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**Autor:** Robbins, Keith

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# Religion and Culture: a Contemporary British/Irish Perspective

Keith Robbins

The relationship between «Religion» and «Culture», boldly stated, has long been a tantalizing topic of historical enquiry.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, it is easy to see why, in the contemporary United Kingdom, it is a topic which has stimulated fresh investigation and reflection. «Religion» and «Culture», in turn, both relate to «Identity» – an issue which likewise concerns both individuals and governments amidst current large-scale migration into many European states. The anchorage of «Religion» in a particular «Culture» (or the extent to which it constitutes a «Counter-Culture» in conscious opposition to what might be considered the prevailing or «established» culture of a nation or state) is in turn bound up with issues of ethnicity and language. It is not infrequently the case, when these matters are raised in current political debate that politicians and media commentators find it difficult to know where one begins and the other ends. An inherited assumption that a community is one which, by definition, shares a «common culture» is confronted by a widespread «multiculturality».<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the characterisation of a particular society as «multi-faith» may, or may not, preclude the possibility of a «common culture».<sup>3</sup> «Faith communities» may share a conviction of the importance of «faith», and there may be many matters on which they stand

<sup>1</sup> For over half a century, H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (New York, 1951) has been a starting point for much discussion in the English-speaking world.

<sup>2</sup> Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, Oxford 1995; Tariq Modood, *Not Easy being British: Colour, Culture and Citizenship*, Stoke-on-Trent 1992; Bhikhu Parekh, 'British Citizenship and Cultural Differences' in: Geoff Andrew (Hg.), *Citizenship*, London 1991. These are but a few pertinent examples from a substantial literature.

<sup>3</sup> The extent to which a «faith community» also has a «cultural identity» is perhaps most evident as an issue in the case of Islam where the cultural/linguistic background of Moslems in Britain is varied and adds to the difficulty of determining «representative» Moslem opinion. The extent to which certain aspects of Islamic practice can be modified or discarded on the grounds that they are not in fact «central» to the faith but are culture-specific to the countries of origin is a fundamental issue confronting Islam in Europe. It is, of course, not a matter which is confined to Islam. J.Klausen, *The Islamic Challenge: Politics and Religion in Western Europe*, Oxford 2005; Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, Oxford 2005.

together, sometimes over against those without «faith» but there may equally be matters on which one or other «faith» may share more «values» with those without «faith» than they do with those of other faiths. To what extent, in turn, the Liberal State should concede «religious freedom» as an absolute, or reach an accommodation with religious group autonomy, raises fundamental issues in the realm of «rights». <sup>4</sup> The idea that governments must play «an active and dynamic role in imposing or inculcating a single culture or set of values» is seen in some quarters as something which will either lead to totalitarianism or civil war. <sup>5</sup> It is currently proposed, for example, that English schools should cease to provide lessons relating to the country's «cultural heritage». Pupils, the relevant authority has suggested, should have «secure values and beliefs» but there is to be no indication of what these might be: values and beliefs are not a matter for the state. <sup>6</sup> At the same time, perhaps paradoxically, there are calls from various quarters for the urgent definition (supposing it to be possible) of a common core of «British values» to which new citizens and those of all faiths can subscribe. The relationship between «the public» and «the private», always contentious, is under additional stress. <sup>7</sup> Equally problematic is the extent to which there is coherence in «secular» values other than that they explicitly reject any basis in or support from «religion». There is, after all, no uniformity in the content of the «secularity» of such «secular societies» as have existed, or nearly existed.

This sketch of current concerns – which only lays out the field and does not purport to resolve these issues as they are currently discussed by politicians, theologians, philosophers, lawyers and political scientists – has given an impetus to historians to look again at «Religion» and «Culture» over the long «Christian history» of Britain and Ireland. It has also been fed, however, by what has happened, politically, over the last quarter of a century or so in these islands. The «Troubles» in Northern Ireland continued to pose the question of Irish identity within the island of Ireland and impacted on the relationship between the London and Dublin governments. <sup>8</sup> It scarcely needs to be said that «Religion», «Culture» and «Politics» have seemed, in the eyes of many observers, to be so intertwined as to make it almost arbitrary whether the struggle is «really» about one or the other. The still incomplete search for a workable «solution» rests on the assumption that there are two «communities» whose opposing aspirations must some-

<sup>4</sup> Rex Ahdar and Ian Leigh, *Religious Freedom in the Liberal State*, Oxford 2005; Robert Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society*, Oxford 1997.

<sup>5</sup> David Nicholls, *The Pluralist State*, London 1994, 135.

<sup>6</sup> *The Times*, 31 July 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Clarke E. Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, New York/London 1990; Frances Young, ed., *Dare We Speak of God in Public?*, London 1995.

<sup>8</sup> The further question is to what extent, if any, Scotland, Wales and Ireland (or the two Irelands) share a «Celtic culture» which stands in some kind of unity in contradistinction to England is considered in Keith Robbins, *Location and Dislocation: Ireland, Scotland and Wales in their Insular Alignment*, in: John Morrill, ed., *The Promotion of Knowledge: Lectures to mark the Centenary of the British Academy 1902–2002*, Oxford 2004, 163–80 and the critique offered by various commentators on pp.181–213; Murray Pittock, *Celtic Identity and the British Image*, Manchester 1999.

how be accommodated within the political structure of a «devolved» Assembly on a basis acceptable to the British Government and with which that of the Irish Republic is content. Squaring that circle, at the time of writing, still remains to be achieved in a working form. Of course, there are fractures within the «two communities» but the Protestant/Unionist – Catholic/Nationalist polarity remains substantially in place. Even so, there appear to be some from both communities who are prepared to think of themselves as «Northern Irish» – that is to say that «Northern Ireland» is inescapably a «mixed» or «bridge» place. Its «Irishness» cannot be that of the Irish/Catholic/Nationalist «master narrative» of Dublin as developed in the struggle for independence and which dominated until at least recent decades. Its «Britishness» too, at least from Britain itself, has not been perceived as «quite the real article».<sup>9</sup>

But what «Britishness» is has itself become to a degree problematic and contentious in a post-imperial and uneasily «European» state.<sup>10</sup> Although the United Kingdom, in both its nineteenth century form («Great Britain and Ireland») and in its post-1922 form (Great Britain and Northern Ireland), was neither culturally nor religiously homogeneous this pluralism did not seem, until the 1960s, seriously to challenge the «unity» of Britain itself.<sup>11</sup> In the absence of any political (as distinct from administrative) «devolution», it was substantially an amalgam of Religion/Culture which served in Scotland and Wales to «carry» an identity which was in some sense «national».<sup>12</sup> Not that the situations in Scotland and Wales were precisely the same. The 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland had maintained, amongst its other provisions, the existence of a Church of Scotland (Presbyterian/Reformed) as the established church. That Church, reunited after its nineteenth century divisions, through its General Assembly and various committees, sought in some sense to «speak for Scotland» and be the «voice of the nation». Irish immigration into urban Scotland, largely but not exclusively Catholic, had, however, cumulatively created a Catholic presence, a

<sup>9</sup> The literature on «the Irish question», particularly since 1970, is huge and the following are merely a few recent pertinent studies: Patrick Mitchel, *Evangelicalism and National Identity in Ulster 1921–1998*, Oxford 2003; P. Shirlow and M. McGovern, eds., *Who are «The People»? Unionism, Protestantism and Loyalism in Northern Ireland*, London 1997; J. Dunlop, *A Precarious Belonging: Presbyterians and the Conflict in Ireland*, Belfast 1995; S. Bruce, *God Save Ulster! The Religion and Politics of Paisleyism*, Oxford 1986; F.W. Boal, M.C. Keane and D.N. Livingstone, *Them and Us?: Attitudinal Variation among Churchgoers in Belfast*, Belfast 1997; Marcus Tanner, *Ireland's Holy Wars*, London 2001; Patrick O'Sullivan, *The Irish World Wide: History, Heritage, Identity Volume Five: Religion and Identity*, Leicester 1996; Marianne Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster: A History*, London 2000; Alan Megahey, *The Irish Protestant Churches in the Twentieth Century*, Basingstoke 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Ward, *Britishness since 1870*, London 2004; A. Aughey, *Nationalism, Devolution and the Challenge to the United Kingdom State*, London 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Harvie identifies 1939–1970 as the period when «British nationalism» had its «moment» in «The moment of British nationalism 1939–1970», in: *Political Quarterly*, 71, 2000, 328–40.

<sup>12</sup> Keith Robbins, *Nineteenth-Century Britain: England, Scotland and Wales – The Making of a Nation*, Oxford 1989, and *Great Britain: Identities, Institutions and the Idea of Britishness*, London 1998.



growing minority which challenged the presentation of Scotland as a «Protestant Nation». It could also be presented as an Irish and culturally alien presence. The extent to which there are still not insignificant ramifications of this rift in contemporary Scotland remains contentious.<sup>13</sup> The divisions certainly complicated political alignments in relation either for «Home Rule» or «Independence» for Scotland.

The situation of Wales was very different from that of Scotland. Its sixteenth-century union with England had left it, to all intents and purposes, little by way of institutional or constitutional distinctiveness. Its established church was «The Church of England». It had none of the other manifestations of distinctiveness (such as a legal system) which Scotland continued to maintain post-union. What it did have, however, was its own «Culture» expressed through its own language, even though English became «official». There is no space here to examine these matters in detail or consider the complicated vicissitudes of the Welsh language over subsequent centuries. The late nineteenth century had seen a prolonged campaign for the disestablishment of the «Church of England» in Wales during the course of which, the various Dissenting denominations (Independents, Baptists, Wesleyan Methodists and Calvinistic Methodists) projected a certain image of the «real» Wales. It was a period of vitality in Welsh-language publication as the Welsh-language community continued to grow though, as the twentieth century was to show, the percentage of Welsh-speakers in Wales declined (until we reach the uncertain present of stability/modest growth).<sup>14</sup> The campaign being eventually successful, the implementation of disestablishment followed immediately after the First World War. The «Church in Wales» – an autonomous province of the Anglican Communion – came into existence.<sup>15</sup> «Wales» therefore seemed to exist as a «Religious/Cultural» entity but otherwise, in a political, constitutional and administrative sense it was part of «England and Wales».

The present author discussed these matters in much more detail in his presidential address to the Ecclesiastical History Society in the early 1980s.<sup>16</sup> He did so in the aftermath of the referendums held in 1979 in both Scotland and Wales to determine the level of support for the «Home Rule» proposals then on offer. Sufficient support (massively so in Wales) was not forthcoming and the matter appeared to be dead. After an interval, however, campaigning resumed and the incoming Labour Government offered proposals (different in substance) to the

<sup>13</sup> T.M. Devine, ed., *Scotland's Shame: Bigotry and Sectarianism in Modern Scotland*, Edinburgh 2000; G. Walker and T. Gallagher, eds., *Sermons and Battle Hymns: Protestant Popular Culture in Modern Scotland*, Edinburgh 1990.

<sup>14</sup> See two volumes in the *Social History of the Welsh Language*, Dot Jones, *Statistical Evidence relating to the Welsh Language 1801–1911*, Cardiff 1998, and Geraint H. Jenkins, ed., *Language and Community in the Nineteenth Century*, Cardiff 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Keith Robbins, *Establishing Disestablishment: Some Reflections on Wales and Scotland*, in: S.J. Brown and G. Newlands, eds., *Scottish Christianity in the Modern World*, Edinburgh 2000, 231–54.

<sup>16</sup> Keith Robbins, *Religion and Identity in Modern British History*, in: *Studies in Church History*, 18, *Religion and National Identity*, Oxford 1982, 465–88 reprinted in his *History, Religion and Identity in Modern Britain*, London 1993, 85–104.

electorates in Scotland and Wales (endorsed resoundingly by the former and very narrowly by the latter). The consequence has been a substantial restructuring of the government of the United Kingdom – with a Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh and a Welsh Assembly in Cardiff. Church leaders in both Scotland and Wales had been prominent in the campaigning which had produced this outcome.<sup>17</sup> «Active» church members were probably more likely than not to vote for than against the changes. The scale of support in Scotland probably suggests that Catholic anxieties that a «Home Rule» Scotland would be assertively Protestant had been overcome. In the decades that had followed its autonomy the Church in Wales had endeavoured to throw off the perception of itself as «the English Church». Yet there was awareness in Wales that too vociferous a projection of Wales as a «Religious/Cultural» entity might alienate the majority of the population which was not Welsh-speaking (which was arguably what had happened in 1979) and did not align itself with that «chapel culture» which had appeared to be hegemonic in Wales at the moment of disestablishment but which appears to have been in free-fall ever since.<sup>18</sup>

The end of the twentieth century has therefore produced a somewhat paradoxical situation. The churches in Scotland and Wales, very largely if with some variation in all denominations, saw themselves (all within an acknowledgement of the universal nature of the church) as «carriers» of the nation in the absence (frequently an uncontentious absence) of its political embodiment. It has been argued, with greater or lesser degree of intensity and elaboration, by church leaders that a nation is no mere incidental assembling of persons but has a providential purpose. It frequently led to the assertion that Wales and Scotland were more «religious» than England, though in fact, particularly in the case of the former, to a degree crippled, or at the very least complicated, by a felt imperative for cultural/linguistic maintenance, even if that conflict with apparent opportunities for church growth. Yet, particularly in the case of the former, it had become obvious that if some degree of political autonomy were to be obtained it could not be simply on the basis of that «Religious/Cultural» amalgam which had sustained the «nation» in its absence. The substantial number of «incomers» to Wales (largely from England) both over recent decades and over a longer past,

<sup>17</sup> David Judge, *Political Institutions in the United Kingdom*, Oxford 2005; Christopher Bryant, *The Nations of Britain*, Oxford 2005, and the 2006 updated edition of Hugh Kearney's *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations*, Cambridge 1992 represent three examples of attempts by historians and political scientists to characterize the present position.

<sup>18</sup> Keith Robbins, *Cultural Independence and Political Evolution in Wales*, in: H.T. Dickinson and Michael Lynch, eds., *The Challenge to Westminster: Sovereignty, Devolution and Independence*, East Linton 2000), 81–90; Keith Robbins, *Wales and the «British Question»*, *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* 2002, New series, Vol.9, 2003, 152–61; Keith Robbins, *Locating Wales: Culture, Place and Identity*, in: N. Garnham and K. Jeffery, eds., *Culture, Place and Identity*, Dublin 2005, 23–38; D. Densil Morgan, *The Span of the Cross: Christian Religion and Society in Wales, 1914–2000*, Cardiff 1999; Rowan Williams, *The Churches of Wales and the Future of Wales*, in: *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* 2001, New series, Vol.8, 2002, 151–60. Dr Williams, then Archbishop of Wales has subsequently become the first Welsh-speaking Archbishop of Canterbury.

together with «Anglicized» Welsh people over many generations would only buy into a «Wales» in which that amalgam still had a substantial but not hegemonic and exclusive part. It would appear that in the few years of their existence both the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly Government, on formal occasions, have wished to rest loosely on the religious ingredients of their cultural heritages.<sup>19</sup> And, now that a Scottish Parliament and Executive «speaks for Scotland» on all domestic matters in Scotland, the Church of Scotland (still in a sense «established») is but one element in civil society rather than, in aspiration at least, «the voice of Scotland» to be listened to by a United Kingdom government in London.

The scale of these changes has left the question of «England» problematic. England has no parliament of its own. It is legislated for by the United Kingdom government at Westminster, very prominent members of which can be – and presently are – Scottish MPs. Scottish MPs in the House of Commons can (and do) vote on legislation which applies only to England (for example, in relation to education). English MPs in the Commons have no say (nor have Scottish MPs in the Commons for that matter) on decisions on Scottish education which are made by the Scottish Executive in Edinburgh.<sup>20</sup> Whether the present arrangements can endure is therefore problematic.<sup>21</sup> The details of this complex question cannot be pursued here but what is germane to present purposes is that it has brought to the fore the question of «England» and «Englishness». The electorate of England (of course, by far the largest in the United Kingdom) was never directly consulted about the changed governance of Wales and Scotland and its implications for England. It is a situation which has brought forth a rash of publications seeking, from one perspective or another, and over varying time frames, to establish the «identity of England», an enterprise which has «culture» at its core.<sup>22</sup>

«Culture» and the meaning to be attached to it, can be said to have long been reflected on in previous centuries of English intellectual life. As far as the twentieth century is concerned, however, its manifold implications in English life (and by extension British life) seemed, until the eclipse in his reputation, which we may place between the 1960s and the 1980s (with some subsequent recovery), to be in the hands of a man who in 1921 was living in Switzerland (Lausanne) recovering from a nervous breakdown. It was there that the 33-year old American poet, essayist, playwright and critic T.S. Eliot, educated at Harvard, the Sorbonne, Marburg and Oxford completed work on his long poem «The Waste Land». The break with tradition which he and other non-combatant mo-

<sup>19</sup> Asifa M. Hussain and William L. Miller, *Multicultural Nationalism: Anglophobia, Islamophobia and Devolution*; Oxford 2006 examines attitudes in post-devolution Scotland.

<sup>20</sup> Two edited volumes prepared with the three hundredth anniversary of the Anglo-Scottish Union in prospect put these matters in a broad framework: T.C. Smout, ed., *Anglo-Scottish Relations from 1603 to 1900*, Oxford 2005; and W.L. Miller, ed., *Anglo-Scottish Relations, from 1900 to Devolution and Beyond*, Oxford 2005.

<sup>21</sup> The conclusion of Iain McLean and Alistair McMillan, *State of the Union: Unionism and the Alternatives in the United Kingdom since 1707*, Oxford 2005 is that «a union state without unionism can survive for a long time. But not, perhaps, for ever», p. 256.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Colls, *Identity of England*, Oxford 2002 is one example.



dernists made seemed «valid after the upheaval of the war».<sup>23</sup> The poem has no narrative centre. Its fragmentation expresses a sense of personal loss and cultural disintegration. London, though it could be any other European city, was «un-real». By 1928, however, he had both been received into the Church of England (and although of «Catholic» sympathy he wished to be a member of a church which was still, in some sense, «national») and become a British subject. Twenty years later, he published «Notes towards a Definition of Culture» – and in the same year he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and the British Order of Merit. In the mid-twentieth century his pre-eminence seemed established and his taste – vigorously challenged though it was – defined an era. The trajectory of his own life – not to mention its private tragedies – made him central at that time to any reflection on nation, society and culture. His thinking, however, though it was in part the expression of a personal need to «place» himself, spiritually and topographically, in a society in which he had not been born, has to be seen more generally in the context of a long concern in England with the nature and nurture of «Culture». There was a sense for Eliot in which «Religion» (to be distinguished in his mind from «Belief» – which entailed commitment to certain intellectual propositions) and «Culture» were synonymous. «The Idea of a Christian Society», lectures originally given in Cambridge, had been published in 1939. He had a fear, prompted by the Munich crisis of September 1938, that the culture of England had become hollow and lacked the capacity to resist Nazism. Eliot's views were, in certain aspects at least, controversial. He threw himself into a host of war-time discussions in which the church «looked ahead». It was not a matter of preserving a «Christian culture» but rather of creating it. A broadcast talk in April 1941 was significantly entitled «Towards a Christian Britain». A Christian Britain, as he put it, was «the conversion of social consciousness». It was not to be confused with making a blue-print for «a Christian order» since God could not be fitted into a blueprint. He was aware that creating «a Christian society», however, (insofar as it could be conceived as a human enterprise) might be impossible. One might have to settle for thinking through the possibilities of a Christian community within a non-Christian one. The signs were contradictory. On the one hand, the war had seemingly produced a renewed affirmation, even in unexpected quarters, that the British cause was that of «Christian civilization».<sup>24</sup> On the other, he wondered whether the idea of a Christian culture was an impossibility. «The trouble of the modern age» he told an audience in Paris in 1945 «is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God and man which

<sup>23</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory. Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, Cambridge 1995, 3–4.

<sup>24</sup> Keith Robbins, *Britain, 1940 and «Christian Civilization»*, in: D. Beales and G. Best, eds., *History, Society and the Churches: Essays in Honour of Owen Chadwick*, Cambridge 1985, 279–99 and reproduced in Keith Robbins, *History, Religion and Identity in Modern Britain*, London 1993, 195–214. See also Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the Era of the Two World Wars*, London 2005 and S.G. Parker, *Faith on the Home Front: Aspects of Church Life and Popular Religion in Birmingham, 1939–1945*, Bern 2006.

our forefathers believed, but the inability to feel towards God and man as they did. A belief which you no longer believe is something which to some extent you can still understand but when religious feeling disappears, the words in which men have been glad to express it become meaningless».<sup>25</sup>

In 1958, Raymond Williams (b.1921), a man born on the borders of England and Wales in a very different social and cultural context from Eliot's, attempted to delineate thinking on «Culture and Society 1780–1950» in England. He discussed such nineteenth-century writers as Carlyle, Newman, Ruskin and Matthew Arnold before considering some twentieth-century opinions. Eliot received substantial attention in this latter section. He also considered, however, the rather different polemic emerging from Cambridge literary criticism in the mid 1930s, associated with F.R. Leavis and his wife Queenie, and Denys Thompson. Their starting point was that England had lost the organic community and the living culture which it embodied. The book's subtitle, «The Training of Cultural Awareness», was a call to rebuild the culture. A «Great Tradition» of the English novel was to hand which was near to «life» and, properly instilled, would enable children to escape from the dross which surrounded them – in films, newspapers and advertising (television had yet to be added). Forty years later, the battle against «the culture supplied to us by those who speak and write, design and compose, with large numbers of consumers in mind» continued.

For Williams, the development of the meanings to be attached to «culture» was a central aspect of his own account. The meanings recorded, he believed, though this hardly amounted to a revelation, the responses to changes in British social, economic and political life over the period he was considering. «Culture», he suggested, had shifted from the «tending of natural growth» to a thing in itself. It might refer to an ideal of human perfection. It also came to mean «the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole». It further came to mean «the general body of the arts» and, by the end of the nineteenth century it had come to mean «a whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual».<sup>26</sup> In this process, it came to provoke «either hostility or embarrassment». Williams's repetition of «came to mean» gives an impression of transition at identifiable points in time and while, to some extent, this is the case, the problem with the word is that all its historically-derived meanings still have some resonance. It is these overlapping meanings – in an English language which does not in practice sustain the distinction, made in some languages, between «culture» and «civilization» – which continue to make its use problematic.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in the introduction by D.L. Edwards to an edition of T.S. Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society and other Writings*, London 1982, 38–9. There can of course be no full consideration of Eliot's thinking on Culture and Religion here. A. David Moody, *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*, Cambridge 1994; Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century*, New York 1971, and Roger Kojecky, *T.S. Eliot's Social Criticism*, London 1971 are pertinent to the particular concerns of this paper. Anthony Julius, *T.S. Eliot, anti-Semitism and Literary Form*, Cambridge 1995 injects a rather different note.

<sup>26</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, Harmondsworth 1960, 16–17.



Eliot himself, in his «Notes», recognized that the term had different associations according to whether the development of an individual, or of a group or class, or of the whole country was being envisaged. Like many other authors similarly engaged, however, it was not altogether clear, in particular instances, which of the possible meanings he had in mind. When he spoke, for example, of «the standards of culture» being lower than they had been fifty years earlier and when he thought that «the decay of culture» might proceed further to a point at which it would be possible to say that there would be no culture, it seems obvious that he is not referring to culture as «the whole way of life». That culture included «all the characteristic activities and interests of a people» – which he chose to illustrate by their leisure activities – sport, food and a little art. Even in the examples he gave, which included an enthusiasm for beetroot in vinegar, the English as «a people» did not all participate in them. They might not have been at all «characteristic» of the life-styles of particular individuals or groups. It is not the purpose here to consider whether Eliot was, or was not, right in the particular assertions he made, merely to give illustration to the slippery nature of the word «culture».

It is in the light of the contexts and considerations that have been referred to in this article that the time has seemed ripe to attempt a fresh synthesis of «Christian Britain» over the totality of its existence in a new series with individual volumes which cover its duration. It is a series, under the editorship of this present author, which attempts to explore «Religion, Politics and Society in Britain» as an interconnected whole. Individual authors are not required to commit themselves to any particular interpretations of their specific periods or to a single understanding of «culture». The attempt at a «totality» therefore, may perhaps in aggregate lead to both a fuller understanding of the complexities surrounding «Christianisation» and equally avoid too simple a characterisation of «De-Christianisation». In the opening volume of the series, which grapples with the conversion and Christianisation of the different peoples of Britain, Barbara Yorke argues that wherever Christianity has been introduced it has always been «adapted and affected, without fatal infringement of its basic tenets, to pre-existing social norms and religious beliefs». <sup>27</sup> Of course, how basic are those tenets, and to what extent, either in ecclesiastical structures or in other teaching they have themselves been inevitably themselves culture-bound (and therefore may be themselves susceptible to reformulation in other cultural contexts) remains as problematic and divisive in the contemporary world as it has been in the past. <sup>28</sup> Professor Yorke's volume, however, at the very least suggests caution about the establishment of a «normative Christian culture». Other volumes being written will

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Yorke, *The Conversion of Britain, 600–800*, London 2006, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Dennis Nineham describes his *Christianity Mediaeval and Modern*, London 1993 as the product of a long-standing preoccupation – he is a theologian – with the question of the relation between religion and cultural change. Another English historian, Richard Fletcher, in *The Conversion of Europe: From Paganism to Christianity 371–1386*, London 1997 showed a similar concern with the forces and processes of change.

give their own interpretation of «Christian culture» as it manifested itself (or failed to) in the cultures of the peoples of Britain. The second volume to be published, by John Spurr, deals significantly with the implications both of the transition from «England» (or England/Wales) to «Great Britain» and also, though not without a civil war, to a transition to and grudging acceptance by government of the fact that ecclesiastical conformity was an impossibility. There was no single «Christian culture» but rather a series of contending though overlapping «Christian cultures». A developing religious and cultural pluralism in Britain and Ireland saw «the development and institutionalisation of distinct religious cultures», both as formal denominations and as cultural identities such as «the godly», «free-thinkers» or «churchmen».<sup>29</sup> Much of this approach, too, reflects a scepticism, as Eamon Duffy has put it, about the «imagined polarity between the sophisticated religion of the elite and the crude religion of the people so characteristic of much Enlightenment historiography».<sup>30</sup>

It is not surprising that relating «religion» – itself not susceptible to any simple definition – to the manifold meanings of «culture» has proved a matter of enduring uncertainty in the analysis of the twentieth-century history of the United Kingdom. Callum Brown in the «The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000» (London 2002) appeared to be as certain of the death of Religion as Francis Fukayama is (or had been) of the death of History. He has now written what is envisaged as the final volume in the series.<sup>31</sup> It is naturally the one which is most pertinent to topics which have been addressed earlier in this paper. His case is summarized in what follows but also, in what follows, an editor who is delighted to have the volume in the series, indicates some reservations and uncertainties.

The twentieth century is identified as «the century of Britain's greatest religious change». Britain began as a strongly religious and ended as a weakly religious society. He instances a number of «firsts» in support of this characterization. Christianity, for the first time, lost its dominance of public culture, private morality and the media of the day. Christian behaviour became unenforceable by the state. Non-Christian religions became numerous, leading to the description of Britain as «a multi-faith society», and challenged the dominance that Christianity had held for a millennium. Christian culture, by 2000, had fallen possibly to its lowest level ever and shaped few of the cultural forms with which most people came into contact. Churchgoers were both less numerous – described as «a tiny minority» – and more cut off from the rest of the population. What was apparently happening was the creation of a large cultural chasm between those who went to church intensely (weekly) and those who did not go at all. Cultural activities during the week and during the year became largely empty of religion. Easter, Lent and Whit, we are told, were little more than names for

<sup>29</sup> John Spurr, *The Post-Reformation 1603–1714*, London 2006, 9.

<sup>30</sup> In his presidential introduction to the volume *Studies in Church History*, Vol.42, *Elite and Popular Religion*, Woodbridge 2006, 1 which explores «the processes and effectiveness of cultural transmissions in Christian history».

<sup>31</sup> Callum Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain*, London 2006.

public holidays. The culture which, at various levels, had permitted people to shape their identities, activities, politics and moral sense had gone by 2000. It went during the twentieth century and was not replaced by any new religion. «The dissolution of the religious in British culture», he suggests, «represents one of the greatest cultural changes of all time. In no other century was religious change so rapid or so extensive. Never has something as close to a secular society existed before the late twentieth century.» He reiterated these points in a conclusion which argued that as the social isolation of the churches grew a wedge was being driven between «the indifferent secularity» of the vast majority and the increasing militancy of «the religious remnant». That militancy seemed to be the product of the people's «overwhelming rejection of faith-based morality and large-scale indifference to the faith itself».

So much of what Brown has alluded to is incontestable, though perhaps with a view to making his position dramatic he overstates the position «in 1900» as compared with «in 2000». In the former year, for example, we are told that there was «almost universal certainty in British government and the major institutions (including the churches) that Christianity was the only legitimate religion, that it was obviously superior to every other religion, and without it social morality and civil order would collapse». By 2000, on the other hand, that universal certainty is held to have gone (including from most churches). If one is to interpret «legitimate» strictly, however, no British government held that only Christianity was the only «lawful» religion. The club of British lawmakers in parliament had eventually had to concede in the nineteenth century that a Jew could not only have a place in civil society but could also be allowed to sit in parliament and thus create or administer law. It is also not clear what the author has in mind by «British government» and «the major institutions» when he attributes to them, around the turn of the century, this universal certainty concerning Christianity and its supposed (primary?) significance in relation to «social morality» and «civil order».

The picture of a society almost devoid of Christian culture, however, runs up against an «apparent contradiction». In the UK census of 2001 77 per cent of people stated that they had a religious affiliation – 71.6 per cent being Christian – and only 15.4 per cent stated that they had no religion. These figures, Brown accepts, «tell us that religious belonging was still important to British people at the end of the twentieth century». Further analysis of the figures reveals that this was more the case for those living in England and Northern Ireland than for those living in Scotland and Wales. Such an identification – in a society now largely free, as the book has argued, of social pressure to «conform» religiously (indeed, where social pressure might be thought to operate in the opposite direction) – is so extraordinary as at least to place a question mark against the picture of comprehensive de-Christianisation which is otherwise presented. Brown deals with this puzzle by stating that «belonging to a religion» and «practising one» are two different things. He alludes to a survey conducted in 2000 in which, when asked for their religion, 80 per cent claimed some Christian identity, a further 10 per cent claimed to belong to other religions and only 10 per cent claimed



to be agnostic or atheist. Such a breakdown, as will be noted, is not far out of line with the formal census figures. However, when asked further whether respondents actively practised their religion, i.e. by attending regular church services, only 31 per cent said «yes» and 69 per cent said «no». Brown leaves matters at this point – with the implication that the claimed Christian identity is either very tenuous or in fact spurious. It is noteworthy that the test apparently given for what it is actively to practise religion is that of «attending regular church services». What is a «regular church service»? Were respondents really being asked whether they attended church regularly? And how many of those who said «no» to attending «regular church services» nevertheless did so occasionally or spasmodically? It may be that if respondents had been offered some other indicator of the extent to which they «actively practised their religion» other than that of «attending regular church services» the yes/no percentage responses would have been different. The implication from Brown's use of this survey is that what he has admitted to be an «apparent contradiction» is not in fact a real one, though he does not say so explicitly. Yet will that do? Why is it that in a starkly «secular» society, as it is presented, in which Christians are described as a «tiny minority» such a massive percentage of the population nevertheless wishes formally to claim a Christian identity? The scale of this disparity is such that it cannot simply be «noted» and the central thesis be left largely untroubled.

It does, of course, entail a continuing, serious grappling with those questions which have long been familiar to historians but which will not go away. They concern the very nature of religion itself, in this instance of Christianity, and what it is to «believe» in it, what it is to «belong» to it and what it is to «practise» it – and how far adherence to all three elements, or maybe just one, is a sufficient indication, for the historian, of «authentic» Christianity. That such questions are never simply answered may be readily conceded but without an elaboration of their complexity it is difficult to understand what might be meant by characterising Edwardian Britain as «The Faith Society». Brown recognizes that religion is a very difficult topic for study, even for academics. This is because, he thinks, it is a «thing» that has to be studied in terms of its consequences (church buildings, the formation of church groups and the people's religious behaviour) and not some «thing» itself. There is, he suggests, no isolatable «essence» of religion which can be studied. We only pursue the reflection or shadow. The very definition of religion, he thinks, is that it is founded upon belief and is not susceptible to proof (though whether, if so, it is unique in this respect is another matter). Yet it is possible to see that the specific content of that belief (and its purported implications) can be investigated. In so doing, it becomes apparent that if the «essence» of religion cannot be isolated, what has been held to be the «essence» of Christianity has been in contention from its very beginning and has admitted of contested answers in very different contexts.

What is the relationship, to revert to Eliot, between the development of an individual culture, the consolidation of a group culture and the culture of a whole society. In becoming a Christian in 1927 Eliot, as an individual, was very well aware of the fact that most of those with whom he had associated were not Chris-

tians. There were, therefore, clearly circumstances in which the culture of the individual was at variance either with the group or with what might be judged, from a certain point of view, with that of English culture as a whole in 1927. But he also recognized that the culture of the individual could not be isolated from that of the group, and that the culture of the group could not be abstracted from that of the whole society. It would be a mistake to think that each activity of culture would be distinct and exclusive. On the contrary, it was only «by an overlapping and sharing of interests, by participation and mutual appreciation, that the cohesion necessary for culture can obtain».<sup>32</sup> Identity, whether religious, cultural or national, was – and is – a messy business.

*Keith Robbins*, Vice-Chancellor Emeritus, University of Wales, Lampeter

<sup>32</sup> Cited in John Hayward, ed., *T.S.Eliot: Selected Prose*; London 1959, 247.