

British civilisation and institutions
RELIGION (2 sessions)

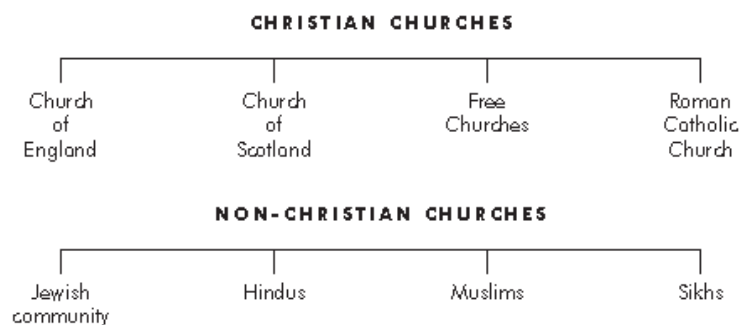
BRITISH RELIGIOUS HISTORY HAS BEEN predominantly Christian. It has been characterized by conflict between Roman Catholics and Protestants and by division into separate Protestant churches and sects. But it has also included non-Christian faiths, such as Judaism, and groups with humanist and special beliefs. Today, Britain still possesses a diversity of religious denominations, which have been added to by recent immigrants. However, despite these features, the country seems to be largely secular in terms of the low figures for all types (Christian and non-Christian) of regular religious observance. Secularization is affecting most faiths, particularly the Christian. But religion still arguably remains a factor in national life, whether for believers or as a background to national culture. It is reflected in active or nominal adherence to denominations and in general ethical and moral behaviour. Religiosity is greater in Wales, Scotland and (particularly) Northern Ireland than in England.

By the end of the nineteenth century the various Christian and non-Christian churches were spread throughout Britain. In the twentieth century, immigrants have added further religious diversity. Muslim mosques, Sikh and Hindu temples, and West Indian churches, such as the Pentecostals, are common in areas with large ethnic communities.

In Britain today the growth of Christian and non-Christian religious observance and vitality is found outside the big traditional Christian churches. The Evangelical movement continues to grow as a branch of Christianity and is characterized by a close relationship among members and between them and God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. It breaks down the barriers of more traditional worship, places little reliance on church furniture and has many different meeting places. It has basic Christian beliefs, but expresses them in different ways. The growth of fundamentalist faiths, 'enthusiastic' Christian churches and some five hundred cults or religious movements have also increased the number of people active in religious life. Meanwhile non-Christian faiths, such as Islam in particular, have expanded significantly.

There is religious freedom in contemporary Britain; a person may belong to any religion or none; and religious discrimination is unlawful. There is no religious bar to the holding of public office, except that the monarch must be a member of the Church of England. None of the churches is tied specifically to a political party and there are no religious parties as such in Parliament.

Main contemporary religious groups



The Christian tradition

Christianity in Britain is represented mainly by the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church (which are the largest), the Church of Scotland and the Free Churches. The Church of England attracts about a fifth of religiously active Britons and the Roman Catholic Church does only marginally better. It is argued that these two churches built too many buildings for too few people in the nineteenth century. They have since used resources to subsidize churches that should have been closed, and poorly attended services contribute to decline. A survey by Churches Information for Mission in 2001 suggested that traditional Christian churches have lost their ability to attract the young and need a more contemporary image: 42 per cent of members of existing congregations consist of retired people and the average age of churchgoers is over seventy. People under fifty-five tend to opt for more evangelical forms of worship.

The Church of England

The Church of England is the established or national church in England. This means that its legal position in the state is confirmed by the Elizabethan Church Settlement and Parliament. The monarch is the head of the church; its archbishops, bishops and deans are appointed by the monarch on the advice of the Prime Minister; and Parliament has a voice in its organization and rituals. But it is not a state church, since it receives no financial aid from the state, apart from salaries for non-clerical positions and help with church schools. The church therefore has a special relationship with the state, although there continue to be calls for its disestablishment (cutting the connections between church and state) so that it might have autonomy over its own affairs.

The church is based on an episcopal hierarchy, or rule by bishops. The two Archbishops of Canterbury and York, together with twenty-four senior bishops, sit in the House of Lords, take part in its proceedings and are the church's link to Parliament. Organizationally, the church is divided into the two provinces of Canterbury and York, each under the control of an archbishop. The Archbishop of Canterbury (called the Primate of All England) is the senior of the two and the professional head of the church.

The Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church in Britain experienced much persecution and discrimination after the Reformation and had difficulties in surviving. Although its organization was restored and the worst suspicions abated by 1850, reservations about it still continued in some quarters. Today Catholicism is widely practised throughout Britain and enjoys complete religious freedom, except for the fact that no Catholic can become monarch. It is estimated that there

are 5 million nominal members of the Roman Catholic faith in Britain, although the number of active participants is about 1.9 million. But regular weekly observance is just over a million, which makes it the largest Christian church in Britain. Its membership is centred on the urban working class, settlers of Irish descent, a few prominent upper-class families and some middle-class people.

The Free Churches

The Free Churches are composed of those Nonconformist Protestant sects which are not established like the Churches of England and Scotland. Some broke away from the Church of England after the Reformation and others departed later. In general, they refused to accept episcopal rule or hierarchical structures and have ordained women ministers. Their history has been one of schism and separation among themselves, which has resulted in the formation of many different sects. Their egalitarian beliefs are reflected in the historical association between political and religious dissent. These churches have developed their own convictions and practices, which are often mirrored in their simple church services, worship and buildings.

The Free Churches tend to be strongest in northern England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, and most of their membership has historically derived from the working class. The main Free Churches today are the Methodists, the Baptists, the United Reformed Church and the Salvation Army.

The Methodist Church is the largest of the Free Churches, with 353,000 adult members and a community of 1.3 million. It was established in 1784 by John Wesley after Church of England opposition to his evangelical views obliged him to separate and form his own organization. Today the Methodist Church in Britain is based on the 1932 union of most of the separate Methodist sects. But independent Methodist churches still exist in Britain and abroad, with a worldwide membership of several million. Attempts were made in the 1960s and 1970s to unify the Methodists and the Church of England, but the proposals failed. In practice, however, some ministers of these denominations share their churches and services.

The Baptists (formed in the seventeenth century) are today grouped in associations of churches. Most of these belong to the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, which was formed in 1812 and has a total membership of some 145,000 people. There are also independent Baptist unions in Scotland, Wales and Ireland (bringing the total Baptists to some 240,000), in addition to a worldwide Baptist fellowship. The ancient Congregational Church in England and Wales had its roots in sixteenth-century Puritanism.

The Salvation Army emphasises saving souls through a practical Christianity and social concern. It was founded in Britain by William Booth in 1865; now has some 55,000 active members; has spread to 89 other countries and has a worldwide strength of 2.5 million. The Salvation Army is an efficient organization and has centres nationwide to help the homeless, the abused, the poor, the sick and the needy. Its uniformed members may be frequently seen on the streets of British towns and cities, playing and singing religious music, collecting money, preaching and selling their magazine *War Cry*.

The non-Christian tradition

The non-Christian tradition in Britain is mainly associated with immigrants into the country over the centuries, such as the Jews and, more recently, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus.

The Jewish community

The first Jews immigrated with the Norman Conquest and were involved in finance and commerce. The present community dates from the midseventeenth century, following the expulsion of Jews in the thirteenth century. It now has 283,000 members and is estimated to be the second largest Jewish population in Europe. The community is composed of the Sephardim (originally from Spain, Portugal and north Africa) and the majority Ashkenazim (from Germany and central Europe).

In religious terms, the community is divided into the majority Orthodox faith (of which the main spokesman is the Chief Rabbi) and minority Reform and Liberal groups. The focus of religious life is the 250 local synagogues, and Jewish schools are attended by one in three Jewish schoolchildren. The majority of Jews live in North London, but the East End of London has traditionally been a place of initial Jewish settlement, while others live mainly in urban areas outside London.

The community has declined in the past twenty years. This is due to a disenchantment with religion; an increase in civil and mixed marriages; considerable emigration by young Jews; a relatively low birth rate; and a rapidly ageing population of active practitioners. For some British Jews, their Jewishness is simply a matter of birth and they are tending to assimilate more with the wider society. For others, it is a matter of deep religious beliefs and practice and this fundamentalism seems to be increasing. But the majority still have a larger global identity with Jewish history.

Other non-Christian religions

Immigration into Britain during the last fifty years has resulted in a substantial growth of other non-Christian religions, such as Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism. The number of practitioners is growing because of relatively high birth rates in these groups and because of conversion to such faiths by young working-class non-whites and middle-class whites.

There are now two million Muslims, of whom some 665,000 regularly attend mosque. Most are associated with Pakistan and Bangladesh, but there are other groups from India, Arab countries and Cyprus. The Islamic Cultural Centre and its Central Mosque in London are the largest Muslim institutions in the West, and there are mosques in virtually every British town with a concentration of Muslim people.

There are also active Sikh (400,000) and Hindu (165,000) religious adherents in Britain. Most of these come from India and have many temples located around the country in areas of Asian settlement. Various forms of Buddhism are also represented in the population, with about 50,000 active participants.

Non-Christian religions amount to some 1.4 million active or practicing members and represent a significant growth area when compared to the Christian churches. But these communities constitute a relatively small proportion of the total British population, 46 per cent of which remains nominally Christian despite the growth of agnostics,

atheists and those who claim no denominational identity. They have altered the religious face of British society and influenced employment conditions, since allowances have to be made for non-Christians to follow their religious observances and customs.