

Original citation:

Walker, David Stuart (2013) How far is it to Bethlehem? Exploring the ordinary theology of occasional churchgoers. In: Astley, Jeff and Francis, Leslie J., (eds.) Exploring Ordinary Theology : Everyday Christian Believing and the Church. Explorations in practical, pastoral, and empirical theology . Routledge, pp. 137-145. ISBN 9781409442578

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Publisher's statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Exploring Ordinary Theology : Everyday Christian Believing and the Church on 3rd March 2013 available online: <https://www.routledge.com/Exploring-Ordinary-Theology-Everyday-Christian-Believing-and-the-Church/Francis-Astley/p/book/9781409442578>

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How Far is it to Bethlehem? Exploring the Ordinary Theology of Occasional Churchgoers

David Walker

Introduction

Occasional Churchgoing

Behind the surface statistics showing that the number of people attending Church of England services each Sunday has been in decline over many decades, there lies a complex story. As lifestyles change, the pattern of a settled parish worshipping community, found in its local church on almost every Sunday of the year, is less the norm. Among this heterogeneous population some still have a habit of reasonably frequent churchgoing, but less than weekly. Others focus their experience of public worship on a monthly Family Service or All Age Worship, or make a commitment to a fresh expression of church as identified and promoted in the influential book *Mission-Shaped Church* (Archbishops' Council, 2004). That book takes as a central theme that there is a major shift in current British society, in which people experience belonging less through communities of geographical propinquity and more by their membership of communities of interest: more succinctly, a shift from neighbourhoods to networks. While this reconceptualization of church belonging still looks primarily at those who are engaged frequently and habitually with church activity, it raises the question as to what other ways are possible of imagining church belonging and whether other forms of it are more capable of capturing the experience and engagement of occasional

churchgoers. In seeking to address this question, the prior issue arises as to how occasional constitutes occasional? While a variety of answers are possible, the consensus within the field of congregational studies is to identify this as comprising those who report their attendance as less than six times a year.

Belonging through Events

In a study of 1450 individuals who attended rural harvest festival services, Walker (2006) set out a fourfold model of belonging: activities, events, people and places. This model takes as its starting point the understanding of belonging as self-defined religious affiliation, following the definition of Francis and Robbins (2004), rather than collapsing it into either doctrinal affirmation or participation in specified activities. Each of these modes of belonging is given a brief theological grounding and a characterization in terms of how different individuals may adopt this mode for their engagement with the church. For the purposes of this present study, it is the dimension of belonging through an event (the cathedral carol service) that provides the lens through which the engagement of occasional churchgoers is to be studied. Walker writes:

The notion of expressing religious belonging through events is evident in the various covenant makings of ancient Israel as well as in the rites for circumcision, purification of women, and cleansing of lepers. Baptism lies to the fore as the main event based expression of religious affiliation in the early church. The notion of affirming religious identity at a variety of rites of passage builds on this over successive centuries. (Walker 2006: 91)

The key distinction between a church activity and an event is that the former carries some explicit or implicit expectation on the part of the individual attendees, others present or the church leadership, that attendance on one occasion creates a commitment or obligation for future occasions. By contrast, an event stands alone;

while the individual may attend a similar event, no wider contract is imputed or implied. Part of what avoids the creation of such obligations may be that, even if an event is held regularly, it is held only very infrequently. Although at one level it is arbitrary, the conceptualization of occasional churchgoing as being less than six times a year fits well here, as it is plausible that this is a frequency at which it becomes less likely that a sense of obligation will arise (see, for example, Francis and Richter, 2007). The Christmas carol service occurs too infrequently for such expectations to arise and hence falls into the category of event, where it might be anticipated that a significant number of those who attend church only occasionally would be present.

Cathedral Studies

Recent Church of England statistics indicate an average growth in attendance at the 43 English cathedrals of 37 per cent over a ten year period (Archbishops' Council, 2011). This context of substantial growth makes it plausible that cathedrals may be attracting significant numbers of individuals who are not regular churchgoers. As well as shedding light on occasional churchgoers in general, studying them in a cathedral setting is therefore likely to provide insights to support the cathedral in the ministry and mission it has among them.

The Cathedral Carol Service

The cathedral carol services studied in this essay took place on two evenings in Worcester in December 2009, and on one afternoon and one evening in Lichfield in December 2010. The worship followed the pattern established since the first half of the twentieth century: congregational participation was limited to singing a small number of hymns, while the remainder of the service comprised the reading of traditional

biblical passages and the performance of a range of carols, dating from the medieval to the present day, by a semi-professional cathedral choir.

The carol service is far from the only example of an 'event', on Walker's classification, to be held in the cathedral. For the purposes of study, however, it offers a number of advantages:

- It provides an opportunity to explore the ordinary theology of those present in relation to the Christmas story and their attitudes, beliefs and practices with respect to Christmas within a wider enquiry;
- It is an open and widely advertised event, to which large numbers turn up, offering a potentially more varied and representative sample than would be the case with an event focused on a school, university or commercial organization, a diocesan occasion such as an ordination service, or a personal event like a wedding or funeral;
- The popularity of the service and the absence of ticketing means that the majority of those attending are seated about thirty minutes before the service begins, affording a good opportunity to gather a significant body of data.

A general discussion of the whole sample can be found in Walker (2012).

Research Question

Against this background, the research question addressed by this study was to describe the ordinary theology of occasional churchgoers attending the cathedral carol services: their understanding and beliefs about Christmas and the Christmas story, their motivations for being present at the service, their wider attitudes towards significant or contemporary issues of Christian doctrine, their moral stance and their attitudes towards the place of the Christian religion in public life.

Method

Procedure

Some 1151 participants completed a questionnaire distributed at the point of arrival at the *Service of Nine Lessons and Carols* in Worcester or Lichfield Cathedral. Pencils were provided and completed questionnaires collected after the service was over. The survey forms were anonymous and confidential. From this sample, the responses of the 460 individuals who were categorized as occasional churchgoers were extracted for analysis.

Measures

Respondents were asked about gender and age (measured largely in decades, but starting at 15 and with a final category for '80 and over'). Frequency of church attendance was assessed by a choice of six responses: once a week or more, nearly every week, at least once a month, at least six times a year, at least once a year, never. The remainder of the survey invited participants to respond using a 5-point Likert scale: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, disagree strongly. For each statement the percentages of those agreeing and those agreeing strongly were added to produce a single percentage for agreement. Those who chose not to answer a particular question were excluded from the calculation. The response rates for individual questions were almost all above 90 per cent.

Participants

The sample contained 44 per cent men and 56 per cent women. There was a good level of familiarity with the concept of a carol service, with 70 per cent claiming to attend one somewhere most years and almost half (46%) claiming to do so in that cathedral.

By comparison with most surveys of churchgoers, the present sample includes a much higher proportion of younger people; some 30 per cent were below the age of 40,

41 per cent between 40 and 59, and just 29 per cent were aged 60 and above. The figures in the same age categories for a sample of 322 adults from two rural cathedral Sunday morning congregations, reported by Francis and Williams (2010), were 12 per cent, 27 per cent and 61 per cent respectively.

Notwithstanding the low levels of churchgoing, this was a population with a significant Christian background, four out of every five (81%) had been baptized, over half of whom (42% of the sample) had also been confirmed – most of them (as implied from their ages) in an era when confirmation for cultural reasons, or as an expected rite of passage, had died out. Very few (only 8%) were currently on a Church of England Electoral Roll, a good measure of an individual's ongoing commitment. Three fifths (59%) agreed with the statement, 'I go to church less often nowadays.' These are people who would often be categorized and studied as 'church leavers' (see, for example, Francis and Richter, 2007). A few were potentially on a return path, with 8 per cent agreeing with the statement that they go to church more often nowadays.

For a significant minority, relationships would appear to be an important dimension of faith, with some 30 per cent agreeing that most of their friends were Christians, over a quarter (26%) having a friend with whom they could talk about faith, and the same proportion claiming to pray at least once a week. By contrast, virtually none of them (1%) said that they read the Bible at least once a week.

Despite the low levels of churchgoing, a little over half (52%) defined themselves as Church of England and a further 12 per cent as a member of another Christian denomination, almost two thirds in total. Nearly one in five (19%) claimed to belong to the cathedral congregation itself.

Results and Discussion

The responses to the questions asked in the survey fell into six sections. In the first section respondents were invited to reflect on their motivations for attending the service, in order to understand whether they saw it in purely cultural and aesthetic terms, or were bringing significant religious and spiritual expectations with them. The nature of these expectations was then explored through a second set of questions which tested the way in which the respondents sought to engage with the service.

Moving the focus from the service itself, the third section turned to the Christmas story as a means of beginning an investigation into the ordinary theology of the participants as regards the Bible and Christian doctrine. This exploration was widened in the following section, where more general questions of Christian belief were asked. This twofold approach allowed a focus on the event at which the survey took place, anticipating that participants would find it easier to offer views in this context than they would in response to more general questions.

The remaining two sections took this study in ordinary theology into the wider fields of moral behaviour and the public face of religion. In each case a number of questions were used exploring issues that are or have been recent matters of public debate in Britain. This allowed some investigation of the ways in which the participants' faith affected their attitudes. The same questions offered insight into the extent to which they expect society to hold a place for faith, and faith institutions to be subject to the consensus of public morality.

Reflecting on Attending the Carol Service

Cathedral carol services are noted for the very high level of choral performance; hence it was not surprising that some 94 per cent cited the music as one of their reasons for attending. As the service was designated 'lessons and carols', it is not surprising that

three quarters (75%) were present to be reminded of the Christmas story. This should confirm to those planning such occasions that what is being offered fits with the wishes of those attending. Three other statements explored more overtly religious aspirations for attendance; in each case over half expressed agreement: I have come to feel close to God (55%), to worship God (55%), to find the true meaning of Christmas (52%). It was a slightly more general question with an implicit spiritual element, however, that gained the highest level of support, with 94 per cent of the occasional churchgoers present agreeing that the service should be uplifting. Taken together, the responses to these questions suggest that the finding of meaning, the possibility of encounter and the significance of public worship are important concepts within the ordinary theology of many of these occasional churchgoers; and that this theology is worth more detailed analysis.

Reflecting on the Carol Service Experience

Responses to four statements about elements of the carol service were then invited. The two statements where agreement indicated a preference for a traditional view, 'I prefer traditional hymns to modern ones' and 'I prefer carol services to be candlelit', gained significantly higher levels of assent (76% and 78% respectively) than did two that suggested support for a modern idiom, where less than half (45%) expressed a preference for the use of modern English in carol services and very few indeed (11%) agreed that they preferred modern carols to traditional ones. It is possible that these responses might be conveying nostalgia for a time when these occasional churchgoers had been more involved in church life, as we have seen to be the case for many of them. This was tested by offering the statement, 'carol services are not as good as they

used to be'; that only 8 per cent expressed agreement with this opinion statement is a good indicator that nostalgia is not a significant factor for many.

The remaining statements in this section explored ways in which the service might engage the attendees, producing what at first may appear to be conflicting answers. Three quarters (75%) agreed that 'I like carol services that get the congregation involved', while little more than a third (36%) affirmed that 'I like carol services that make me ask questions of myself.' Taken together with the statements investigated in the previous section, however, these suggest that the occasional churchgoers are not seeking to be passive recipients of entertainment but to be engaged in the occasion, and to be engaged at a level that is better described as 'opening up to being affected by the experience', rather than being challenged over theological or other beliefs.

Reflecting on the Christmas Story

Several statements sought to gauge responses to individual elements of the Christmas story. Levels of support were highly consistent, with belief in the stable (58%), shepherds (57%) and wise men (55%) being all a little over the halfway mark. Given the sample's lack of engagement with scripture, it is not surprising that there was no significant difference between belief in these elements and the entirely non-biblical donkey (52%). However, a second set of belief statements that more obviously required respondents to consider the possible theological import of their answers received levels of agreement well below the halfway point: such as the virgin birth (42%), the Bible's prediction of Jesus' birth (43%) and the existence of angels (34%). Invited to consider the statement that the biblical account is not literally true, almost half (47%) agreed and

over three fifths (62%) agreed that the Christmas mystery is more important than the historical facts.

These responses build up a consistent picture of a group of people who want to enter into the story, rather than to assent to any particular theological import. As the previous sections suggest, this is not a refusal to engage with the story as a matter of significance in their lives; rather it expresses a clear preference for mystery over history.

Reflecting on Christian Belief

The light touch stance taken by the sample with regard to Christian doctrine came across clearly in their responses to statements about Christian beliefs: the more specific a belief, the less likely was it that the sample agreed with it. So while two thirds (67%) agreed that 'I consider myself a Christian', this dropped to a little over half (55%) who agreed that 'I believe in God'. The level of agreement fell to two fifths (40%) for the belief that Jesus was 'fully human', less than a third (31%) for the statement that he was 'fully God', while fewer than a quarter (23%) agreed that he was 'fully God and fully human'. The numbers make clear that some didn't agree with any of these last three statements. Consistent with the negligible level of Bible reading reported, the lowest figures for Christian belief came in the responses to statements focused on the literal truth of scripture: only 22 per cent agreed that Jesus turned water into wine, one in seven (14%) that God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh, one in twenty (5%) that the Bible is without error.

With this attitude to doctrine, it is not surprising that very few (13%) believed Christianity to be the only true religion and a majority (53%) believed that Christians should not try to convert people, while almost half (48%) agreed that 'all world faiths

lead to God.’ The ordinary theology of these occasional churchgoers places pluralism above dogma.

Reflecting on Moral Issues and Concerns

Respondents were offered one fairly general statement of attitude and one of personal practice, followed by two that focused on currently contentious issues. With regard to the first, when offered the statement that ‘what you believe matters less than how you live your life’, a clear majority (58%) agreed. Almost three quarters of the sample (71%) claimed to give to charity most Christmases. Compared with the relative low significance placed on doctrine, the answers to these two questions suggest that the respondents recognized an important ethical dimension to faith.

The remaining questions focused on homosexuality, in particular the two areas where this is contentious in Church of England circles. Invited to agree that it should be possible for a gay man to be made a bishop and that homosexual couples should be allowed to marry, there was support around or above the halfway mark in both cases (55% and 50% respectively). This suggests that the official negative stance of the church to both issues holds less sway in the theology of occasional churchgoers than does the wider moral climate. If anything, the slightly higher figure of support for a gay man as a bishop than for same sex marriages indicates that the participants do not see the church as exempt from the normal ethical standards of society (for more detail see Walker, in press).

Reflecting on Public Religion

The final area of study explored the attitudes of the sample to the visibility and public face of religion. This, too, has been contested in Britain in recent years with challenges from secularist organizations and atheists on topics ranging from church schools,

through prayers at council meetings, to the very use of the word 'Christmas' to describe a public holiday.

Notwithstanding the strongly pluralist view taken by participants, when asked directly whether 'Christianity should have a special place in this country' almost two thirds (63%) agreed. Nearly three fifths agreed with the principle of church schools (58%), while only a third (35%) thought that 'Christianity and politics don't mix.' Faith clearly has a place in the public realm for most of these individuals. Once attention was turned to Christmas itself the responses became overwhelming; only 1 per cent thought that Christmas should not be a public holiday and just 6 per cent believed that all shops should be allowed to open on Christmas Day.

Conclusions

This survey has made it possible to construct a picture of what the Christian faith looks like among a population cut adrift from the ties and influences of regular churchgoing. In particular, it has put the spotlight on those who attend church at Christmas at a type of service that is still extremely well attended, from village church to cathedral. Rather than faith collapsing into a combination of sentiment, culture and aesthetics, it retains for many a significant religious content from which can be constructed a picture of the ordinary theology of the participants.

Within this theology a high expectation is placed on the possibility of encounter with God through participation in the style of worship offered at a carol service; the high return rate to the service suggests that their past experience supports that expectation. The attraction and positive experience of carol service worship may owe much to the fact that the Christmas story is heard there as a narrative gateway to the mystery of God, rather than as coded doctrine; and it would seem that there is a real

intention on the part of the occasional churchgoers present to enter through that gateway, rather than passively to observe what is going on beyond it.

The faith engendered and supported by this encounter has been shown to be centred on doing rather than dogma. However, this is not a theology of a privatized religion; indeed levels of private piety were quite low and Bible reading almost non-existent. Moreover, the consequence of a strong belief in pluralism is not the ejection of religion from the public realm, but a clear view that faith is a public phenomenon with a right to its place in public life, and that society needs to acknowledge it in the ordering of business, politics and education. At the same time, the values of wider society are clearly visible in the attitudes of the majority of the sample when reflecting on matters of church order. The arrow of influence in their understanding of public religion goes both ways.

Allowing the voices of this group of occasional churchgoers to be heard through their responses to the present survey permits a picture of their ordinary theology to be painted. Attention to this theology should enable those planning church worship, including carol services, to consider the needs and expectations of the occasional churchgoers who attend them, and to determine to what extent their hopes and aspirations are to be met – or challenged. Furthermore, this description of ordinary theology supports the notion that an important dimension of Christian belonging is mediated and expressed through attendance at one-off events rather than habitual and frequent Sunday worship, and suggests that further study of this type of belonging would be profitable.

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