

A country with an established church and one of the world's least religious societies: such is the paradox of Britain in the twenty-first century. Although extreme, this example is not exceptional but representative of many societies today, at least in the West.

In this article published in *The Guardian* in April 2015, Andrew Brown analyses the current state of religion, and more particularly Christianity, in Britain. Based on a recent survey according to which a minority of British people describe themselves as religious although a majority say they believe in God, he emphasises the distinction between faith and organised religion. This leads him to examine the decline of the Church of England, which he correlates with / which he puts down to (*qu'il attribue à*) the crisis of British national identity, and more generally to the cultural evolutions and revolutions of the latter half of the twentieth century. Distinguishing between two types of religion, "cultural" and "counter-cultural", he concludes that the Church of England suffers from its traditional function as a central and official social institution whereas today's culture fosters minority religions.

This article raises questions about the relationships between culture, society, faith and religion: how do they influence each other? The cultural evolutions and revolutions of Western countries in the twentieth century, especially its latter half, have significantly changed their relationship to religion, but in ways which are far from simple and straightforward. The ideological and social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s have arguably blurred the distinction between culture and counter-culture: when a large proportion of a society's young people embrace counter-culture, counter-culture more or less becomes dominant culture. In turn, this phenomenon inevitably impacts the distinction between cultural and counter-cultural religions. Moreover, when identities become less collective and more individual, the role of religion in assigning or reflecting the identity of an individual or a society is also challenged and transformed.

In the course of my commentary, I will first analyse the effects of the 1960s' cultural (r)evolutions on religion. I will then try to show that the relationship between religion and identity is a complex one, especially in contemporary societies where identity is problematical. Finally, I will examine Brown's contrast between cultural and counter-cultural religions, which to a certain extent enlightens but also partly obscures the relationship between religion and contemporary society.

Religion is an area of society and culture which has been particularly affected by the evolutions and/or revolutions which have characterised the West since the 1960s.

These (r)evolutions have prominently featured a rejection of authority and tradition, and an embrace of freedom and self-invention. In particular, this has meant a rejection of traditional religious authority. Yet the counterculture which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s often laid the emphasis on spirituality and claimed not just freedom *from* organised religion but also freedom *of* religious regeneration and innovation.

Another major cultural shift has been the embrace of minorities, of victims and of exoticism. This has included a ratification of the religions of minorities and of victimised and exotic groups: African Americans, Native Americans, non-Western cultures...

A rejection of empire and political violence (or violent politics) has led to a rejection of the churches which are seen as expressions of violent and oppressive states, and has been expressed by an adoption of alternative, non-violent religions.

Contemporary societies are largely influenced by a movement which rejected "cultural religion" and religious authority but embraced "alternative traditions" or endeavoured to invent tradition. There has been a major change but also continuity: religion has lost one major function: maintaining order in society, but retained another one in a new form: enabling the individual to fulfil her- or himself. Its social function is not even totally destroyed: by helping the individual to fulfil her- or himself, it helps her or him to improve her or his relationships to others, on a small scale (relationships between individuals) or a large one (relationships between groups, between state and individuals, between nations). This takes us to the issue of the relationship between identity, both individual and collective, and religion.

Religion can be a reflection of national identity. This is very much the case of the Church of England, founded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to unite the English people around their monarch and against (Catholic or dissenting) enemies within and without. Such religion is strong when national identity is strong as a result of national identity's strength, and conversely weak when national identity is in crisis.

Yet religion bequeathes on society a cultural heritage which bleeds beyond the literal confines of theology: as the text reminds us, few British people today describe themselves as Anglicans but not many Catholics either and most say they are believers. More or less paradoxically, this can be seen as a sign that Protestantism is still part and parcel of British identity: asserting one's belief in an individual way without affiliation to tradition or institution is one possible definition of Protestantism. So we may question Brown's

argument that when the British “believe in God more than religion” they are exemplifying the decline of British cultural identity: it may be interpreted as a new way of perpetuating that identity. Another example of the larger cultural heritage of religion would be Germany which celebrated the anniversary of Lutheran reformation as a national founding moment at a time when fewer Germans declared themselves Protestants than Catholics.

Thus it may be argued that the logic is not simple or binary: the influence of religion on identity is transformed, not destroyed. Religion plays a small role in defining the identity of the British as a people but a bigger one in defining the identity of individuals (which is made possible by the ‘personalisation’ of religion mentioned in the first part of this commentary) or of subsets (minorities: see Brown’s references to “counter-cultural religion”).

Anyway, the idea of culturally homogeneous societies is largely outdated: contemporary societies have multiple identities. In that respect the situation described by Brown reflects the reality of contemporary British society: a post-colonial society where post-colonialism furthers the cultural revolution of the 1960s, which, as mentioned above, fostered the heterogeneity of society and culture, a depletion of centralised authority and tradition, and an emphasis on “different”, non-Western cultures. A society’s culture can no longer be defined by one dominant set of beliefs and customs but appears instead as a mixture of composite identities. So what, today, is really cultural or counter-cultural? We need to reexamine this distinction posited by Andrew Brown.

To explain why some religions flourish while others pine away at a given point in time, Brown divides them into “cultural” and “counter-cultural” religions: the former are, or are seen as, an expression of the dominant identity and traditions of a society; the latter as an expression of minority identity or even as a critical force. Given the current state of Western cultures, the former show much less appeal than the latter.

There is no denying that groups may be reinforced by a sense of minority identity, especially if victimised, and that religion can channel the identity and the struggles of such a group. The religious traditions of African Americans are a case in point.

However, what Brown calls “cultural religion” can also be a similarly binding force: Protestantism in England (see the widespread observance of Guy Fawkes night), Catholicism in other countries (Latin America). Brown himself mentions the United States’ belief in the special destiny of the United States, which is an example of a unifying “religious” belief which is definitely cultural, not counter-cultural. In yet other countries where Islam or Buddhism are the majority religion, and sometimes officially the state’s, they act as a powerful factor of unity.

But the distinction is not always clear: Puritanism in 17th-century New England was experienced as both a religion shared by everyone and a dissenting one. Catholicism in Ireland in colonial times was forbidden although it was the religion of the majority of the population. In these two examples we see combined traits of both “cultural” and “counter-cultural” religions because culture and law did not coincide. Today in the Republic of Ireland Catholicism is a “cultural” religion (it is the majority religion and has more or less official status), but it has kept much of the force of a “counter-cultural religion,” providing us with yet another combination.

Possibly it might be argued that a condition for a “cultural” religion to be strong is that there be a sense of an enemy to fight or of a mission to accomplish: Protestantism in England from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, when it was the majority’s religion, but when there was a common feeling that the English nation was threatened by enemies within and without, might illustrate this. Absent such a galvanising goal, what Brown calls a “cultural” religion may have a greater risk of being seen as only a boring, conservative institution.

Although the official nature of the Church of England and its deeply-ingrained ties with the state make it irrelevant for a large part of the population in a society which rejects authority and tradition, this may be seen as a paradoxical fulfillment of the Protestant reformation: the rejection of institutional authority, the rise of the individual as an autonomous being with a personal and direct relationship to what makes his/her own life meaningful did not start with the beatniks or the hippies but can be traced back to the origins of Protestantism.

The Church of England is itself “post-colonial”. There has always been diversity in it and today this inner diversity has ties with outer diversity: the diversity of worldwide Anglican churches (just as a post-colonial society is a diverse society whose diversity has ties with outer diversity). This “post-colonial” diversity is emphasised by the decline of mainstream Anglicanism, which makes room for minorities inside and outside the Church of England. The vibrancy of worldwide Anglican churches leaves the declining Church of England in a minority position within worldwide Anglicanism, where Evangelicalism is a rising force. English Evangelical Anglicans are seizing this occasion to build ties with Evangelical Anglicans abroad: together, they are today the most dynamic subset of Anglicanism and transcend the opposition between “cultural” and “counter-cultural” religion.