW: CHURCH GROWTH IN BRITAIN: 1980 TO THE PRESENT, EDITED BY DAVID GOODHEW



One of the commendations for this book says, 'I have been waiting for someone to write this book.' I would almost echo that sentiment. There is certainly a need for books on this topic. This book almost meets the need.

The book consists of fourteen detailed case studies that look at various examples of growth across a wide spectrum of churches in the four nations of Britain. A good proportion of the researchers are professional researchers and others are astute and knowledgeable observers of the church life that they describe. Their contribution needs to be taken seriously.

One section concentrates on examples of church growth amongst mainstream churches in England, a second on the growth of the new churches which includes migrant or black majority churches, while the remaining material concentrates on the nations of Scotland, Wales and

Northern Ireland. Each of these three major sections are given a helpful introduction and conclusion by the editor David Goodhew.

Inevitably, the individual studies vary a good deal in style and quality and some readers who are already specialists in the field of church growth might feel that they already know some of the subject areas fairly well. But nevertheless the composite case that is presented deserves attention.

What is that case? In essence the argument offered is intended as a partial antidote to, or even protest against, the narrative of decline in the British church. The weight of the decline argument, flowing as it does from the broader secularization theory of Western society, sometimes leads to the caricature that the last Christian in Britain will need to turn out the lights in the last place of worship, some time in the middle of the 21st century, if not sooner.

David Goodhew makes the point in his introduction that there is something strange about the reluctance of theologians and church leaders to address the issues of numerical and institutional decline. It is almost as if church leaders feel that there is something so inevitable about decline that it is hardly worth offering any resistance. Attention turns rather to questions of institutional re-organisation to take account of shrinking resources of money, clergy and congregations.

The overall case made by Goodhew and his team of writers is not that the church has been uniformly growing since 1980 and that somehow we have failed to notice, so much as to make the case that the picture of uniform decline is not accurate either. The picture is much more variegated and this book makes the case that there are some significant parts of the church that have been growing and that this reality has largely been unnoticed and undocumented. This is an attempt to begin a more serious study of that growth.

One reason for the difficulty in documenting growth, is that it has occurred beyond the mainstream church. In other cases, where growing churches belong to larger denominations, their growth becomes subsumed in the broader statistics which describe very serious decline. Still other growing congregations are part of groups that are so new that they are unknown and therefore not included in “official” statistics. There are also many completely new, independent congregations for which there is no counting mechanism.

In short much of the growth is “under the radar” and this book highlights the need for different or additional research methodologies than those that are often employed to track church growth and decline. The present position therefore is one in which decline and growth exist side by side and this is exactly what one might expect in circumstances where a complex institution – the church in the west – is in process of renewing itself. The figures suggest that the church in the greater part of the 18th century – the century of revival – was actually in overall decline for most of that period.

Readers and prospective readers may well wish to read the review of *Church Growth in Britain* by the sociologist Steve Bruce, which is on the Amazon web site. Bruce is substantially cited in the book and as the major proponent of the secularization thesis in the UK, he has a good deal to say about the content of the book, not all of which is flattering. It is clear that the secularization thesis is rather suspect at the moment so although his comments are very valuable, especially at a technical level, it is hard to resist the thought that he has a substantial axe to grind.

Callum Brown’s case that Britain is no longer Christian still holds weight in relation to influence around the public square however. The huge falls in overall church attendance are disturbing and will not be reversed quickly even if they now show signs of halting. However Brown, Bruce and others need to take account of *Church Growth in Britain*, along with other studies, as early pointers to the possibility that a huge part of our national life – the Christian Church – is in the process of a significant movement of renewal and regeneration which will have ramifications for the whole of society in years to come.



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