A HISTORY of the SCOTTISH PEOPLE

RELIGION IN SCOTLAND 1840-1940

W W Knox

This is Chapter 8 of 10. The others are:

Summary of Economy & Society, Education, Employment, Health, Housing, Income, Leisure, Migration, Transport

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Religion in Scotland has one been one of the defining characteristics of national identity. The Union of 1707 provided for a separate religious system to that of England and Presbyterianism has been used until recently to define what it means to be Scottish. The use of religion to define one's Scottishness has inevitably created divisions within society; the most obvious is that which exists between Catholics and Protestants. However, the divisions within Presbyterianism have been just as bitter as that which has prevailed between Catholics and Protestants, and have in their own way helped to contribute to the decline of organised religion in Scotland. Social historians, however, have been less interested in the theological splits within the church, and have focussed on the processes of the decline in attendance and membership of the Scottish churches. Their interest in these questions has sparked off a lively debate on the reasons behind the general decline in religious observation.

2. THE DEBATE

In explaining the process of religious decline historians have concentrated on two main issues. Firstly, the question of class, focussing on the religiously "respectable" middle class and the alienated working class. Secondly, the pious morality of the rural world and the secularist tendencies of urban society. These issues have split historians into optimists and pessimists. The pessimists include TC Smout, who views the decline of religion taking place somewhere in the early

to mid 19th century, and links this with the failure of the churches to reach the working classes. The optimists include CG Brown, who sees the 19th century as one of expansion and argues that the skilled working class identified strongly with Christian principles, and that unskilled workers were swept into the church during periods of religious revivalism, such as that of 1859-1862.

3. THE EVIDENCE

There is little doubt that there were features of religious observance in the 19th century which alienated working people and put church attendance out of their reach. The practice of renting seats or pews in church, and the need for fine 'Sunday best' clothes, as well as the patronising attitudes of middle class churchmen and parishioners alienated many workers from the church. Indeed, the snobbishness of many middle class parishes was sometimes extreme. In the 1790s in Edinburgh, at the behest of the middle classes, the Church of Scotland initiated evening services for servants and 'common people'. In Glasgow, ministers and middle class congregations petitioned the Town Council to discontinue special services for the workers and their families on the grounds of hygiene.

There was also the problem of the rise in population, especially in urban areas, where the churches were unable to cope. In 1841 there were, in the Highlands 240 seats for every 1,000 persons; in the rural North-east there were 401 seats per 1,000 persons; while in the Lowlands the figure varied from 561 per 1,000 in rural Berwickshire to 232 in industrial Lanarkshire. With the split in the Church of Scotland in 1843 over the question of patronage , which saw the formation of the Free Church, a furious church building programme was initiated by the two rivals. However, although it did much to improve things in rural Scotland - in the Highlands the number of seats per 1,000 persons nearly doubled to 474 in 1851 - the urban areas still experienced an imbalance between seats and people. Industrial Lanarkshire had only 302 seats per 1,000 persons in 1851, while rural Berwickshire had 701 by that date.

It might be assumed that barriers such as these proved too much for even the most determined of workers to attend church. The truth is somewhat different. Many ordinary Scots were dependent on the Church of Scotland for Poor Relief until this was put in the hands of the local authorities in 1845. This ensured a certain level of attendance from the needy as relief was given on the basis of one's moral character. It seems also that skilled workers and their families attended church in fairly large numbers in spite of the opposition of the presbyteries to trade unions. A study of eight Glasgow churches in the period 1845-65, showed that 75% of 1,330 members of the Church of Scotland, and 54% of 2,663 members of dissenting churches were working class. Of these the majority came from the skilled ranks, although the elders were almost exclusively made up of the middle and upper classes.

Even the much vaunted rural/urban divide in terms of religious observation is ambiguous. Admittedly church building had gone further in rural areas, but it was still the case that counties such as Argyll, Inverness, West Lothian and Wigtown had low attendance rates. Even Glasgow with the lowest attendance

rate of large towns in Scotland had a higher rate than a quarter of Scotland's rural counties.

On the basis of this evidence, it is difficult to argue that the working classes were alienated from the church; rather it was the unskilled and poor who were divorced from the church. The 1851 Census had shown that only a third of the population attended morning service. In Edinburgh it was estimated that a third of the population were in the category of the 'godless poor'. The idea so popular among the Protestant faithful that the poor were responsible for their own poverty through sin, discouraged the churches from trying to reach them. Thomas Chalmers' social experiments in St John's parish Glasgow in the 1820s and 1830s proved that exhortions by ministers to moral improvement meant little to the poor, who needed food rather than pious sermonising. Thus it was not until the mid-1880s that the church began to address the position of the 'godless poor' with some seriousness.

4. RECAPTURING THE GODLESS POOR

The desire to reclaim the poor for God was a part of a movement within the church which stressed the necessity of good works as a means towards claiming a place in heaven. There were various initiatives towards children and young people. The Sunday School movement was the first attempt to reach the children of the poor and this was followed by other programmes. The temperance Band of Hope was begun in the 1870s and by 1908 had 700 bands and 147,000 members. The Boys Brigade was begun in the mid-1880s. For adults there were the Home Missions, which were active in working class areas and in mining villages. The level of the church assault on godlessness might be gauged from the activities of St Mary's Free Church in the working class Govan district of Glasgow. St Mary's had 1,137 children enrolled in its Sunday School, 493 in Bible class, 155 Sunday School teachers, a company of the BBs numbering 58, Gospel Temperance Meetings with 420 members, a Penny Savings Bank, several branches of the YMCA, and 292 Home Mission workers.

But in spite of these overtures success was only found among young people, once in adulthood most workers became alienated from the church. A Church of Scotland report in 1900 found that religious observation was still strong in rural areas and the Highlands and Islands, but in mining areas and large towns the poor and the unskilled did not attend church.

The church explained the lack of response from workers and their families in terms of poverty and working hours. It was argued that pew rents were a disincentive, but when they were abolished there was no rush to attend church. Long hours of work were also highlighted and that led to evening services being introduced, but they were poorly attended. Contemporaries also blamed the rise in commercial leisure pursuits, such as professional football, as an additional factor in diverting the masses away from the church.

The church's explanations seemed to highlight factors outside of its power to influence, and to an extent this was correct. Its loss of control over Poor Relief and education, as well the growth of civil registration of births and marriages from 1858, made the church less socially relevant to the masses. Psychologically,

the church was still seen as representative of the middle classes in the eyes of the workers, and this made identification difficult. As part of this the exclusion of skilled workers from positions of influence in the church aided the process of alienation. It is interesting that in less class-ridden communities, such as the Highlands and the fishing villages, the church flourished though usually in the form of dissenting faiths and sects.

The inter-War period saw little change in the overall pattern established in the 19th century. However, the opposition of most ministers to the General Strike of 1926 saw membership and attendance experience their largest fall. After the end of the Second World War things improved and the church recovered the ground it had lost in the inter-War period, only to lose members once again in the 1960s. Since that decade the church has continued on a downward spiral of decline. The only exception to this story of uneven but continuous decline has been the Roman Catholic Church.

5. THE CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE

Catholicism had been almost rooted out of Scotland after the Reformation. By the 18th century the numbers of Catholics only amounted to 20-30,000, living mainly in rural enclaves. The famine in Ireland in the mid-1840s changed all this, with the influx of thousands of immigrants to urban Scotland.

The mass migration of Irish Catholics posed enormous problems for the Catholic hierarchy in Scotland. Most church funding had to come from the pennies contributed by workers who were in low paid employment. However, the Catholic Church never faced the problems of dealing with alienated workers since its congregation was working class. For that reason as the 19th century wore on and its diocesan organisation was improved, it saw numbers in its flock increase rather than decline. Adult membership of 172,000 in 1851 had grown to 244,100 by 1901, a trend which developed well into the 20th century. By 1951 membership was estimated at 750,000 and the Catholic Church could claim 25.1% of total church membership in Scotland, whereas in 1901 it was only 15.5%. The growing membership of the Catholic Church in the first half of the 20th century can be put down to several factors. The Catholic faithful were predominantly working class, and since workers and their families constituted the largest portion of Scottish society, the Catholic Church had a bigger constituency than the more middle class Church of Scotland. However, not only had the Catholic Church a larger working class membership, it had been more prepared to follow the working population as it shifted its place of residence. From the 1830's onwards slum urban centres to new estates on green-field sites on the outskirts of the cities. The Catholic Church reacted by initiating a vigorous church building programme. With the school and church linked, the Catholic authorities were able to maintain direct contact with their flock in the new surroundings. Scotland failed in this direction and was left with empty churches in city centres. Additionally, the Church had a special place for Irish Catholics since in the 19th century it had provided them with not only pastoral care, but social services, and had even instructed them on political matters. That allegiance did not diminish in the 20th century.

The Catholic experience proved that workers need not necessarily be alienated from religion. Religion still plays an important part in the lives of people in Scotland, in spite of the gradual decline in formal worship and membership. At most of the vital events in people's lives, such as marriage and, especially, death some form of religious experience is desired to give meaning to the event. Therefore, while organised religion has declined dramatically, the need to study and understand religion in its widest form remains an important task for historians.

A GLOSSARY OF PROTESTANT CHURCHES

THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND: The established church which split in 1843 over the question of patronage. The Church of Scotland re-united with the United Free Church in 1929.

THE FREE CHURCH: This was formed in 1843 by the split in the established church. By 1851 it had as many members as the Church of Scotland.

THE UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH: This was formed in 1847 by a union of two of the largest seceding churches of the eighteenth century. In 1851 it only had about half the membership of the other main churches - the CofS and the FC.

THE UNITED FREE CHURCH: This was formed in 1921 as a result of the union of the FC and the UPC. The majority of its members joined with the Church of Scotland in 1929, but a minority refused to join and they continued as the UFC.

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