

# Lent Addresses 2013: What Future for the Church?

## How Did We Get Here?

### The Religious Crisis of the 1960s

*A Lent Address in Collegiate Parish Church of St Mary  
by Professor Hugh McLeod, University of Birmingham*

**“The changes of the 1960s were a rupture as profound as that brought about by the Reformation.”**

#### 1) Why did I say that?

- a) International impact – most profound in traditionally Roman Catholic countries
- b) In Britain the idea of being ‘Christian country’ gave way to notions that we are ‘pluralist’, ‘post-Christian’, ‘secular’ (this change can be seen in various institutions, not least the BBC)
- c) Radical widening of religious options – not only more vocal agnostics and atheists – but Buddhists, Hindus, Pagans – perceived as ‘weird’ in 1950s, have become ‘mainstream’ in 1970s
- d) Women leaving church as often as men – very important because of women’s role in family religion and inculcating values for the next generation
- e) Decline in Christian socialisation – Sunday Schools – RE goes multi-faith (a bit later)

#### 2) What happened?

- a) Drop in church going and church membership (less spectacular than in Holland, Belgium or Canada)  
Anglican confirmations drop by 44% for males and 41% for females 1960-70  
Church of England Electoral Roles drop by a third 1960-73  
Church of England baptisms down from 67% in 1950 to 47% in 1973  
Church of England Congregations down by 22%, Methodists 14%, Baptists 13%, Roman Catholics 10% in the period between 1960-70
- b) Crisis of clergy (especially Roman Catholic)
- c) Growth in non-Christian religions (mainly through immigration)
- d) Atheists ‘come out’ (e.g. John Lennon’s statement that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus was an important symbolic moment)
- e) Changes in law – from those purporting to be based on Christian morality to those which assumed a pluralist society and a range of value systems

#### 3) The Historians’ Debate – two sides represented by Brown and Gilbert:

- a) Callum G. Brown *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*  
Religious crisis of ‘60s comes very suddenly – caused by reaction against puritan atmosphere of post-war years and role of churches in moral discipline – revolt of young, especially women, focused on demand for sexual freedom
- b) Alan D. Gilbert *The Making of Post-Christian Britain: A History of the Secularization of Modern Society*  
1960s is culmination of a gradual long-term secularisation, going back for centuries and propelled by growing human self-confidence and control of environment

#### 4) My argument

- a) There is no one big master-factor – ‘60s are explosive in religion (and much else) because so many forces for change came together at one time