



By: *Harvey Morris*

Image of 'woke' Church of England skews perception of an institution in decline



It is a while since the Church of England has lived up to its reputation of being “the Conservative party at prayer”.

The established church, or at least its clerical leadership, is these days more likely to be classed as part of an elitist wokeraati fixated on matters more secular than divine.

Its pronouncements on issues ranging from slavery reparations to climate change are portrayed in some media as further evidence that the Anglican clergy has strayed from its true mission of reinforcing traditional English values.

Responding to reports this year that the Church planned to set up a diversity-focussed race action plan in every parish, the Express newspaper **demande**d: “The Church of England must get back to basics and drop the wokery”.

The evident attraction of pitching the Anglican clergy as a protagonist in the culture wars is that such headlines appeal to the perceived conservative instincts of a targeted right-of-centre audience.

But, in an increasingly secular and multi-cultural Britain, how many of the wider public actually take notice? While the Church of England remains a constitutional pillar of the state, its influence on the customs and mores of the nation may be in terminal decline.

A minority of the population

It was only in 1972 that the UK abandoned the last of its strict Sunday observance laws that had banned sabbath-day shopping, sport and theatre for centuries.

And it was some two decades later that the Conservative prime minister John Major, quoting George Orwell, confidently predicted that a future Britain would continue to be associated with “old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist”.

It turns out that devout old maids and other Anglican churchgoers are very much in a

minority in a contemporary Britain.

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For the first time in 2021, that year’s census revealed that self-professed Christians of all denominations were now a minority of the population of England and Wales at 46.2 per cent, down from almost 60 per cent a decade earlier. In the same year, average attendance at Church of England Sunday services was just 509,000.

The fall has led to intense soul-searching in the hierarchy of an Anglican church whose numbers now fall slightly below those of Catholics. Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, **confesse**d to the Church Times that he regarded the decline as a personal failure.

‘Conservative party at prayer’

The Church of England has always been about much more than religion. Established in the wake of Henry VIII’s break with Rome, it continues to exercise a formal role in Britain’s unwritten constitution. Welby is among up to 26 bishops assigned to the House of Lords where they sit, speak and vote as members of the Lords Spiritual.

But the fall in the number of adherents has revived a long-standing debate over the disestablishment of the Church, a formal separation from the state that is supported even by some clergy. The topic was raised in a Liberal Democrat-sponsored bill in the House of Lords shortly before the last parliament rose.

Another quirk of the Church of England is that it serves as an identifier for those of a traditionalist persuasion who are nevertheless

happy to declare themselves agnostic.

In a recent irony-laced column for the political website Conservative Home, its assistant editor William Atkinson **revealed**: “As a self-described agnostic Anglican, I have never been a regular churchgoer.”

He then goes on to outline the attractions of the C of E, and particularly its conservative Anglo-Catholic wing, to his “young fogey instinct”. “I see myself as a ‘flying buttress’ to our national Church, a sympathetic fellow traveller.”



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He lamented that what was once regarded as the Conservative party at prayer now provided Britain with the world’s first left-wing theocracy. “Anglicans voted strongly for Brexit and the Conservatives. Yet only one bishop, out of 113, voted to Leave.”

Atkinson should recall that the ‘Conservative party at prayer’ descriptor was not intended as a compliment. It was coined by the suffragette Maude Royden in 1917 during her campaign for the Church of England to allow the ordination of women, a once divisive issue long since resolved.

Since its foundation, there have always been tensions within the national church: between high church Anglo-Catholicism and a more Protestant-focussed low church, between formalists and evangelicals, and between left and right.

Divisions persist, despite populist attempts to

portray the clergy at large as a unified body of flabby progressives. The Church has, for example, yet to resolve conflicting views on same-sex relationships. Since 2022, gay couples may receive a priestly blessing at regular public services but cannot yet be married in church.

Avoiding the word ‘church’

It is an issue that has created a fairly even split between conservatives and progressives, both among the laity and the clergy, amid threats from some bishops and priests to break away if liberalisation goes any further.

It is nevertheless a debate from which a broadly socially permissive 21st century population has long moved on.

The latest pearl-clutching reports of alleged clerical wokery this month honed in on a somewhat esoteric theological study that suggested the C of E has gone as far as avoiding the word ‘church’ when setting up new faith-based institutions.

“The Church of England looks set to undergo a woke rebrand yet again by dropping the word ‘church’ in favour of ‘relevant and modern-sounding’ descriptions such as ‘community’,” **according** to the right-wing GB News.

The greatest threat to the Church of England is perhaps the sin of pride

The report in question, with the forbidding title “New Things: A theological investigation into the work of starting new churches across 11 dioceses in the Church of England”, does indeed confirm that new institutions across the country invariably avoid the word ‘church’.

Based in existing church buildings or elsewhere, some of these projects aim to promote a community role for the established church in deprived areas and among the young.

For the average non-theologian, whether a believer or not, an ambition to tend to the young and the poor might sound closer to the Christian message than the Church's current obscure theological debates that divide rather than unite its leaders and adherents.

The greatest threat to the Church of England is perhaps the sin of pride, a belief that its internal theological bickering has any greater relevance to the secular majority than debating how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.