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You don't have to go to church to be a good Christian: the implicit religion of rural Anglican  
churchgoers celebrating harvest

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**ABSTRACT**

The notion that you don't have to go to church to be a good Christian is accepted as an indicator of the form of implicit religiosity espoused by those who (in Bailey's analysis) say that they 'believe in Christianity'. The prevalence of this belief was examined in a sample of 1226 individuals attending harvest festival services in Anglican churches in rural Worcestershire. The data demonstrate that around two out of every three attenders (63%) endorsed this view of Christianity. The levels were highest among those who attended church less than six times a year (84%), and among those who never prayed (81%). Such high levels of endorsement among those who attend church for harvest festival services suggest that de-institutionalised implicit religion may be superseding commitment to conventional explicit religious attendance. This form of implicit religion could erode further the already weak connection between the rural church and rural society.

### Introduction

The connection between Christian believing and churchgoing has been examined from a number of different perspectives. A classic formulation of the secularisation hypothesis would suggest that loss of faith leads to reduced attendance (see, for example, Bruce 2002). Robin Gill's reformulation of the association proposed the opposite causal path according to which reduced attendance leads to loss of faith (Gill, 1993, 2003). Grace Davie's (1994) recognition of the contemporary disconnection between Christian believing and churchgoing led to her characterisation of the predominant religion of the British as 'believing without belonging'.

Edward Bailey's perceptive analysis of the implicit religion of a British suburb spoke in terms of those whose religious commitment was most adequately expressed in the confession 'Well, you see, I believe in Christianity' (Bailey, 1998, p.67). 'Christianity' in this context, argues Bailey, seems to have three sides: belief in God, in Christ, and in the church. This belief in Christianity is more likely to be reflected in the quest for infant baptism than in the commitment to frequent church attendance. Those who express this implicit religiosity through belief in Christianity are likely to take the view that 'You don't have to go to church to be a good Christian.'

In her study of *The Church on Trial*, Rose (2009) gives considerable attention to the key question, as she defines it, 'whether, in order to define oneself as a Christian, it is necessary to belong to a church', and deploys her interview data to illustrate the following point:

Whatever theologians or the churches themselves may have to say about this, people on the ground have a number of different views (Rose, 2009, p.106).

Drawing on her rich source of interview data Rose illustrates her point by referring to John, Anna, Liz, Michael, Alan, Frances, and another unnamed interviewee.

John became a Christian through an understanding of himself and God, and the need for his own acceptance of himself; and ‘this in no way required a church community.’ Anna said, ‘I believe in God, but that has not got anything to do with churchgoing’. Anna said that it never occurred to her to seek out a new church when she moved house. Liz said, ‘I don’t think you do have to go to church to be a Christian.’ Liz went on to explain that Jesus never told his followers, ‘Gather together once a week in large outdated buildings.’ Michael said, ‘The God I relate to is a Christian one – but I certainly would not say I belong to a church.’ Alan, a church organist, felt that belief in the Christian story does not necessarily imply going to church. Frances did not see church membership as a necessary consequence of her rediscovered relationship with Christ. She said, ‘Christ was my life. Church did not have to be.’ Another unnamed interviewee said, ‘My parents would describe themselves as Christians, though they have never been churchgoers.’

Within their study examining the motivations of individuals who leave church, Francis and Richter (2007) located the notion that you don’t have to go to church to be a good Christian within the wider context of the move from churchgoing to the attraction of a ‘de-institutionalised faith’. Drawing on their interview data Francis and Richter cited Peter Kendall, a television producer in his forties, who had left a Methodist church and who associated his church-leaving with a more general distrust of institutions.

I tend not to like institutions that much. I don’t mean that I don’t like them in any sort of glib way, I just think that institutions tend to always have alternative agendas .... Certainly the Methodist church was the first time that I began to formulate my opposition to institutions, and my first move away from the church was not to reject Christianity, but to reject what I call Churchianity. (Francis & Richter, 2007, p. 229),

Francis and Richter (2007) also drew attention to Alison Matthews, a social worker in her twenties, who had left a Roman Catholic church and also saw God as actively developing her faith by leading her away from church.

I feel that God led me away from the church, in his mysterious wisdom, in order for me to discover more about my relationship with God .... I think it's not a problem for me right now to be worshipping on my own, to be praying alone, in fact I've found that quite a positive experience, to be alone with God in a sense. (Francis & Richter, 2007, p.229-230)

Drawing on their statistical data from over 800 church-leavers, Francis & Richter (2007) reported that 75% of church-leavers had taken the view that they did not need to go to church to be a Christian. Moreover, this proportion did not vary significantly when the data were examined for sex differences, generational differences, cohort differences, or age of leaving. There were, however, significant differences according to the main denomination with which the church-leavers identified. The Anglicans were significantly more likely to believe that you don't have to go to church to be a Christian. This view was endorsed by 78% of Anglicans, compared with 70% of Roman Catholics and by 67% of Free Church members.

Against this background, the aim of the present study was to examine the views of those who attend harvest festival services within rural Anglican churches, on the connection between being a Christian and attending church. Harvest festival services provide an interesting meeting point between frequent churchgoers and occasional churchgoers. In particular the study was designed to test the connection between adopting the view 'You don't have to go to church to be a good Christian' and four key factors: sex, age, frequency of church attendance (public religiosity) and frequency of private prayer (private religiosity).

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

Churchgoers attending harvest festival services in rural churches within the Diocese of Worcester were invited to complete a brief questionnaire before leaving the church. Participation was entirely voluntary and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

### **Measures**

*Belief in Christianity* (as an index of implicit religiosity) was assessed by the question, ‘You don’t have to go to church to be a good Christian.’ Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly.

*Frequency of church attendance* was rated on a five-point scale: never, at least once a year, at least six times a year, at least once a month, and nearly every week.

*Frequency of personal prayer* was rated on a five-point scale: never, occasionally, sometimes, at least once a week, and nearly every day.

### **Participants**

The key item employed in this analysis was completed by 1226 participants (You don’t have to go to church to be a good Christian). Of these participants, 416 were male, 793 were female, and 17 failed to disclose their sex; 69 were under the age of twenty, 26 were in their twenties, 85 in their thirties, 142 in their forties, 187 in their fifties, 330 in their sixties, 373 were aged seventy or over, and 14 failed to disclose their age; 8 said they never attended church, 98 at least once a year, 168 at least six times a year, 236 at least once a month, 701 nearly every week, and 15 failed to disclose their frequency of attendance; 58 never prayed, 138 prayed occasionally, 214 prayed sometimes, 206 prayed at least once a week, 590 prayed nearly every day, and 20 failed to disclose their frequency of prayer.

### **Results**

Table 1 presents the proportions of the participants who responded to the question ‘You don’t have to go to church to be a good Christian’ by checking the agree or the agree

strongly option. These two options have been combined in the 'yes' response. In order to calculate the chi square significance test, the other three options have also been combined into a single category.

-Insert Table 1 here -

### **Discussion**

In terms of the whole sample these data indicate that around two-thirds (63%) of those attending harvest festival services in rural churches take the view that you don't have to go to church to be a good Christian. This figure is considerably lower than the 75% found by Francis and Richter (2007) among people who used to attend church but who no longer do so. It is clearly reasonable to imagine that churchgoers are less likely to support this view than church-leavers. On the other hand, it is illuminating to discover that nearly two out of every three people who attend harvest festival services in rural churches are far from being heavily committed to the notion that churchgoing is core to the Christian faith. These are the people who, within the framework of implicit religion, would be described by Bailey as believing in Christianity. Such people are clearly found within the rural churches as well as outside in the wider community.

In terms of sex differences these data indicate that there are no differences in the proportions of male and female churchgoers who take the view that you don't have to go to church to be a real Christian. Given that women are more likely to attend church than men (Francis, 1997), it may have been reasonable to hypothesise that women were less likely than men to take the view that faith did not necessarily indicate attendance. The data, however, do not support this view and suggest that the higher level of attendance among women must reflect something other than a different theological formulation on the connection between belief and practice.

In terms of age differences, these data demonstrate a clear increase across the generations in the proportions of churchgoers who take the view that you don't have to go to church to be a good Christian. While 58% of those aged sixty or over take this view, the proportion rises to 81% among those under the age of thirty. This finding is consistent with the view that the formulation of what it means to be Christian in the contemporary world is undergoing transformation among younger generations. It is also consistent with the view that a church-based faith is being replaced by forms of de-institutionalised and personalised implicit religiosity rather than by a secularised worldview.

In terms of association with church attendance frequency, these data demonstrate a clear link between belief and practice. While 53% of those who attend church most weeks take the view that you don't have to go to church to be a good Christian, the proportion rises to 84% among those who attend less than six times a year. It is reasonable to suggest that the weekly churchgoers who take this view may be more likely than the weekly churchgoers who do not take this view to reduce their level of attendance.

In terms of association with personal prayer frequency, these data demonstrate a clear link between belief and practice. While 54% of those who pray most days take the view that you don't have to go to church to be a good Christian, the proportion rises to 81% among those who never pray. This finding offers key additional insight into the kind of Christianity in which such people believe. Bailey's (1998) analysis of implicit religion suggested that those who believe in Christianity are ultimately attracted by the moral code rather than by the doctrinal beliefs or by the spiritual practices.

### **Conclusion**

Inspired by one of Bailey's proposed markers of implicit religion, this study set out to explore the responses of those who attended harvest festival services in rural Anglican churches to the proposition that you don't have to go Church to be a good Christian. The

findings confirm the high prevalence of this belief among those who sit in the pew (even among weekly attenders). The level of acceptance of this belief is highest among young people, among occasional attenders, and among those who do not pray.

For rural Anglican churches the positive reading of these findings takes encouragement from the way in which this form of implicit religion has not cancelled out a willingness to continue to attend services. Nearly two-thirds of those who attend do so without believing that they need to do so in order to count themselves to be good Christians. The less positive reading of these findings suggests that belief in Christianity can be supported outside the churches and unaccompanied by traditional Christian practices like prayer. This form of implicit religion could erode further the already weak connection between the rural church and rural society.

These findings also contribute to the debate regarding the way in which responses to the religious question within the 2001 census in England and Wales can be interpreted (see Francis, 2003). According to the census data 72% of the population of England and Wales were defined as 'Christian', a much higher proportion than appears in church on any given occasion. This discrepancy between self-assigned religious affiliation and church attendance is consistent with the belief that Christianity is not predicated on ritual observation. Given such strength of Christian implicit religiosity, it may be both somewhat unwise and somewhat premature to celebrate the death of Christian Britain (Brown, 2001).

A major limitation with the present study concerns the way in which the operationalised measure of implicit religion was restricted to a single item. Future research may wish to nuance this construct by developing a series of items, possibly by specifying variants on the qualifier (a good) employed in the present study.

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Table 1

*You don't have to go to church to be a good Christian*

	yes %	$\chi^2$	$p <$
total sample	63		
<u>sex</u>			
male	62		
female	63	0.2	NS
<u>age</u>			
under 20	81		
20-29	81		
20-39	73		
40-49	67		
50-59	61		
60-69	58		
70 plus	58	29.0	.001
<u>church attendance frequency</u>			
at least once a year	84		
at least six times a year	79		
at least once a month	71		
nearly every week	53	70.8	.001
<u>personal prayer frequency</u>			
never	81		
occasionally	72		
sometimes	69		
at least once a week	68		
nearly every day	54	36.9	.001