

Is Europe Christian?

1. Introduction

The starting-point of this piece was the publication, in 2019, by the French scholar Olivier Roy, of a book on the theme of *Is Europe Christian?*¹ Roy is, among other things, well-known for writing about Islam. One might have expected that he would be concerned with the recent impact of Muslims on Europe. But this was, in fact, only a marginal concern in this book. Rather, he wrote about the extent to which values in Europe are still Christian. His response to this question was, broadly speaking, 'no'.

The issues with which he is dealing are interesting. He is especially concerned about the shifts that have taken in cultural values, and the Catholic Church's accommodations to them in the Twentieth (and Twenty-First) centuries. The degree of change, and in some cases (e.g. in the recent collapse of the influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland) its speed, has been dramatic. But what struck me about his most interesting account, is his argument that there has been an intellectual and social collapse on the part of the Catholic Church, quite generally, in Europe. While its moral teachings have remained intact, it is not clear that it has come to terms with the task of engaging with citizens who are increasingly secularized. In particular, it seems, on Roy's account, not really to have been able to cope with a situation in which more affluent and mobile people are freer to form their own judgements about things. The Church still offers moral guidance; but sociologically, the Church seems, on Roy's account, to be increasingly content with what are somewhat marginalized, if dedicated, groups of followers.

As the title of his book indicates, Roy discusses Christianity, but he has particularly in mind the Catholic Church. Further, while he teaches at the European University in Florence, Roy is especially concerned with issues and debates that have arisen in France. Reading his book brought home to me the degree to which, in Britain, Catholicism has really made no impact at all on current discussions in this field (and also the degree to which France and Britain do not share a common 'public sphere'). It is not that, in Britain, there are no Catholics. Currently, just under 10% of the British population is Catholic. But they do not play a major role *as Catholics*, in British cultural life, and the specific debates with which Roy is concerned have not had the same impact in the English-speaking world. I would strongly recommend Roy's discussion to those of you who are concerned with these issues in relation to the Catholic Church in Croatia. Not only is Roy's book of great interest in itself, and very readable. But it should also be of interest to see the degree to which what has taken place in France, has been matched by developments in Croatia.

2. The Decline of Christian Europe

Roy starts his discussion with a wide-ranging historical consideration of relationships between the Catholic Church – and the universalism of its claims, and in some respects its institutions – and the claims of national governments. He reports on the degree to which, in broad terms, it is the individual national states that have won out, although he also documents the degree to which the Catholic Church continues to make use of forms of non-national organisation. By contrast with this,

¹ Olivier Roy, *L'Europe est-elle chrétienne?* (Paris: Seuil, 2019); *Is Europe Christian* (London: Hurst, 2019).

it is striking that the concerns of churches within Britain and the United States have been with freedom of association within, and in independence from, the state, within the guidelines of a liberal view of the rule of law. Within these broad restrictions, such groups – acting as private associations – are seen as entitled to do whatever they want to, in public and in private, provided that they comply with the law. This may be a reason why ‘multiculturalism’ – e.g. with respect to Muslim immigrants – has taken a very different form in Britain from what has happened in France, and why there is in Britain no doctrine of *laïcité*.² At the same time, in Britain things moved – in the Reformation and beyond – from a dramatic top-down enforcement of a reorientation in religion, to a situation in which compliance with religious mores was enforced by way of social pressure.³ This meant that, in cases where there were strong geographical concentrations of people with particularly strict understandings of religious ideas, such social pressures could be formidable, and out of kilter with those in the wider community.⁴ At the same time, there is a sense in which the subsequent decline of informal social controls might be seen as having led to the government having taken a greater degree of control; for example, in terms of imposing its ideas about morality onto all forms of schooling.

In Britain, if one looks back to the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, a considerable proportion of the population attended one form or another of worship every Sunday. There were differences between different social classes, geographical areas and occupations. It may also be noted that attendance was often hardly a matter of free individual choice. There were strong social pressures on people to attend a place of worship, both from their fellows and from employers and others in leading social positions. While welfare, education and medical services were often linked to religion. (In addition, it was locally-based landowners or industrialists who typically paid for church buildings and often for the salary of the minister, which meant that they got to exercise influence over what went on within them.)

From the latter part of the Nineteenth Century onwards, intellectual doubts of various kinds served to undermine religious orthodoxy,⁵ although these issues tended to be felt most keenly among the clergy, and those members of the educated middle classes who cared deeply about such things. In the broadest of terms, one might say that there were four kinds of intellectual issues which some people found pressing. First, attempts to offer a systematic view of the world which fitted a traditional Christian perspective became more difficult. While there are those who still try to reconcile orthodox Christianity with current understandings of the physical and biological world,⁶ perhaps the last significant philosopher to suggest that an interpretation of Christian ideas could play a *positive* role in our understanding of the world (rather than, as it were, a retrospectively apologetic one) was William Whewell (1794-1866). Second, there were arguments about the interpretation of *The Bible* which were concerned with the likely authorship and pedigree of different books within it (most notably, ‘higher criticism’), and more general historical work

² Historically, the idea that public institutions, notably schools, should not be influenced by the Catholic Church, which in effect, serves to restrict religious symbolism in the public sphere. See, on this, John R. Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves* (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press, 2007).

³ Another element of this related to the advantages that might follow in people's practical lives from disciplined ‘puritanical’ conduct.

⁴ This has been striking in terms, for example of the strict Sabbatarianism practised on some of the North Western islands off Scotland, and the practises of some communities of Hassidic Jews in North London.

⁵ A. N. Wilson's *God's Funeral* (London: Murray, 1999) gives a readable overview.

⁶ The work of the philosopher Richard Swinburne (1934-) is, here, notable.

concerning the social and intellectual background to the periods in which the Bible was written, and the early Church developed.⁷ Third, there were arguments about what was to be made of Darwinian (and subsequent) ideas about natural selection, which offered an alternative explanation for the existence of design in the biological world, and heuristic ideas which have shown their worth in many other areas. Fourth, there seems to have been an acceptance of a kind of debased Hegelianism, which, to the degree to which people combined it with genuine religious belief, seemed to suggest that God had addressed people in ways which were appropriate to the period of time in which they were living. This offered ways in which the parts of the *Old Testament* which became embarrassing to modern sensibilities could be explained away. At the same time, it seemed to suggest a path towards re-interpreting inherited religious ideas in such a way as to accommodate them towards whatever are taken to be the sensibilities of contemporary people.⁸

It is not clear, however, that most of those in church congregations actually shared the intellectual concerns to which people who 'liberalised' their views in the face of such issues, were responding. It was a common phenomenon, through much of the Twentieth Century, that members of church congregations, while not necessarily having much sophistication to their views, typically (if they had initially been given orthodox religious instruction) held much more orthodox views, theologically, than did those who were supposed to be guiding them. At the same time, if one looks at contemporary material on the sociology of religion,⁹ and on the character of 'spiritual' concerns more generally,¹⁰ it is difficult to imagine that people willing to swallow the farrago of nonsense that seems, today, to be fashionable, would have had the slightest intellectual concern with the problems that could be posed for orthodox Christianity.

To say this is not to downplay the intellectual difficulties that the orthodox views faced. But it seems to me that rather than setting out to try to answer their critics, traditionalist Catholics (such as the Catholic convert Ronald Knox), simply appealed to Papal authority.¹¹ While conservative Protestants, after initially offering interesting but in my view badly flawed accounts of how their ideas could be defended,¹² ended up stuck with claims about the inerrancy of *The Bible* which went beyond the views of key figures in the Reformation, and which it is difficult to see how could be defended.¹³ The general intellectual climate of conservative evangelical Christianity was well-

⁷ See for an interesting overview, John Barton, *A History of the Bible* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2020)

⁸ Compare Ronald Knox, in his *Some Loose Stones* (London: Longmans, 1914), who, when describing the views of some of his contemporaries, wrote (p.9), in a chapter entitled 'How Much Will Jones [i.e. the 'man in the street'] Swallow?': they 'ask of a doctrine, not... "Is it true?" but, "Can I induce Jones to see it in that light?"'.

⁹ See for example Steve Bruce's discussion of 'new age' ideas in his *British Gods: Religion in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)

¹⁰ See Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020).

¹¹ See 'Pascendi Dominici Gregis', Pope Pius X, 1907: <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius10/p10pasce.htm>.

It seems to me personally that the problem was not the idea that the Church should wish to condemn such ideas, but that the condemnation was not combined with a detailed attempt on the part of Catholic intellectuals, to show that they were in fact untenable.

¹² I have in mind here the mix of Scottish 'common-sense' philosophy and Baconian inductivism favoured by the 'Old Princeton' tradition, for which those who followed them did not even try to offer a replacement – on which compare George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987). A particularly useful overview is provided in Harriet A. Harris, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

¹³ See James Barr, *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1984).

described in Mark A. Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*;¹⁴ something that can be matched by intellectual analysis, by Catholics, of the situation in Catholic universities in the 1950s in the United States.¹⁵

One other issue which is worth raising, however, is this. Frank Sheed, in addition to being a successful publisher and author, had a long career working for the Catholic Truth Society. He also worked as a volunteer, debating the case for Catholicism on the streets, in Britain and the United States. In the course of his fascinating *The Church and I*,¹⁶ Sheed argued that, in his experience, ordinary Catholics were simply not taught the details of their faith at all well. The same thing emerges, on the Protestant side, from R. Albert Mohler, Jr's *The Gathering Storm*.¹⁷ Mohler is the President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He argues that ordinary members of churches have simply not been properly educated in Christian doctrine. One consequence of this, Mohler argues, has been the finding reported by the American sociologist of religion, Christian Smith,¹⁸ that when religious faith was espoused by young people, it often amounted to what Smith called a 'moralistic therapeutic deism'. The content of this amounts to the idea that 'god wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other' (Mohler, p. 124). While one might say that this is no bad thing, it is utterly removed from what Christianity has stood for, traditionally. It is striking that Steve Bruce, in his recent sociological study *Scottish Gods*,¹⁹ described the way in which it was from just such a perspective that traditional Protestants on the Western Isles of Scotland have been condemned as 'unchristian' because they tried to stick to their traditional Protestant views about Sunday observance.

The account that Bruce has offered of the development of Christianity in Britain in the Twentieth Century is a striking one. In his *Firm in the Faith*,²⁰ he describes the way in which 'liberal' Christians discarded so much of their traditional doctrine, and stressed the degree to which their resulting views were in accord with secular ideas. However, Bruce suggested that it was not clear that they ended up with anything to which it would make sense to try to convert anybody whose views were already secular.²¹ Their constituency seemed, rather, to consist of people whose faith had been

¹⁴ Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1994). It is, here, well worth bearing in mind the way in which, in the period prior to this, there was a systematic shift, among American universities which were initially set up on an explicitly Protestant basis, towards secular views. See George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ See the treatment, in Patrick Allitt's *Catholic Converts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 325, of the discussion round John Tracy Ellis's 'American Catholics and the Intellectual Life', *Thought* 30, Autumn 1955), pp. 351-88. See also Philip Gleason, 'A Look Back at the Catholic Intellectualism Issue', *U.S. Catholic Historian* 13, No. 1, Winter 1995, pp. 19-37.

¹⁶ Frank Sheed, *The Church and I* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975).

¹⁷ R. Albert Mohler, Jr, *The Gathering Storm* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2000).

¹⁸ Mohler refers to Smith et al's *Soul Searching* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) and *Souls in Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Steve Bruce, *Scottish Gods: Religion in Modern Scotland 1900-2012* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

²⁰ Steve Bruce, *Firm in the Faith* (Aldershot: Gower, 1984).

²¹ It is striking that Allitt comments, p. 309, that, in the period after Vatican II, that 'the Catholic quest for converts slackened'. It is also interesting that Wilfrid Sheed, in his memoir *Frank and Maisie* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985) about his parents who ran the Catholic publishing house Sheed and Ward, that in the period after Vatican II, there was little demand for the work of new more 'modernist' theologians, but there was continuing demand for older theological work, such as by Frank Sheed.

more substantive, but who developed ‘doubts’ over the years. In *Firm in the Faith*, Bruce described the way in which more conservative evangelical ‘Christian Unions’ did much better – up to the 1980s – in universities, than did organizations of ‘liberal’ Christians. Since then, there seems to have a quite general decline which has affected all forms of Christian practise.

Bruce, here, has been a robust defender of the idea that there has been progressive secularization, particularly in terms of there having been a dramatic drop in religious participation, and in offering arguments as to why we should be sceptical about claims that vaguer ideas about ‘spirituality’, and ‘new age’ movements, have taken up the slack.²² Bruce also argues that the growth of ‘charismatic’ Christianity, rather than offering a rebirth of more conservative Christian ideas, in fact offers a path for people who were initially conservative Protestants to move *away* from firm credal commitments. He offers what seems to me (as someone without religious beliefs), a rather depressing picture of religious believers often moving towards a kind of ‘buffet’ view of religion. This has historically characterized the ‘new age’ movement, in which people simply flit from one idea to another, taking up whatever strands and techniques they fancy. But, Bruce argues, it has increasingly come to characterize modern Protestantism, generally. Just how much of a shift from orthodox belief there has been may, in some respects, be difficult to work out – not least because of the way in which, in the past, people seem to have attended places of worship because they were obliged to do so. Pressures, here, came from locally-based landlords and later industrialists, rather than out of conviction. While in the past there were strong pressures on people to conform. In part, this attested to their moral character. In part, it was because religious participation was simply the way in which rituals of social life (birth, marriage, death, and also key features of people’s development, and the seasons of the year) were celebrated. It might be worth asking to what extent ordinary people ever held deep commitments to traditional Christian views – rather than being familiar with them because they had to be, and because the public expression of religious ideas tended to be dominated by the orthodox.

As Bruce’s recent sociological work on England and Scotland has brought out, the consequences of all this are likely to be significant.²³ Recruitment into religious views has come, historically, from two sources. First, there are the children of religious families. But, currently, pious families are lucky to be able to retain 50% of their children’s allegiance. Second, there is evangelism. But no more than 5% of the membership of Christian churches comes from people who were not born into church membership, and big evangelistic rallies, such as those of the Billy Graham organization, were typically attended by people who already had a church background. A difficulty that Christians face today, is that increasing proportions of the population have no familiarity with Christian ideas. (I recall, when I was teaching philosophy at the University of Edinburgh in the early 1980s, conducting a tutorial with a young Scottish woman who had no idea what I was talking about, when I referred to the Fall of Man.)

²² Bruce stresses the idea that those who have done (often interesting) qualitative work on such ideas, have typically not done sufficient quantitative work to show that their conclusions can be generalized. However, for an account, drawing on extensive quantitative work, which suggests that academic researchers have over-emphasised the influence of conservative evangelicals in universities, see Mathew Guest et al, ‘Challenging “Belief” and the Evangelical Bias: Student Christianity in English Universities’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28:2, 2013, pp. 207-223.

²³ See also the material on this cited by Burton in notes 1 and 2 to her chapter 3, p. 254.

The situation facing Christianity is grim. The numbers of professing Christians have fallen. For orthodox Christians, Catholic or Protestant, while they may, now, have amongst their members people who are more dedicated, and with a better understanding of the faith, than people had in the past, face some real difficulties. Fewer people, outside the churches, have any understanding of the Christian message. A consequence of this, is that, in trying to address them, the orthodox will initially have to spend time trying to explain to them what they are talking about.²⁴ Beyond that, there are two further difficulties. First, there is the spread of a 'buffet' view of religious matters, so that even some of those who count themselves as Christians, might in fact espouse their own personal selection of ideas, in which elements of Christianity are mixed up with (incompatible) fragments of other views. Second, there is the problem that, behind the 'buffet' view, there is the idea that religious matters are simply what we happen to find subjectively satisfying. Such ideas will make it increasingly difficult for Christians to get over to their fellow citizens the idea that specific religions teach that the world is a certain way, and it is that way even though we might not like it, and further, that we ought to behave in ways that we may not find attractive.

3. Does any of this Matter?

As I have indicated, I do not, myself, hold religious views. Modern 'buffet' spiritual ideas are often vapid (although, as Burton's book brings out, sometimes rather disturbing). They seem simply an aspect of the kind of subjectivism that, these days, is found quite widely about both intellectual and moral matters. I personally think that we all need to take questions about what is true and false seriously, and be willing to expose our ideas to critical scrutiny. At the same time, we need to understand the difference between what aspires to truth or falsity (which is a rather different thing from what we can demonstrate to be true), and what can properly be understood to be conventional. (However, just because something is conventional does not mean that it is on a par with all other possible conventions. We need to ask, in respect of what is conventional: for what purpose do we favour one convention rather than another, and is this, in fact the best convention? At the same time, we need to bear in mind what the costs may be of shifting from one socially entrenched convention to another.)

What about Christianity? Should those who are not Christian be happy about these developments? The older amongst us who are not Christian need, I think, to consider the degree to which we have been shaped by a Christian upbringing, or, more weakly, by having grown up in a Christian-influenced culture. Frank Sheed, in his *The Church and I*, mentions in passing differences between Christian and Nazi ideas about humanity. He raises a point which is worth thinking about. Unless there is a dramatic change, Christian ideas are likely to fade in their influence. But there is a sense in which our culture tends to take seriously humanitarian concerns, and ideas about each person being morally important. The form in which they are found in our culture has been influenced by ideas from the classical world, by Christianity, and then by the Enlightenment. Such ideas are typically taken for granted by people who are critical of this broad tradition. And it is equally taken for granted by those who at least profess to espouse complete subjectivism about values. It is surely worth asking: just how are we to react, and just what we are to say, if people start to espouse very different ideals.

²⁴ The Protestant writer Francis Schaeffer stressed the need for what he called 'pre-evangelism', prior to addressing most people with the Christian message. See his *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1968).

Suppose it is our view that values that are things which may be correct or incorrect, and about which we may learn through discussion with others. At one level it seems attractive to think that we may learn from one another, and that we have gained by being more humanitarian now than we were in the past. But it is quite another thing to be able to make sense of *what* it is that we think that we have been learning about. Just what is the place of values, in the kind of world that science, fallibly, discloses us as living in?