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3. Why Religious History Matters: Perspectives from 1851

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‘The Sea of Faith’

In the early 1980s it seemed easy for both academics and the media to characterize religion as a steadily receding and increasingly marginal force in human affairs. A quarter of a century later, despite the specific reality of continuing decline in British church attendances, overall perceptions have changed very substantially. Although committed adherents of the churches are dwindling in numbers, the pronouncements of their leaders on political and moral issues, whether the Iraq war or bioethics, have gained a high public profile. In 1989 Muslims reacted with great hostility to Salman Rushdie’s recently published and allegedly blasphemous novel *The Satanic Verses*, thus giving decisive notice to secular liberals that religion was pivotal to the culture of ethnic minorities in Britain. In 1997, the response to Princess Diana’s death indicated that, despite popular British ambivalence towards traditional Christianity, alternative spiritualities were widespread.

Above all, although the situation in Britain remained variegated, in the 1990s religious issues moved increasingly to the centre of the world stage. The explosion of the ‘Rushdie affair’ in the same year, 1989, as the fall of the Berlin Wall was symbolic of a trend that had begun with the Iranian revolution of 1978. Before the turn of the millennium, not only the resurgence of political Islam, but also the influence of the ‘new Christian right’ in the United States, the growth of Hindutva nationalism in India, and the increasing social importance of Pentecostalism in Africa, Asia and Latin America all belied previous assumptions that religion would retreat to marginality in a modernized and secularized world. Then, as the new century dawned, terrorists claiming Islamic inspiration stunned the world with their suicide attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 and on the London Underground on 7 July 2005.

There is currently considerable confusion and doublethink regarding the trajectory of religion in the contemporary world. It is possible to argue, depending on one’s geographical and confessional frame of reference, that religion is either resurgent or declining, and that religion itself is either a major world problem or a panacea for other difficulties. The effect of 9/11 and 7/7 has been to change the debate from one primarily of academic and insider interest, to one that is perceived to be a matter of major public concern, and moreover one that opens up highly disturbing possibilities. In that respect it has significant parallels with the recent foregrounding of public concern

over climate change. Indeed anxieties over religious change and over climate change may well show common patterns of thought and collective insecurity, grounded in underlying anxiety about the stability and long-term viability of the current social order. It will be argued in this essay that an informed historical perspective has much to contribute to reasoned engagement with such concerns.

In 'Dover Beach', first published in 1867 but probably written in June 1851,¹ Matthew Arnold evoked a world in which the tide of faith was already retreating:

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright garment furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar ... (Ricks 1999: 453)

Today there is no consensus as to whether the tide is going in, or out, or on the turn; but there is a consciousness that there are some vicious eddies and rip currents around. At the end of the poem Arnold changed his metaphor with a chilling allusion to the ancient battle between the Athenians and the Syracusans at Epipolae in Sicily described in Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War (Thucydides 1973: 358–60). This fight took place at night, with the soldiers unable to see what was going on. In the consequent chaos and confusion, there were unnecessary Athenian casualties, a classical parallel for what would nowadays be called a 'friendly fire' incident.

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight
Where ignorant armies clash by night. (Ricks 1999)

The lapse of time between composition and publication altered perceptions of these lines. By 1867, in the wake of the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and of controversy over liberal theology in the Church of England, they appeared to be a comment on the existential chaos arising from the decline of traditional religion. In 1851, however, when Christianity still seemed very much in the ascendant but was bitterly divided, they were more likely to have been intended as an observation on the perplexing internecine struggles of contemporary believers. Arnold's evocation of 'ignorant armies' clashing by night may therefore aptly be applied to characterize attitudes to religion in the early twenty-first-century world. There is a collective confusion and fearfulness about religious commitments and influences that are not adequately understood. Actions intended to calm or neutralize religious difficulties have a disconcerting tendency to inflame them further.

Past and present: parallels and differences

Let us look more closely at Britain in the early 1850s as a vantage point from which to view the early 2000s. Three features of these years are worthy of particular attention: the 1851 Religious Census offers a comparator for present-day religious practice; strong anti-Catholicism bears a striking resemblance to contemporary Islamophobia; and exploration of the interface between religion and national consciousness stimulates an enhanced understanding of current debates over citizenship, the nature of the United Kingdom and its role in the wider world.

First, the 1851 Religious Census was a survey, unique until very recent times, of every identified place of worship in Britain and of attendances on 30 March 1851. The surviving documentation consists of printed parliamentary reports containing copious statistical tables covering the whole of Great Britain, and most of the original manuscript returns for England and Wales (those for Scotland have disappeared) which still survive in the National Archives. There are numerous limitations in the data, and problems with interpretation, but it is still an invaluable document.

The Religious Census indicates that overall between a third and a half of the British population attended Christian worship on the Census Sunday, with a few thousand Jews present on the preceding Sabbath. Participation was thus very substantially higher than present-day rates (6.3 per cent in 2005),² but it also fell a long way short of universal. Indeed when the results were published three years later contemporaries were alarmed at the extent of non-attendance, especially in working-class districts. Horace Mann, the official responsible for compiling the report, coined the memorable phrase ‘unconscious Secularists’ (*Census of Great Britain 1851* 1853: clviii) to characterize the attitudes of the absentees. He argued that their non-participation did not generally arise from conscious opposition to Christianity, but rather from the distractions and preoccupations of the ‘passing hour’, which meant that organized religious activity was not a priority for them. He might well have been describing still widespread attitudes in contemporary Britain, where opinion poll evidence indicates that the level of professed Christian or at least supernatural belief greatly exceeds actual church attendances. Awareness that such a state of mind has a long history is important in qualifying the facile but influential assumption that it is a distinctive feature of a ‘postmodern’ and ‘post-Christian’ culture.

Research on the 1851 Religious Census is also important in revealing the highly diverse particularities of regional and local religious practice (Wolffe 2005).³ One standard statistic derived from the Census, the Index of Attendance, shows total attendances as a proportion of population. Double-counting of people who went to church more than once meant that this figure could exceed 100 per cent. To some extent the census data confirms conventional assumptions about the negative effect of industrialization and urbanization on religious observance. For example, some predominantly

agricultural counties such as Bedfordshire, with an Index of Attendance (IA) of 104.6, and Buckinghamshire, with an IA of 87.3, were highly observant. Forty miles to the south, in already highly urbanized Middlesex (IA 37.2), there was much lower church attendance. However, the figures for Herefordshire (49.0) and the West Riding of Yorkshire (52.9) should immediately serve to check simplistic generalization. Crude urban/rural, industrial/agricultural, 'modern'/'premodern' dichotomies give us little help in explaining why attendance was dramatically lower in Herefordshire than in Bedfordshire, and even somewhat lower than in industrial Yorkshire.

The closer one looks at the Census the more complex and variegated the picture appears. Mappings of patterns of attendance and their denominational distribution at registration district or parish level tend to look like patchwork quilts with no straightforward socio-economic explanations for the significant differences between nearby localities. Why for example, in North Yorkshire, was attendance in the Bedale registration district (IA 79.1) more than 20 per cent higher than in the seemingly very similar Northallerton district (IA 57.0) immediately to the east? Why were there significant variations in attendance between different parts of the densely populated West Riding textile conurbation? For example, inner Leeds had an IA of 50.9, but the suburbs only 45.0, whereas the nearby town of Dewsbury was much higher at 62.9. The answers to such questions require study of the detailed contingencies of previous local history and events, geographies and personalities. When we bring other documentary evidence into the picture, it becomes apparent that not only did the snapshot of this particular Sunday reveal very different pictures in particular localities, but that medium-term trajectories were often also different. Congregations were growing in one village while they were stagnant or declining in another nearby similar settlement.

The importance of studying organized religion in its local context may seem obvious once the point is made, but it is too often forgotten in more general assessments. Historical legacies can be very longstanding, for example in the physical siting and layout of places of worship. They continue to exercise a significant influence on present-day religious behaviour. Moreover, in view of the frequently formative role of churches and chapels in the development of village and urban settlements, such awareness also informs appreciation of the local heritage and its role in contemporary community life. When read carefully alongside other evidence, the Census can yield valuable clues to other aspects of religious practice – for example the frequency with which individuals attended Sunday worship – that enable better understanding of the role of churches and of Christian belief in people's lives. Awareness of complex local variation in the past alerts the observer to look out for it in the present, where indeed motives for active practice of religion continue to be diverse and where numerous instances of successful growing churches can be obscured by overall statistics of Christian decline. Are such varying local experiences specific to their context, or do they suggest alternative wider

potentialities for a future in which organized Christianity recovers some lost ground? The incidence of Islam and of other faiths is also, like that of Roman Catholicism in the nineteenth century, highly geographically specific, and needs to be carefully mapped if its impact and significance are to be properly understood.

A second feature of the early 1850s is highlighted by the fact that at the very time that the Religious Census was being conducted, many days of parliamentary time were being devoted to debate on the Ecclesiastical Titles Act, the sole purpose of which was to make the titles of Roman Catholic bishops illegal.⁴ This somewhat surreal climax of Victorian anti-Catholicism had been provoked by the Pope's creation (or, from a Catholic point of view, restoration) of a hierarchy of bishops with territorial titles. Hostile Protestants viewed this action as a carving up of English territory by a foreign power. The analogies with present-day suspicions of Muslims are striking. Exploration of this historical perspective, as well as analysis of the long-term pattern of interactions between Christianity and Islam, hence offers a valuable enhancement to the growing social scientific literature on Islamophobia.

Roman Catholics were a small and semi-invisible minority in early nineteenth-century Britain. Then in 1829 Catholic Emancipation gave them something close to civil equality. Migration from Ireland gathered momentum in the following two decades and they became a much more numerous and conspicuous presence. Similarly, there was a small Muslim community in Britain from at least the late nineteenth onwards, but only in the 1970s and 1980s did Muslims, now much more numerous, develop a visible public profile.

A small minority of nineteenth-century Catholics, like a small minority of early twenty-first-century Muslims, were indeed dangerously alienated from the British state because of its longstanding repression of the political aspirations of their co-religionists in Ireland. And Catholics like Muslims appeared to have divided loyalties because of their recognition of an extra-territorial spiritual tie to the papacy. They also represented a genuine spiritual challenge: nineteenth-century Catholic leaders dreamed of the reconversion of England; contemporary Muslims also seek conversions from the majority community and aspire to develop an Islamic vision of society. In both cases, however, the extent of popular antagonism became grossly disproportionate to the objective threat. Victorian Protestants were apt to see a Jesuit conspirator in every inoffensive professing Catholic; just as some are likely to perceive every contemporary Muslim as at least a potential terrorist. Sexual undercurrents also run deep. Both groups were associated with practices seen as fundamentally unnatural by Western cultural Protestants: celibacy in the case of Catholics, and arranged marriage and the supposed repression of women among Muslims. In both cases, too, anxieties have a significant apocalyptic dimension: the nineteenth-century expansion of Catholicism was often interpreted as a manifestation of evil powers foretold

in the biblical Book of Revelation; contemporary Islamophobics perceive Muslim growth as presaging the collapse of existing Western society.

In a pamphlet published in 1852, John MacGregor, secretary of the Protestant Alliance, envisaged a future in 1900 in which Britain would be controlled by over a thousand district courts of Inquisition, English replaced by Anglo-Latin and the satirical magazine *Punch* suppressed (MacGregor 1852). In 1865 James Wylie articulated the views of many when he wrote that 'the civil liberty of the country is at this hour in very great peril' from the perceived aggression of the papacy (Wylie 1865: iv). A century-and-a-half later, it is true that Catholicism is still perceived as somewhat distinctive and the papacy's authoritarian and conservative tendencies are regarded with concern in some quarters. Nevertheless, even the most forceful critics of recent popes would take a much milder view of their potential influence. Contemporary recognition of the exaggerated and irrational nature of much Victorian antagonism to Catholicism should thus stimulate a caution towards similarly alarmist views of the future impact of Islam. It is especially important to place such concerns in due proportion because they are given credibility by influential academic commentators, notably Samuel Huntington, with his scenario of a 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington 1996), and Niall Ferguson, with his endorsement of the view that growing Muslim influence could see Europe transformed into 'Eurabia' during the course of this century (Ferguson 2004).

There is, though, one very significant contrast. Nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism was a multifaceted phenomenon, but its central driving force was Protestant belief. Conviction derived originally from the sixteenth-century Reformation view that Rome's doctrinal teachings and religious practices were fundamentally erroneous and spiritually corrupting. By contrast contemporary Islamophobia, and indeed residual anti-Catholicism, evident for example in the parliamentary controversy in 2008 over the Human Fertilization and Embryology Bill, is much more secular in its ethos. Huntington, Ferguson and others perceive a clash between Islam and Christianity, but they do so from a perspective of attachment to what Sir Winston Churchill in 1940 called 'Christian civilization' (Robbins 1985: 279) rather than from the personal theological and faith commitments that inspired nineteenth-century anti-Catholics. Moreover, the ideological Protestantism that characterized mid-nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism was bound up with positive assertion of a 'Britishness' that had been a central strand in the forging together of the nation in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, present-day Islamophobia lacks such strong links to a focused religio-nationalist ideology: while the rhetoric of groups such as the British National Party and the English Defence League includes appeals to residual Christian identity, their underlying ethos is a secular one.⁵

Contemporary official Christian leaders, for their part, have generally appeared to be seeking rapprochement rather than confrontation with Islam.

In 1991 George Carey explicitly addressed other faiths in his enthronement sermon as Archbishop of Canterbury, saying 'I trust I can listen to your story and respect your integrity, even though having listened I may still want to present to you, as to all, the claims of my Lord' (British Council of Churches 1991: 17). More recently, in February 2008, his successor Rowan Williams spoke positively of the possibility of allowing some kind of limited space for *shar'ia* law in relation to Muslim communities in Britain, framing his argument by reference to the established accommodations already existing for other religious communities, for example, in allowing Christian medical professionals conscientiously to refuse to be involved with performing abortions (Williams 2008). The widespread hostile reaction that greeted a scholarly and nuanced lecture, in which the Archbishop had already anticipated and addressed most of the potential objections, was very revealing of the force of contemporary secular prejudice against Islam.

A third prominent feature of Britain in the early 1850s was strong links between Christianity and national consciousness. Following the assertion of Protestantism in the Ecclesiastical Titles Act of 1851, the Duke of Wellington's funeral in 1852 was a spectacular pageant bringing together the religious and military resonances in mournful celebration of the final passing of the era of the Napoleonic Wars. Then in 1854, the Crimean War broke out, with the subsequent course of the conflict marked by national days of prayer and a seemingly perverse sense that national mission was being advanced amidst the messy military realities.

During the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries British national consciousness, and indeed more strident forms of imperialist and nationalist self-assertion, continued in general to grow out of Christianity rather than to be in conflict with it. The monarchy gave particular focus to that linkage of the secular and sacred. The Duke of Clarence, Queen Victoria's grandson who died in 1892 at the age of twenty-eight, was cast as an unlikely St George in the stained glass window of Sand Hutton village church in the Vale of York (Wolffe 2000: plate 9). The connections of religion, monarchy and nation were particularly apparent at events such as the Diamond Jubilee and death of Queen Victoria, and the interment of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey in 1920, at which George V was chief mourner (Wolffe 2000: 222–42, 261–4). It still appeared plausible at the time of the coronation of 1953 to describe it, in a serious academic journal, as 'a great act of national communion' (Shils and Young 1953).

Since the 1960s, however, declining conventional Christian observance has been paralleled by a decline in popular enthusiasm for the monarchy. These processes had a common root in a weakening sense of collective overall British identity. Indian independence in 1947 and the dismantling of most of the remainder of Britain's overseas empire in the 1960s left a more introverted and insecure nation at home. From the 1960s onwards nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales gathered momentum. They

manifested a substantially more secular ethos than their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century antecedents which were primarily rooted in the distinctive religious cultures of the two nations. In Ireland, north and south, church attendances remained much higher and the sectarian roots of the Troubles in Northern Ireland gave religion a consistently high political profile. Even there, however, religious influences appear to have receded somewhat in recent years, despite the Christian symbolism of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

This historical perspective is very relevant to contemporary debates over citizenship and 'Britishness'. The endeavour to reinvent 'Britain' is shown to be a challenging undertaking in a society where religious commitments are pluralist rather than exclusively Christian, and where secular forces are increasingly strong. There are two discernible approaches to this challenge. First, there is inclusive religion, as symbolized for example by the prominent seating of representatives of non-Christian faiths under the dome of St Paul's at the Golden Jubilee service in 2002. Second, there is an essentially secular strategy that consigns religious faith and activity to the private sphere and seeks public consensus in non-religious language and ritual. It is apparent that the Queen, and in a different way the Prince of Wales, would prefer the former, while many elected politicians would support the latter, which might perhaps have negative implications for the monarchy. Organized religion is itself divided depending on whether more sectarian or more universalistic impulses predominate. Future debate on such issues needs to be rooted in an informed sense of history, not in a misplaced endeavour to resurrect an anachronistic, narrowly Christian construction of British identity, but in order to ensure that any new model can both have the credibility that comes from awareness of past tradition and be responsive to the realities of the twenty-first century (Wolffe 1993; Wolffe 2010a).

Britain in the past lacked the sharp distinctions between the religious and the secular that have been present in French public life since the revolution of 1789, but recent trends indicate a sense of heightened tension, and sometimes confrontation between the religious and the secular. The traditional middle ground of nominal Anglicanism and cultural Nonconformity has been steadily eroded. It leaves on the one hand a highly diverse minority of committed believers and, on the other, a probably somewhat larger minority with firmly secular outlooks. The middle ground remains, but it looks more contested and variegated than it was, with Arnold's night battlefield analogy appearing to be an apt one. For example, church schools, having until the early twentieth century been a bone of contention between Anglicans and Nonconformists, subsequently became an effective channel for the diffusion of nominal Christianity. Nowadays, however, faith schools again increasingly look like becoming a battleground between a variety of committed religious groups and a secular constituency that perceives them as a divisive anomaly in contemporary Britain.

The conclusion that the current historical trend is to the clearer polarization of the religious and the secular helps to make sense of the rather contradictory impressions with which this essay opened. Organized religion, or at least organized Christianity, may still be in statistical decline, but the context has stimulated a greater assertiveness by both religious and secular camps which paradoxically makes religion more visible.⁶ It is very conceivable such attention will stimulate a degree of religious revival. Minority groups are prompted to perceive their religion as a key marker of identity and culture, while a sense of mild persecution may well prove more galvanizing for the Christian churches than the consciousness of complacent but limited acceptance that characterized their situation in Britain for much of the twentieth century. Comparative history indeed suggests alternative possibilities: although in France organized Christianity has declined even more precipitately than in Britain, in the United States, which also has a constitutional separation of church and state, church attendances have continued at a much higher level.

Partnership

There are therefore extensive contemporary applications for the work of historians of religion. Indeed, if the field of vision is widened beyond the primarily British perspective explored here, to consider the role of religion on the world stage, the importance and urgency of objective historical research and analysis is magnified further. Historians have, however, hitherto been somewhat coy about acknowledging a contemporary application for their work: one leading practitioner of religious history has pithily remarked that they 'had better be content to decline the role of saviours of the nation' (Bossy 1975: 1). Inflated claims for any single academic discipline are inadvisable, but there is a converse danger of false modesty and academic isolationism. In reality the insights arising from religious history have much to contribute to an interdisciplinary process of knowledge exchange to inform understanding of present-day issues.

These opportunities have been facilitated by the development of the subject area itself since the 1960s. An earlier generation of church historians primarily concerned with the institutional and theological development of Christian religious organizations has given way to religious historians who have moved the field outwards to engage in much wider ranging assessment of religious influences in society, culture and politics. The pioneers in this respect have tended to be medievalists and early modernists, for whom the historical centrality of religion is hard to question. However, leading researchers such as Hugh McLeod, David Hempton and Callum Brown have pursued similar approaches in relation to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The parallel development of religious studies as a discipline distinct from theology has also served to facilitate this process by stimulating scholars to analyse forms of religion other than the narrowly institutional, and encouraging an historical

engagement with major religious traditions other than Christianity. The field has also developed a methodological maturity that facilitates objective inquiry and debate. Researchers inevitably have personal commitments, both religious and non-religious, which may legitimately shape their agendas and the manner in which they weigh the evidence, but there is a consensus that academic religious history should not on the one hand be subordinated to Christian theology nor on the other be utilized to support a secular or atheist polemic (Wolffe 2010b).

Three avenues for knowledge exchange call for exploration. First, there is significant potential for work with religious organizations themselves. These face two converse dangers in their approach to their own history. On the one hand there is the risk of an uncritical traditionalism that risks condemning them to marginality and irrelevance in a fast-changing world. On the other hand there are the perils that come from wholesale rejection of the past in the endeavour to be as contemporary as possible, leading to a sense of rootlessness and a tendency unwittingly to repeat previous mistakes. A constructive middle course implies a readiness to engage critically and reflectively with the past, not in order to replicate it, but as a route to better understanding of their present-day situation, and a resource both of ideas for the future and of cautionary tales.⁷

Second, there is value in working with the media to advance public understanding of a longer term view of topical contemporary issues, as in the BBC-Open University series, *A History of Christianity*, presented by Diarmaid MacCulloch and screened in 2009 and 2010. Awareness of the complexity of the religious past is a valuable corrective to simplistic and short-term interpretations of present-day religious problems. An enhanced knowledge of the situation of religious minorities in earlier periods, and of attitudes towards them, would help to advance better community and inter-faith relations in the twenty-first century.

Third, there is considerable unrealized potential for partnership both with religious organizations and with the heritage industry to advance informed understanding of the past. Religious buildings, notably cathedrals, may be popular tourist sites, but visitors need to be helped to understand them in their evolving historical context. Museums remain liable to ignore or to marginalize religion. There may well be a perceived difficulty in a multicultural society in drawing too much attention to a national religious past that in institutional terms was primarily Christian, but carefully considered modes of interpretation should facilitate constructive engagement with that legacy rather than its simplistic glorification or its implicit rejection.

If such partnerships can be developed, religious history offers valuable potential to assist in bridging divides between different communities as well as between the religious and the secular. Scholars also need to give priority to historical engagement with non-Christian religions and with non-European

Christianity. Such a process should immediately stimulate awareness not only that the paradigm of religious decline in the twentieth century is a distinctively European one rather than a global one, but also that the very polarity of the secular and religious either operates in different ways, or does not really exist at all. The very numerical strength of organized Christianity in the United States or in sub-Saharan Africa implies a different kind of relationship to the surrounding 'secular' culture and society from that operating in Western Europe with its much smaller active Christian minorities. And when one turns to look at majority Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu societies, underlying religious and cultural values imply the integration of the secular and the sacred much more than their separation.

An historical perspective suggests that the best way of understanding the situation of religion in our day may well be to think not so much of the decline of religion, but of a sharpened polarization on the ground between the religious and the secular. That polarization brings with it numerous possibilities, some of them alarming, others much more constructive. At the same time, the development of religious history offers a growing opportunity for a positive dialogue between religious and secular perspectives, and for facilitating a realistic response to contemporary religious challenges.

Notes

- 1 For a summary of literature on the dating of 'Dover Beach' see Weinstock (Weinstock 1981: 73, footnote 1).
- 2 Christian Research Press Release, 18 September 2006.
- 3 The figures stated below are calculated from the tables in the census report.
- 4 For the specific context of mid-nineteenth-century anti-Catholic agitation see Wolffe (1991), and for discussion of longer-term trends see Wolffe (2004), especially chapters 4 and 10.
- 5 <http://www.bnp.org.uk>; <http://www.englishdefenceleague.org> [accessed 11 July 2010].
- 6 For a specific example see the Bishop of Durham's critique of legislation inspired by the 'militantly atheist and secularist lobby' in his Easter Day sermon in 2008 (Wright 2008) and the response from the 'Godfree' columnist David Aaronovitch (Aaronovitch 2008).
- 7 I am pleased to acknowledge ongoing support from the Arts & Heritage Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council for three current projects of my own, designed to advance this agenda in relation to changing approaches to the Christian formation of youth; the role of the Church of England in London; and Protestant-Catholic conflict.

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