Hugh McLeod

The Religious Crisis of the 1960s

The 1960s were a period of decisive change in the religious history of the Western world – including not only western Europe, but the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Historians disagree as to when the ‘Sixties’ began and ended, but here I will borrow Arthur Marwick’s concept of a ‘long Sixties’, lasting from about 1958 to 1974.¹ In the religious history of the West these years may come to be seen as marking a rupture as profound as that brought about by the Reformation.

First, and most obviously, nearly every Western country saw a decline in church membership and attendance, and a drop in the number of clergy and other religious professionals. In many cases the drop was severe. For instance, while 825 secular priests had been ordained in France in 1956, by 1975 the figure was 181. The proportion of Dutch Catholics attending mass in a week fell by half in just ten years between 1965 and 1975.² During this period large numbers of people lost the habit of regular religious worship, and the social significance of priests and nuns diminished because their numbers had diminished so considerably.³

Second, the ‘long Sixties’ saw a weakening of the processes by which Christian identity and knowledge of Christianity had been passed on to the younger generation. In some countries there was a substantial fall in the proportion of infants baptised, children attending Sunday Schools or catechism classes, and adolescents confirmed. In England, for instance, the latter statistic fell by half between 1956 and 1975.⁴ Religious education in schools continued, but it seems likely that this was less effective as a means of Christian socialisation than religious teaching in the home and in institutions, such as Sunday schools, directly connected with the church.

3 For the crisis of the Catholic clergy, see ibid., 1–40.
Third, this period saw a great multiplication of the world-views accessible to those in their formative years. In the 1950s the main options had been Christianity, Socialism and Scientism – or some combination of Christianity and Socialism, or of Socialism and Scientism. Other possibilities existed of course for the intellectually enterprising, but those who sought out more esoteric alternatives were likely to be dismissed as eccentrics. By the 1970s the options had widened enormously to include not only many new forms of Christianity and Socialism, but also various non-Christian religions and many kinds of «alternative spirituality». Moreover, the period since the late 1960s had seen a flowering of feminism of many kinds. What had seemed eccentric in the Fifties now seemed to reflect a healthy degree of independent-mindedness. By the Eighties and Nineties the fashion was for eclecticism – a deliberate mixing of elements drawn from different belief-systems, or a casual assumption that the boundaries between them were irrelevant. My favourite example of the latter is the England footballer, David Beckham, who, when asked whether he and his pop-singer wife Victoria would have their son Brooklyn christened, replied: «I definitely want Brooklyn christened, but I don’t know into what religion yet.»

Fourth, changes in the laws relating to such contentious issues as abortion and divorce, and changes in the treatment of religion by the media, reflected the assumption that what had formerly been professedly «Christian» societies were now «pluralist» societies, in which there was no consensus in some key areas of belief and ethics, and where the rights of a variety of groups, Christian and non-Christian, needed to be recognised.

In this paper I aim to describe and explain this crisis in popular religiosity and in the social role of Christianity. Starting with the long-term preconditions for, and the short-terms precipitants of, the revolution in the Sixties, I will then go on to offer a narrative of the events of those years, emphasising the dynamic of change which built up in the course of the decade. My examples will be taken predominantly, though not exclusively, from Britain. My approach is similar to that employed by the Dutch sociologist, Leo Laeyendecker, in his study of The Postwar Generation and Establishment Religion in the Netherlands. Laeyendecker argued that the dramatic changes in the 1960s and ’70s needed to be understood with reference to three different levels of change: that of long-term processes, among which he instances «modernisation»; that of medium-term processes such as «depillarisation», and that of «catalysts», among which he includes the Second Vatican Council and the Dutch Pastoral Council.

5 For the growth of «alternative spiritualities» in England since the 1960s, see P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, The Spiritual Revolution (Oxford, 2004).
1. Interpreting Religious Change

Sociologists whose understanding of religion in the modern world is founded on the classical theories of secularisation, as advanced by Weber and Durkheim, see the events of the 1960s as a perfect illustration of the general secularising trends in modern societies, but they have seldom addressed the specificity of the 1960s.\(^8\) However, a growing number of sociologists and, more especially of historians, have seen the speed of religious change in the 1960s, and especially the contrasts between the 1960s and the decades immediately preceding, as a problem. Here I will divide their interpretations into four categories, according to whether they stress long-term or short-term factors, and whether they highlight religious or economic, social and cultural factors when explaining religious change in the Sixties.

As an example of Group A – those who mainly highlight long-term factors, but who explain the specific crisis of the 1960s in terms of religious factors, I will take the Australian historian Alan Gilbert.\(^9\) Gilbert sees secularisation in Britain as the product of a long-term evolution and his chief emphasis is on the impact of industrialisation and urbanisation in the nineteenth century. However, his account of the 1960s focuses mainly on what he regards as misguided attempts at theological modernisation. The main culprit is identified as John Robinson whose best-selling work of popular theology, *Honest to God* (1963), is described by Gilbert as «a vital event in the making of post-Christian Britain». According to Gilbert, all religious groups are, and are likely to remain, small minorities in the modern world. But those with the best survival chances are Evangelicals and, to a lesser extent conservative Catholics, who are able to establish tightly-knit sub-cultures with highly distinctive and dogmatic beliefs and moral rules. Liberals like Robinson fatally opened the way for doubt and a massive growth in agnosticism. The debates which he sparked off enabled doubters «actually to admit their unbelief», and alienated many of those who had accepted Christianity in a passive and unreflecting way. He quotes one ex-church-goer as saying that «now the parsons are contradicting everything they have said».\(^10\)

As an example of group B – those who highlight long-term factors, and explain the crisis of the 1960s mainly in economic and social terms, I will take the Belgian sociologist Karel Dobbelkaere, a prolific writer on secularisation and a champion of the classical approach. Most such exponents have been content to establish that there is a general relationship between modernisation and the decline of tradi-

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\(^8\) See, for instance, St. Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford, 1996), which argues strongly for a general «erosion of the supernatural» in the modern Western world, and offers numerous examples of the diminution over time of religious belief and behaviour, but which provides very generalised explanations of these trends, and makes little attempt to link them with specific events or to identify specific periods of time as being particularly significant.


\(^10\) Ibid., 121–123, 133–157.
tional forms of religious belief and practice and to explain the reasons why this is so. They have not been much concerned with the precise details of when, where and how this decline has taken place. Dobelaere is one of the few who has recognised it as a problem that as late as the 1950s levels of traditional belief and practice remained so high in many parts of the Western world – his own home-base of Flanders being a notable example. His solution is to suggest that there may be a considerable time-lag between the changing of the social conditions which underpinned certain patterns of behaviour and the actual changes in behaviour. Thus in the first half of the twentieth century, improved technology was already weakening belief in God («When people take command of their world, God is more and more removed from it»), and social differentiation was marginalizing the church, but old religious practices continued in the 1940s and ’50s through force of habit. This disjunction was, however, the reason why the change in behaviour, when it came in the years 1967–1973, was so explosive. The youth revolt was partly propelled by the recognition that the religion of their parents was a sham and no longer corresponded with their real underlying beliefs. And once the youngsters had exposed the sham, it became easier for the older generation to give up their religion too.11

Group C comprises those who stress the suddenness of the crisis in the 1960s and who see its main causes as being religious. I will take the example of Gérard Cholvy and Yves-Marie Hilaire, doyens of French Catholic history. Referring to the familiar description of the years 1945–1973 as the «Trente Glorieuses» – the ‘Thirty Glorious Years’ of French economic growth – they describe the years 1930–1960 as the «Trente Glorieuses» of modern French Catholicism, during which organisations multiplied, intellectual life flourished, levels of observance stabilised after the severe decline in the nineteenth century, and Catholics gained a new degree of prominence in public life. They see problems beginning to surface in the later Fifties, but the real crisis came, they suggest, in the later Sixties, in the aftermath of Vatican II. They do not (as some conservative Catholics do) blame the Council itself, and they emphasise that French Protestantism faced similar problems. However, they note that the Council raised expectations to an unrealistically high level, causing an inevitable mood of disillusion when these could not be met; they also criticise poor leadership, half-baked reforms stemming from the Council, the love affair with Marxism on the part of radicals in both churches, and the «spirit of ’68», weakening the churches from within, as well as establishing a wider social mood of hostility to institutions, hierarchies and discipline.12

Group D comprises those who emphasise short-term factors, and give priority to social, economic or cultural changes. This approach is perhaps the most fashionable at the moment, and a leading exponent is Callum Brown, Professor of Religious and Cultural History at the University of Dundee in Scotland. As much as, or even more than Cholvy and Hilaire, Brown emphasises the extent of the religious upturn in the 1940s and ’50s, and he goes much further in emphasising the sudden and drastic nature of the downturn, which he dates from 1963. Brown argues that women had played the key role in British religion in the nineteenth and early twentieth century: they internalised religious teachings in a way that few men did, they were the mainstay of church congregations and organisations, and they passed religious beliefs and habits on to the younger generation. However, the system collapsed in the Sixties when women adopted new aspirations and identities, and began to reject the patriarchal and puritanical values promoted by the churches.13

My own view is that although each of these writers has important insights to offer, none of these approaches is entirely satisfactory. My doubts relate partly to methodology and partly to chronology. As an example of the former, I find it hard to believe that one single factor can carry so much of the burden of explanation as it does in Brown’s account, or that so much can be blamed on mistakes by particular individuals as happens in the book by Cholvy and Hilaire. As regards chronology: there is a need to take more seriously both the specificity of the Sixties, and indeed specific events in the Sixties, and the long-term preconditions that made the changes in that period possible. The way for the Sixties was prepared by developments in the early twentieth century – and indeed by those in the nineteenth and even the eighteenth century. But we also need to take account of the short-term triggers that precipitated these events. Writers like Brown emphasise the suddenness of the Sixties revolution by exaggerating the extent of the Christian hegemony in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. On the other hand, those who see ‘modernity’ as such as being unfavourable to religion tend to brush aside much of the historical evidence as to how secularisation has actually happened. For instance, they tend to take it for granted that the most ‘modern’ communities or social groups will lead the way in rejection of religion and the church.14 Some examples can be given in support of this contention, but there are also many contrary examples. Indeed, the highest levels of alienation from the church have often been founded in economically backward regions, such as southern Spain.15

14 Cf. Dobbelare, «Secularization».
2. Long-Term Preconditions for the Sixties

The religious revolution of the Sixties did not come as a bolt from the blue, but the way was prepared by trends in western societies going back for decades, or even centuries. This does not mean that the events of the Sixties were the inevitable result of these long-term trends: on the contrary, they were also dependent on other more immediate factors, which will be discussed later. Here I will briefly mention two of these long-term trends, and will discuss a third at greater length.

Most obviously, critics of Christianity in the 1960s were heirs to traditions of religious criticism in the Western world, going back at least to the 1690s. The 1960s added little that was new to the philosophical, historical and scientific debates about God, religion and Christianity, which had been initiated by the Deists and in which such figures as Voltaire, Hume, Feuerbach, Strauss, Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud had played key roles. One work of religious polemic published in 1968 expressed surprise that Christianity had survived these earlier attacks. While the accusations that Christianity was anti-Semitic and anti-feminist reflected newer concerns, most of the argument drew heavily on Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.

The «sexual revolution» of the 1960s was also made possible by longer-term changes in thinking about sex and in the presentation of sexual themes in literature, art and the media, which had been developing gradually since about 1880. In spite of the enormous differences between them, the psychology of Freud, the romanticism of D. H. Lawrence, the astringent realism of Ibsen, the melodrama of Munch or of Wedekind, all served both to highlight the centrality of sexuality in the life of the individual and in human relations and to subvert the existing conventions of sexual morality. Hollywood, the most powerful force in popular culture from the 1930s to the 1950s, idealised romantic love and, whatever the limitations imposed by the «Code», built its films round the physical attractions of the leading actors and actresses. Kinsey’s studies of human sexual response (1948–1953) influenced future behaviour: by suggesting that practices regarded as deviant were much more widespread than was generally realised, he helped to establish their «normality». In Britain, since the 1920s, but more especially during the 1950s, advice literature was placing an increasingly heavy emphasis on the sexual dimension of marital happiness – and demographic historians have found that couples were following the advice in the manuals: Hera Cook suggests that the post-World War II baby boom was caused partly by increasing numbers of pre-marital pregnancies, but more especially by increasingly frequent intercourse by married couples at a time when contraception was widely used but not fully effective.17 In short, the norms of sexual morality

prescribed by the churches, and the culture of sexual restraint that often went with the morality, as well as the taboos surrounding the open discussion of sexual matters and the explicit depiction of sex in literature and film, were all under considerable strain by the mid-twentieth century. The catalyst for the «sexual revolution» of the Sixties was the contraceptive pill, available in the United States from 1960, and in Europe from 1961. But the ground for this «revolution» was already well prepared.

The most important aspect of the long-term background to the Sixties is the history of emancipation from the ancien régime, with its confessional state, social hierarchy and political exclusions.\(^{18}\) Politics played a much bigger part than intellectual debate in alienating significant sections of the population from the church in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century emancipation from the old order had been mainly collective: political parties, newspapers, trade unionism, peasant leagues, and so on, emerged to represent the interests of previously subordinate social groups; religious minorities gained freedom of worship and political rights; free churches were formed. Political and religious emancipation were closely linked, but their relationship varied considerably from one country to another. We can distinguish between societies that were (a) religiously polarised (b) pillarised (c) pluralist or (d) dominated by nationalism. Each of these situations led to different kinds of interaction between religion and politics, different kinds of religious mobilisation, and different levels of support for secularist and freethinking movements.

Polarised societies, such as France and Spain, were those in which a dominant church, usually Catholic, faced a powerful movement of anti-clericals, and the conflict took very intense and sometime violent forms. Religious issues were at the heart of politics, with Catholicism being integral to the Right and anti-clericalism to the Left. Levels of mobilisation on both sides were high, and there were stark contrasts between Catholic regions, such as Brittany or Navarre, marked by overwhelmingly high levels of Catholic practice, and anti-clerical strongholds like the Limousin or Andalusia, where levels of Catholic practice were extremely low. Pillarised societies, of which the Netherlands were the classic example, were marked by the presence of three or more major confessional or ideological communities, none of which was strong enough to dominate the others, and each of which tended to form tightly-knit sub-cultures held together by a huge range of organisations, aiming to cater for all aspects of their members’ non-working lives. Here political relationships tended to be governed by compromise and the need for alliances. On the other hand the daily lives of those of different political and religious persuasions remained largely separate. Again levels of religious mobili-

\(^{18}\) For fuller discussion, see H. McLeod, Religion and the People of Western Europe 1789–1989 (Oxford, 1997), 15–21 and passim.
sation tended to be quite high. Support for freethought movements was also quite high, especially among Socialists. Pluralist societies, such as Britain or the United States, were marked by the presence of large numbers of different religious denominations, many of them small, providing for every nuance of religious opinion. Freethought movements were of relatively limited importance – partly because political dissent could be expressed through one of the many dissident forms of Christianity. One result was that early Socialism, which in continental Europe was usually linked with secularism, was in Britain strongly influenced by religious Nonconformity. Here it was also easier to remain religiously more or less neutral than in the polarised or pillarised societies. Societies dominated by nationalist struggles saw very high levels of involvement in the church in countries such as Ireland or Poland where the national movement was closely linked with Catholicism, or very low levels in countries such as Bohemia or Estonia where it tended to take a more secular form.

These patterns, established in the nineteenth century continued to have a major influence right up to the 1950s. Religion and politics were closely related, and in the majority of countries religious variables were the best predictors of how a person or a community would vote. There were often concentrations of people with the same kind of religion or irreligion in the same place. Confessional differences were pervasive, affecting many areas of life. The result was that patterns of religious involvement varied widely between countries, between social classes, sometimes between confessions. Although the current fashion as represented in the work of such historians as Callum Brown, Patrick Pasture or Olaf Blaschke is to see the Sixties as the «Secularisation Decade», there were many parts of Europe where attachment to the church had collapsed long before that time. On the other hand, the traditional views that sees secularisation as the inevitable result of industrialisation and urbanisation or of the rise of science have to face the facts that there is no straightforward correlation between secularisation and levels of either industrialisation or education.

The confessional and ideological communities which played such a central role in most Western societies placed strict limits on their members’ rights to individual freedom of thought and action. The conformist pressure came from priests and politicians, from church or party newspapers, but crucially it was enforced by the state, sometimes religious and other times civil. As we have seen, the extent of such constraining has shaped the ways in which the establish religious institutions have been used to control dissent, to promote various versions of secularisation, and to ensure the continued power of the church in society.

References

21 See, for instance, the extensive international data in Western Religion, ed. H. Mol (The Hague, 1974).
at the local level by family and neighbours. A lower middle class Manchester Catholic, born in 1942, recalls that he and his parents, his sisters and his grandparents, all went to church together:

«I mean, it was a thing you had to do, you went on Sunday and that was that. [...] it was a sort of family thing really, where we were all brought up in that particular faith, and as I say it was a condition, there was no excuses for missing church […]».24

A working-class Catholic from Preston, born in 1945, complained that when priests visited «It was always, yes father, no father», and that until she married at 20 and became independent of her parents, «I couldn’t fall off, not going to church»:

«I mean we weren’t allowed to discuss anything at home. I mean if you didn’t agree with anything at home. I mean if you didn’t agree with anything, I used to start off saying like, ‘I don’t agree with this,’ and it was like a closed shop, you don’t talk about it you know, you don’t discuss religion. I mean my mum was ill and she went to Lourdes, and like I don’t really agree with Lourdes, but my mum went, and I think I had a discussion with her before she went. And I was saying things like, ‘Do you agree with this?’ and she was saying ‘You have to agree with this’. She was saying it was something you had to do, and if you were asked to go to Lourdes by your church, it was your duty to go. Even though you had to pay.»25

Political loyalties were equally deeply engrained. A Lancashire working-class woman, born around the time of World War I, told her daughter «I was born a Tory and I will die a Tory».26 Norman Brown, born in Kent in 1946, the son of a printer and a nurse commented that: «I think me father had sort of had Labour beaten into him. Certainly me grandparents had always voted Labour and would never have voted Conservative.»27 Jean Thomas, born in Staffordshire in 1936, whose father was manager of a Co-op grocery, recalls that when she was growing up «it was always that the Labour Party and the Socialists were right and the others were wrong […] it was very much one-sided». She remained «very, very Socialist minded» as a young adult but eventually switched to the Liberals.28

24 «Families, Social Mobility and Ageing: A Multi-Generational Approach», [henceforth FSMA], interview 45, (National Sound Archive, British Library, London.) All references to these interviews are to the unpaginated transcripts. All names given in quotations from oral history interviews are pseudonyms.

25 «Social and Family Life 1940–1970» [henceforth SFL], interview with Mrs R1P, 21–23 (Oral History Archive, Centre for North-West Regional Studies, University of Lancaster). All references are to the paginated transcripts.

26 SFL, interview with Mrs B10P, 69.

27 FSMA, interview 98.

28 Ibid., interview 135.
a variety of social backgrounds and of different political convictions: Communists, on the other hand, often lived within a more strictly circumscribed world. An account of Communist life in Paris during the years 1944–1964 notes how «Solidarities chained each to each, by contamination: the family, the workshop, the tenement, the neighbourhood, the Party, the Union,» and how these loyalties were underpinned both by resentment of those living in the wealthy west of the city and by a fear of betrayal. Here too, in spite of the key role of popular activism, authoritarian styles of leadership were normal, with local sections being described as «little kingdoms».  

By the later 1950s, as some of the quotations above indicate, there were signs of frustration. In Germany, for instance, Catholic priests were noticing that the young would come to mass, but object to going to confession. In the Netherlands, Catholic intellectuals were incensed by a pastoral letter of 1954 condemning membership of socialist organisations; their journals increasingly condemned the isolation of the Catholic community and the authoritarianism of the bishops. By the early 1960s a new generation of bishops was accepting the need for a different style of leadership – and some of the older bishops were also having second thoughts. Similarly large numbers of west European Communists decided that they had had enough when they were asked to accept the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956.

One aspect of collective emancipation in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth was that the supreme virtue was loyalty to one’s own ideological community. The main theme of the last four decades of the twentieth century was the drive for greater individual freedom. Very often the churches and political parties which had once evoked such strong emotions seemed to be standing in the way. The economic and social revolution of the 1960s created a situation in which the ties of community and family became looser, and rebellion became much easier.

3. Short-Term Factors Shaping the Sixties

The most important of the short-term factors shaping the Sixties was the «affluence» which gradually superseded post-war austerity in most western countries. This was happening by the mid-1950s in Britain, and by the late 1950s in West Germany, though one French sociologist dates the beginnings of affluence in that country as late as 1965.\(^32\) It was a time of full employment when rising living standards enabled the mass of the people to enjoy what had previously been luxuries, such as cars, foreign holidays and home ownership, and when television became an important part of life for those in all social classes. Growing national wealth also made possible other important social changes, such as the expansion of higher education in the 1960s and the large growth of employment in services.

The impact of these changes was greatest in rural areas, as has been vividly shown by the French sociologist Yves Lambert in his study of the Breton village of Limerzel. In this strongly Catholic community, 92 percent of the population still attended mass regularly in 1958. By 1975 the proportion had fallen to around 55 percent. During those few years, major social changes had taken place, including the decline of agriculture and the rise of employment in industry and services; the arrival of television and the increasing availability of magazines and newspapers published in Paris; rising car ownership, opening up the possibility of Sunday trips to the seaside or to visit relatives. Young men in their 20s and 30s, who had in the past been less involved in the church than women or older men were now tending to stop going to church at all. Later, many teenagers began to follow their example. Manual workers and shopkeepers were those most likely to give up going to church, while farmers remained more faithful.\(^33\)

As Lambert comments, «This is a period of often dramatic conflicts between parents attached to religious practice and young people (then adolescents) who are increasingly reticent.»\(^34\) The distinctive rural cultures, which had survived into the post-war era, and which were often marked by strong loyalties to a church or a political party were now in general decline both because of rural depopulation and because of the growing dominance of urban influences.\(^35\)

Affluence also funded the youth culture which was emerging in the later 1950s, focused on rock ‘n’ roll, new styles of clothes, sometimes drugs, and an increasingly freewheeling approach to sex.\(^36\) The first heroes of the youth culture were singers, such as Elvis Presley and Bill Haley, and in the 1960s, popular music, and


\(^{34}\) Ibid., 243.

\(^{35}\) Mendras, Seconde Révolution, 28–34, 79, 93.

\(^{36}\) See, for instance, B. Osgerby, Youth in Britain since 1945 (Oxford, 1998), 25–63.
above all the Beatles, came to be seen as the main expression of the spirit of the age and the basis for a completely new set of values. This youth culture challenged the churches both indirectly and sometimes very directly. The indirect challenge lay in the fact that the churches were extensively involved in youth work. In the 1950s large numbers of teenagers belonged to parish youth clubs or other Christian groups, including uniformed organisations and sports teams, or spent their Saturday evenings at church sponsored dances.  

By the Sixties many young people were earning enough money to be able to look at alternatives, and there is some evidence that the competition was winning. For example in West Germany membership of Catholic youth groups fell from 860,000 to 450,000 between 1953 and 1964. The youth culture could present a direct challenge in so far it was associated with values of hedonism, unlimited experimentation, or the individual’s right to live life in their own way without regard for any external moral code, which clashed with the more austere values generally fostered by the churches. Interviewed by oral historians some twenty-five years later, women who had been teenagers in the Sixties recalled some of the new opportunities of that era. Mrs Horwich, born in 1945, was living with her parents while working in a hospital in Preston in the middle and later Sixties. She recalled the tensions with her mother that stemmed from her «Swinging Sixties social activities», such as «enjoying clothes and hairstyles and freedom and sexual freedom», as well as «the music» and «a lot of drinking and boozing with friends». She also mentioned the influence of teenage magazines which «changed and started advertising contraceptives and all sorts of advice on relationships», and of D. H. Lawrence’s Women in Love — «I thought this is terrific this, talking about real people and relationships and complications and mental attitudes.»

Sandra Wilson, also born in 1945 and brought up in a Lancashire industrial town, described the gradual change from a social life based on the church to one based on the pub, especially under the influence of her future husband whom she met at 17 and who «didn’t go to church […], who liked drinking, liked dancing, liked going to night clubs, liked gambling». For several years she maintained a «double life», with «friends from the church» and «the boozy night life type of life that I’d come to like» — but it was the boozy night life that eventually won out. One important aspect of the widening range of commercial entertainments that became available in the 1960s is that they were open to anyone who could pay. In areas like Lancashire, where the divide between Protestant and Catholic was still deep in the 1950s, church-based youth clubs, dance halls and football clubs were among the institutions which helped to keep many people within a confessional sub-culture. A man from a strongly Protestant Lancash...
shire family recalls the day in the late 1950s when his sister invited a young Catholic man to tea: «I remember for the first few visits at least, the very strained atmosphere, because we expected someone with two heads.» As increasing numbers of teenagers could afford to go, or to go more frequently, to coffee bars, pubs, commercial dance-halls and pop concerts, encounters across the sectarian divide became commonplace.

The booming economy of these years was among the factors which made the student revolts of the later Sixties possible, since full employment meant that those who failed their exams or were thrown out of university still had excellent prospects of finding a job. As Arthur Marwick suggests «The unique ingredient which made it possible for all these movements to develop and expand was […] economic security, which underwrote innovation and daring, and minimized attendant risks.» For similar reasons, working class youth were tending to be less deferential to parents and employers. The British oral historian, Elizabeth Roberts, quotes a Lancashire woman (born 1947) who walked out of her factory job in the early 1960s after a dispute with the supervisor, and who recalled that «at that time you could do that. You could leave a job on Thursday and get another job on Monday. Not like now.» Roberts commented on another of her interviewees (born 1944), who had frequent confrontations with his father: «Mr Rowlandson was different from his working-class, teenage predecessors in several ways: he had his own key, he stayed out far later than was traditional; he saw lots of women, even when he was going out with the girl he eventually married; and he had a car at eighteen.» Roberts also suggests that this less deferential attitude may have affected attitudes to other forces of authority, such as the church. She quotes Mrs Horwich (mentioned above) who came from a lower middle class family, and who attended church as a teenager. She recalled that «I often had to hold back from shouting arguments at the pulpit. It didn’t seem fair that you had to be talked to, to be so receptive without saying anything back.»

The affluence of these years also had more subtle influences on many ordinary working class and lower middle class families, whose members had no interest in the more spectacular manifestations of nonconformity in this period, but who were wanting to enjoy the new opportunities which prosperity presented and to throw off some of the puritanical restraints that they had inherited from the years of wartime and post-war austerity. Those who were buying their own house often found their weekends taken up with Do It Yourself activities. Elizabeth

41 SFL, interview with Mr M10L, 23.
42 Interviews with several hundred English Catholics found that from the 1930s to the later 1950s the proportion who married non-Catholics remained stable at about 30 percent, but that there was then a continuous increase, with 47 percent of those marrying in the 1960s choosing a non-Catholic partner, and 67 percent of those marrying in the 1970s. M. Hornsby-Smith, Roman Catholics in England: Studies in Social Structure since the Second World War (Cambridge, 1987), 94.
43 Marwick, Sixties, 37.
Roberts, whose studies of the working class in north-west England cover both the early twentieth century and the 1950s and ’60s, comments that in the latter period «few seemed to have experienced a crisis of faith or a dispute with the church – both situations which had been evident earlier in the century. Instead, correspondents spoke of being too busy creating a home to go to church, having other things to do.»45 A typical example was Jill Barker (born 1944 in Preston), who went to church regularly as a teenager, but «after we got married we never bothered». A major reason was that her husband worked most of Saturday and Sunday: «I think we wanted to buy new things, didn’t we, and that were the thing; we wanted carpets and stair carpets and new furniture.»46

Similarly, Roberts notes a declining interest in politics and trade unions.47 Political parties built on powerful class identities suffered from the growing blurring of class lines around the middle of the social hierarchy and the increasing tendency of those of different classes to dress alike, live in the same kind of house, and have similar leisure interests. Interviews with those brought up in the 1950s and ’60s repeatedly show a pattern whereby a strong inherited political identity was rejected in favour of a different and often more weakly held identity, a strictly pragmatic approach to politics, or even complete indifference. Michael Thompson was born in Aldershot in 1945. His father, an aircraft technician, was strongly Labour, but he had «just got total apathy about politics» and said that he had not voted for years. Brenda Clark was born in 1946 in a Yorkshire working-class family. Her father was a member of the Labour party, but she voted «on consideration at the time, rather than a sort of deep felt connection either Conservative or Labour.»48 The weakening of political identities was reflected in declining membership of political parties. The peak year for both Labour and Conservative parties was 1952, when the Conservative membership stood at 2.8 million. By 1958 it was down to 2.2 million, and in the early 1970s it was less than 1.5 million, with some reports suggesting that active membership was much lower.49

Other changes, both social and ideological were weakening the hold of those churches and political parties which depended on a powerful sense of common identity and of the need for solidarity in the face of a common enemy. A striking and well-documented example is that of Quebec, where the association between national identity and Catholicism remained strong up to the 1950s, underpinned

45 Ibid., 16.
46 SFL, interview with Mrs G7P, 90.
47 Roberts, Women, 15–16.
48 FSMA, interviews 32 and 141.
49 St. Ball, «Local Conservatism and the evolution of party organisation», in Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900, ed. A. Seldon and St. Ball (Oxford, 1994), 292; St. Bartolini, The Political Mobilization of the European Left, 1960–1980: The Class Cleavage (Cambridge, 2000), 265–268, shows that membership of Communist parties, as a proportion of the electorate, in countries not under Communist rule generally peaked in the later 1940s, except in Finland where it was in the early 1960s. Patterns for Socialist parties were more variable, but the peak was most often in the 1950s.
both by resentment at the political and economic hegemony of English-speaking Canadians, and by the fact that the clergy were the largest and most widely influential body of well-educated people. The ‘Quiet Revolution’ of the Sixties, which weakened the position of the church, has been attributed to the emergence of a ‘new middle class’ which was ready to challenge what they saw as the excessive power of the clergy.\textsuperscript{50} No doubt parallel situations could be found in some regions of Europe. For instance John Coleman in his study of Dutch Catholicism in the Sixties, highlights the growth in the Forties and Fifties in the number of middle class Catholics, often employed in Catholic schools and hospitals, and resentful of the authoritarian style of leadership practised by many of the clergy.\textsuperscript{51}

Around the end of the Fifties there were also signs of important changes in elite opinion, which helped prepare the way for many of the legislative and institutional innovations of the next decade. These changes were referred to rather obliquely by the Swedish parliamentary commission on educational reform which in 1962 recommended a switch from confessional to ‘objective’ religious education: «Today different conceptions of questions about outlooks on life manifest themselves within our people, and old normative systems, which many people still consider valid, have by others been replaced by new ones.»\textsuperscript{52} The same trends can be seen in Britain, though here the emphasis was more on extending the sphere of individual freedom of conscience. Thus the Wolfenden Report of 1957, which was widely discussed throughout the English-speaking world, and which won the support of both the Anglican and the Methodist churches, recommended the decriminalisation of male homosexuality. Two key distinctions were made in the Report: first between the ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres, in the second of which the state should only intervene in exceptional circumstances; and between ‘morality’, which properly concerns the whole of life, and ‘law’, which is much more limited in its scope.\textsuperscript{53} While the government did not at the time accept these recommendations, a large part of elite opinion was persuaded, and the ground was prepared for the sweeping extensions of individual freedom in the Sixties.

The 1920s and ’30s in Britain had seen the beginnings of a number of campaigns, often supported by coalitions of Rationalists and liberal Christians, which only achieved their objectives in the 1960s. For instance the Abortion Law Reform Association was established in 1936, and in 1937 the government appointed a committee to take evidence on this issue. Already in the 1930s some church leaders were arguing that in a situation of increasing pluralism in morality and

\textsuperscript{50} K. McRoberts, Quebec: Social Change and Political Crisis, 3\textsuperscript{rd} edition (Toronto, 1988), 147 –157.
\textsuperscript{51} Coleman, Dutch Catholicism, 48 –57, 81 –82.
\textsuperscript{52} D. Alvunger, «A secularised Lutheran kingdom of the Swedish nation?» (paper given at Modern History Seminar, University of Birmingham, 19 May 2004), 12.
belief, the laws could not simply be based on Christian principles. Thus at the time of the reform of the divorce law in 1937, the Archbishop of Canterbury, C. G. Lang, commented that «it was no longer possible to impose the full Christian standard by law on a largely non-Christian population».\textsuperscript{54} However, the identity of Britain as a Christian nation was strongly confirmed by World War II, and by the ensuing Cold War.\textsuperscript{55} This was exemplified in the Education Act of 1944, which made religious education in state schools compulsory, and decreed that the school day should begin with an act of common worship. It was also reflected in the programming of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), whose Director General, Sir William Haley, had declared in 1948 that Britons were «citizens of a Christian country», and that «the BBC – an institution set up by the State – bases its policy upon a positive attitude towards Christian values».\textsuperscript{56} By the later 1950s, however, the need for cohesion and strongly defined moral and religious values with which to confront the Nazi and then Communist dangers no longer seemed so evident, and the costs of such cohesion in terms of loss of freedom, and sometimes of human suffering, were becoming more apparent. Moreover the real diversity of British religion was also becoming increasingly recognised – not because of the still very small numbers of Muslims and Hindus, but because of the significant minorities of agnostics and atheists, as well as the majority of non-church-going Christians. This was reflected in the BBC’s Sunday evening religious television programme, Meeting Point, so called because it would «seek to bring together those who believe that man is a spiritual being and those who believe no such thing»\textsuperscript{57}. It started in 1956 and ran right through to 1968, providing, in the view of its critics, a vehicle for the liberal theology and «New Morality» of the decade. While programmes became more frankly provocative as time went on, right from the beginning they were based on the formula of picking a controversial issue and then presenting two or more opposing views. For instance in February 1957 a theologian and zoologist were discussing the «cruelty of nature», which «presents the Christian with one of his toughest problems», and in the following year a Christian and an atheist were discussing «Humanism and Morals».\textsuperscript{58} The first of the major items of liberalising legislation which characterised the next decade came in 1959: the Obscene Publi-

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 104.
\textsuperscript{55} For the religious impact of World War II see M. Snape, God and the British Soldier (London, 2005); and for an overview of the 1940s and ’50s, see the relevant chapters of A. Hastings, A History of English Christianity 1920–1985 (London, 1986).
\textsuperscript{57} Radio Times, 12 October 1956.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 17 February 1957, 9 February 1958. For criticism, see M. Whitehouse, Who does she think she is? (London, 1971). 45. Whitehouse was a teacher who launched a «Clean Up TV» campaign in protest at what she saw as the harmful effects of BBC programmes on the pupils in her school. She also became a scourge of church leaders who, in her view, were half-hearted in their criticisms of the «new morality». 
The best overview is provided by Holden, *Makers and Manners*, though it is much stronger on the politics than on the cultural and religious background.


Damberg, "Pfarrgemeinden", 11.
the widening gap between the generations. In 1957, when 49 percent of those polled claimed to have attended church during the previous week, there was hardly any difference between the generations – in fact respondents aged between 21 and 30 were slightly more likely than older people to have been to church. From the late Fifties onwards the overall decline in church-going was very gradual, but there was a much more rapid decline in attendance by younger people. By 1971, when the overall average was 40 percent the figure for the youngest age-cohort was 28 percent.63

Second, there was the mood of aggiornamento in the churches. Most obviously this included the election of pope John XXIII in 1958, the calling of the Second Vatican Council, and such other new departures as the sending of Catholic observers to the World Council of Churches in 1961. Also reflecting the mood of the times was the publication in 1962 of Soundings, a collection of essays by a group of Anglican theologians from Cambridge University. The reception of this volume could be seen as a rehearsal for the battles surrounding the publication of more openly controversial works of *new theology* in the following year.64

Then there was the *Lady Chatterley Trial*. D. H. Lawrence’s novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, noted for its detailed descriptions of sex between a married woman and her lover and for its extensive use of so-called ‘four-letter words’, previously inadmissible in print, had been published in France in 1928. It was published for the first time in Britain in 1960 by Penguin Books, who were prosecuted for obscenity. The failure of the prosecution was a turning-point in the history of British publishing and opened up a new era in the history of the open discussion of sex and the explicit portrayal of sex in books, films and television.

5. The Mid-Sixties

In the years 1963–1966 the pace of change speeded up. For Americans 1965 came to be seen as a year of destiny dividing the optimistic early Sixties from the angst-ridden later Sixties. In that year the United States became irrevocably committed to fighting in Vietnam. Meanwhile the Voting Rights Act was the last triumph for Martin Luther King’s non-violent civil rights revolution, and the riots in Watts marked the beginning of a new phase in the struggle for racial equality. If the United States was the biggest influence on politics, Britain was for a brief period in the mid-Sixties the leader in popular culture. 1963 was the year when the Beatles

63. R. Wuthnow, *Experimentation in American Religion: The New Mysticisms and their Implications for the Churches* (Berkeley/Calif. 1978), 117–121, 130–131. The reliability of estimates of church attendance derived from polls has been hotly debated by experts on American religious statistics. St. Presser and L. Stinson, ‘Data collection and social desirability bias in self-reported religious attendance’, *American Sociological Review* 63 (1998), 137–145, make a strong case for arguing that the decline in attendance during the 1960s was greater than the polls suggested. Either way, the trend was clear.

burst into stardom in Britain, and in 1964 they became the first British singers to top the pop music charts in the United States. A recent study of Australia in the Sixties dates the beginning of the decade from the first arrival of the Fab Four on their shores in 1964.\(^{65}\) They were seen at the time as harbingers of a new era, and they remain the most universally recognisable symbol of the Sixties. Apart from their sex appeal and the hysterical behaviour of their fans – both of which were already standard ingredients of the pop music scene – their main novelty at first lay in the fact that they were both articulate and mildly irreverent. Only around 1967 did they clearly enter more controversial territory, as overt references to drugs and religion became more frequent – most notoriously in John Lennon’s claim that the Beatles were «more popular than Jesus Christ».\(^{66}\) It was also in that year that they gave their blessing to the new fashion for Eastern alternatives to Christianity by announcing that they had become disciples of the Maharishi MaheshYogi and were travelling to India in search of enlightenment.

In the Protestant churches this was a period of radical questioning. The Cambridge theologian Howard Root referred in 1963 to «a deep and inarticulate longing for liberation from all the religious and intellectual paraphernalia that have encased the gospel for centuries», and the middle years of that decade saw an outpouring of books which attempted to restate the gospel in contemporary language.\(^{67}\) John Robinson’s Honest to God, published in April 1963, is said to have been the fastest-selling work of theology ever.\(^{68}\) It was translated into at least seven languages and provoked enormous debate, especially in Britain, where some critics accused Robinson of atheism and others thanked him for saving their faith.\(^{69}\) Other popular books of the time included Harvey Cox’s Secular City (1965) and Joseph Fletcher’s Situation Ethics (1966). Less widely read, but even more widely known were the American «Death of God» theologians who inspired Time Magazine’s famous Good Friday 1966 issue with the headline «Is God Dead?»\(^{70}\) The most popular religious slogan of the time was Bonhoeffer’s «religionless Christianity». As popularly understood this included three main points: an overriding stress on the Christian obligation to build a better world here and now; a non-legalistic approach to ethics; and a critical attitude to institutions and formal dogmas.

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\(^{66}\) I. MacDonald, Revolution in the Head: The Beatles’ Records and the Sixties, 2nd edition (London, 1997), xvi–xvii, argues that Americans misunderstood, by taking too literally, comments like this, which «their English audience would instinctively identify as, at most, half serious».

\(^{67}\) Clements, Lovers of Discord, 175.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 179.

\(^{69}\) There is a detailed discussion of the debate in ibid., 178 – 214. Hilliard, «Religious crisis», 212 – 215, discusses the considerable interest in Australia in Robinson’s book, and in other works of «new theology».

For Catholics the central event of this period was of course the Second Vatican Council. The debates and behind the scenes wrangles in Rome were reported with unusual frankness in the press and eagerly followed by many priests and laypeople at home. In the latter part of the Council rival conservative and progressive pressure-groups were being formed.\textsuperscript{71} As the Council ended in 1965 Hans Küng, one of the most prominent of the progressive theologians who had acted as advisors to the Council Fathers, commented that far more progress had been made on the theoretical than on the practical front.\textsuperscript{72} This was in many ways to remain true. The Council ended with hopes for change at a very high level.\textsuperscript{73} But as the following years showed there were still many barriers in the way of making these hopes a reality.

6. The «Late» Sixties

The temperature of political and religious debate had been gradually rising in the course of the Sixties. In 1967 and 1968 it reached boiling point. At the same time contrasts in life-styles were becoming increasingly glaring as a growing minority of those influenced by the «counter-culture» experimented in increasingly provocative ways in such fields as sex, drugs, clothing, hairstyles and language.\textsuperscript{74}

The late Sixties which, according to my chronology extend from 1967 to about 1974 were a very special time. For some of those who were deeply involved in the movements of these years (or in what was known in the United States simply as «The Movement»), the rest of their lives has seemed something of an anti-climax. For others, events at this time and ideas current then can be blamed for any apparent social ill. The distinctive mood of 1968, the year that still stands as the symbol of the era, was made up in equal measures of despair and of hope. Sixty-Eighters despaired of all the dominant institutions and values of Western society, and they no longer had any faith in the kind of step by step reformism that had predominated in the early and mid-Sixties. The supreme symbol of everything that was rotten was the American war in Vietnam. At the same time, the «anti-authoritarian» movement detected oppression, injustice, sinister hierarchies in every area


\textsuperscript{73} A. Greeley, \textit{The Catholic Revolution: New Wine, Old Winestins, and the Second Vatican Council} (Berkeley/Calif., 2004), 64–65, and passim. This is a lively overview, stressing the popular impact of the Council. The literature on Vatican II and its reception is vast, the standard work on the latter topic being G. Alberigo, ed., \textit{The Reception of Vatican II} (Washington/DC, 1987); Italian ed. \textit{Il Vaticano II e la chiesa} (Brescia, 1985).

\textsuperscript{74} Something of the flavour of the British counterculture in these years can be obtained from two books by Jonathon Green, himself a former «Underground» journalist, \textit{Days in the Life: Voices from the Underground 1961–1971} (London, 1988), and \textit{All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counterculture} (London, 1999).
of society – in politics, in industry, in education, and in the church. On the other hand, they entertained messianic hopes for the new world that was coming. The same combination of despair and hope can be seen in the early years of the Women’s Liberation movement, which was the most important legacy of the late Sixties.

For both Protestant and Catholic churches the late Sixties were a period of acute crisis. In most parts of the Western world there was a serious drop in churchgoing. As already mentioned, attendances had been declining in some countries since the later Fifties. But Catholics had often remained immune to the trend. From about 1967 the trend was more or less general, and Catholics were implicated as much as Protestants. The decline in these years was particularly striking in areas previously known for high levels of religious practice. For instance, according to one estimate, the proportion of Catholics in the United States who attended mass in a given week fell from 71 percent to 40 percent between 1965–1966 and 1975.75 It was also becoming easier for atheists and agnostics to «come out». For instance, the Australian census of 1966 found less than 1 percent of the population saying they had no religion; but by 1976 it was already 8 percent.76 One reason for this rapid growth was probably that many of those whose religious affiliation had been completely nominal now felt it was socially acceptable to state that they had none. Meanwhile there was a big drop in the number of young men and women becoming priests and nuns, and in the Catholic Church there was a huge movement of resignations from the priesthood.77

In part these developments were the result of broader social trends. However, factors specific to the late Sixties must also be mentioned in accounting for the fact that exit from the church took on the character of a mass movement. First, the mood of «1968» was hostile to institutions of all kinds and to some extent anti-religious. In the United States anti-war militants accused the churches of sitting on the fence – although some of the most outspoken critics of the war were Christian ministers, such as Martin Luther King Jr, the Berigan brothers, or William Sloane Coffin, the student chaplain at Yale.78 In countries such as France and Germany, where the influence of Marxism was strong at this time, there was a tendency to dismiss religion as irrelevant to the struggle, though the most prominent French student leader, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, included Christianity and Judaism among the relics of the past that had to be swept away if the revolution were to succeed. In C’est pour toi que tu fais la révolution (1969), Cohn-Bendit

75 Presser and Stinson, «Self-reported religious attendance», 143.
78 W. Clark Roof, A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journey of the Baby Boom Generation (New York, 1993), 41, argues that a generalised distrust of institutions «whether the military, banks, public schools, Congress or organized religion», continued to characterise the American generation shaped by the Vietnam War.
condemned «hierarchy», «bureaucracy» and all «control of information and knowledge», and called on his readers «to rid ourselves in practice of the Judaeo-Christian ethic, with its call for renunciation and sacrifice. There is only one reason for being a revolutionary – because it is the best way to live.»79 The pioneers of the Women’s Liberation movement mostly had a negative view of Christianity and Judaism, though attacks on religion were usually subordinated to other concerns.80

Second, the political movements of these years had strong parallels within the churches. Especially in the Catholic Church enormous hopes were invested in such new departures as the Dutch Pastoral Council, which opened in 1966 amid high expectations that the ideals of Vatican II would now be turned into a reality, and ended in 1970.81 For Catholics the turning point was Humanae Vitae, the papal encyclical of July 1968 condemning contraception. Catholics still debate as to how far the decline in church-going can be blamed on this encyclical. But it unquestionably played a key role in the catastrophic movement of resignations from the priesthood in the years 1969–1972. Just as most older Americans claim to remember what they were doing when they heard that Kennedy had been shot, most older Catholic priests and ex-priests are said to remember what they were doing at the moment when they heard about Humanae Vitae. In a typical story, an American rural priest was driving along a remote country road when he heard the news on the car radio and uttered the two words «I quit».82 There were also sharp conflicts between radicals, conservatives and moderates in the Protestant churches. In particular, Protestant student movements were torn apart, as many of the radicals argued that working for the revolution must take priority over all other concerns.83

Third, though this suggestion is more speculative, the «sexual revolution», which Hera Cook, on the basis of a range of both literary and statistical sources, places between 1965 and 1969 in the case of Britain, may have had more influence on relations with the churches than either political or religious militancy. In the new sexual climate, this was the area where considerable numbers, especially of the younger generation, were finding their lives in most conspicuous conflict with


80 A classic example of rejection of Christianity on feminist grounds is the American theologian, Mary Daly, author of The Church and the Second Sex (1968). Many of the pioneers of British «second-wave» feminism seem either to have come from a non-religious background or to have dropped their religion long before becoming active in the women’s movement. See the collections of memories, L. Heron, ed., Truth, Dare and Promise: Girls Growing up in the Fifties (London, 1983), and M. Wandor, ed., Once a Feminist (London, 1990). Very revealing of the attitude to religion prevailing among this generation of feminists is the defensive tone of the one avowed believer among the contributors to these volumes, Alison HenneGAN: «whilst loathing many aspects of organised religion, I am a Christian in that I cannot not believe in the divinity of Christ. (I did try very hard once, in a period when faith was even less intellectually respectable than usual, but I couldn’t manage it)», in Heron, ed., Truth, Dare and Promise, 152.

81 Coleman, Dutch Catholicism, 152–174.

82 D. Rice, Shattered Vows: Exodus from the Priesthood (London, 1990), 41.

83 Cholvy and Hilaire, Histoire religieuse, 295–301.
the teachings of the churches. This conflict was probably most acute for women, and may have played a part in the distancing of many women from the church which Callum Brown identified as the most significant religious trend in the Sixties. There is at present insufficient evidence to assert this with any confidence. However, it could be a way of at least partly resolving a chronological problem in Brown’s argument, namely that «second-wave feminism», which he sees as a major cause of the decline of church-going in this period, only got off the ground after the decline in church-going was well under way.\(^8^4\)

At the same time the change from «Christian» to «pluralist» societies was also proceeding more rapidly. In Britain, for instance, the years 1967–1969 saw a series of sweeping legal changes, which according to the Labour Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, signalled the arrival of «the civilised society». These included legalisation of homosexual acts «between consenting adults in private», liberalisation of the laws on abortion and divorce, abolition of theatre censorship and provision of contraceptives to unmarried couples through the National Health Service. In Britain, these changes came in a piecemeal way, and while some passed through Parliament with little opposition, others were the end-result of prolonged political battles.\(^8^5\) In Canada, on the other hand, a similar programme was introduced in 1967 as part of one huge «omnibus bill» by the Justice Minister, Pierre Trudeau, who was unusual among the politicians of that era in the degree to which he tried to give his proposals a philosophical underpinning. As a liberal Catholic, Trudeau was critical of the power which the Catholic Church had exercised in the Quebec of his youth. He insisted that «we are not entitled to impose the principles that belong to a sacred society upon a civil or profane society». The law should recognise the existence (and maybe even the desirability) of a considerable degree of moral pluralism in contemporary society, and should respect individuals’ right to make their own moral choices.\(^8^6\) Similar legislation followed soon after in many other countries, though the legalisation of abortion caused particularly acute controversy in predominantly Catholic countries, such as France and Italy.\(^8^7\) In general the churches were divided in their attitude to these reforms. Most were opposed by conservative Protestants and supported by liberal Protestants, while Catholic attitudes were more variable.\(^8^8\) The significance for our theme is that laws which purported to be based on Christian morals were being replaced by laws which recognised the reality of contemporary moral pluralism and the need for some degree of compromise between different moral values. Church leaders quite often made a distinction between law and morality. Christian ethics should remain

\(^8^4\) Cook, Sexual Revolution, 295; Brown, Death of Christian Britain, 176–80, 191–192.

\(^8^5\) Holden, Makers and Manners, 117–172.

\(^8^6\) Egerton, «Trudeau», 95–96.


\(^8^8\) For Britain, Machin, Churches and Social Issues, 175–210; for Canada, Egerton, «Trudeau», 97.
rather strict, but the law could tolerate a wider range of behaviour. In practice most people seem not to recognise this distinction. The effect of changes in the law has been to legitimate actions which had previously been seen as morally question-able.

7. Conclusion

The messianic hopes animating the late Sixties soon faded, but meanwhile a generation of Western youth had largely given up active involvement in the church. Some would return – especially in the United States, where parenthood and political conservatism seem to have been factors favouring increased church attendance by the «baby-boomer» generation in the later Seventies and Eighties. Nor did those alienated from «mainline» Christianity necessarily become irreligious. Some switched to more evangelical churches: in Britain, for instance, the Seventies and Eighties saw a mushrooming of «house churches». «Eastern» religions and many kinds of «alternative spirituality» attracted continuing interest. But the most significant change in these years was the sharp drop in the proportion of young people receiving a Christian socialisation in the home. Three studies from the University of Sheffield in northern England illustrate this trend in a precise way. In 1961, a sample of students were asked if they had received some kind of religious upbringing, and 94 percent replied that they had. In 1972 the proportion was still 88 percent. But by 1985 it had already dropped to 51 percent. This would suggest that the period I have defined as the «late Sixties» was a turning-point and that the change was remarkably rapid. Admittedly there were considerable differences from country to country. In some predominantly Catholic countries the proportion of those saying that they had received a religious upbringing remained very high. An international survey in 1990–1991, covering all age-groups, found that it was still over 90 percent in Ireland, Italy and Spain. It was 80 percent in the United States, 71 percent in France and the Netherlands, 59 percent in the United Kingdom, 46 percent in Norway, 43 percent in Denmark and 31 percent in Sweden.

89 Roof, Generation of Seekers, 161–169. This pattern is far from unknown in Britain too: the oral history projects cited earlier found examples of those who had given up going to church when teenagers in the 1960s, but started going again when they had young children – though some of those stopped when the children grew older. Changing relations with the church across the life-cycle are a frequent theme in these interviews.

90 D. Bebbington, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s (London, 1989).


The weakening of religious socialisation reflected not only the weakening of religious faith in the new generation of parents – or at least a greater willingness openly to declare their lack of religious faith. It also arose from the overriding stress that was increasingly being place on individual freedom – by the Seventies it was a commonplace that children were not being baptised or not being sent to Sunday School, because they must be free to decide for themselves when they were old enough. The drive for greater individual freedom is a leitmotiv of the Sixties, in areas ranging from the determination of many younger women to break free from prescribed gender-roles, to the movement to abolish all forms of censorship in literature and the arts. And as Elizabeth Roberts shows in her oral history of the working class in north-west England most people soon adapted to the fact that the bounds of acceptable behaviour were rapidly widening. In the Forties and Fifties the old cliché that «It was the thing to do» still provided sufficient explanation for many conventions, and «neighbours, teachers, clergymen and policemen» combined to ensure that most people did not break the rules too blatantly or too often; in the more relaxed Sixties and Seventies, authority figures of all kinds had lost a lot of their power, and the new cliché was «Do your own thing».94

94 Roberts, Women, 159–162.
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Professor Hugh McLeod
Department of Modern History
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B152TT, Great Britain
e-mail: D.H.McLeod@bham.ac.uk