MASCULINITY AND SECULARISATION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN

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There is growing evidence that secularisation has been accompanied by a shift in the gender of Christian adherents and practitioners from female to male. For example, in France during the twentieth century there was a major decline in the proportion of women who were religiously active, leading to a significant narrowing of the traditional gender gap which had made for higher churchgoing by women. In Scotland between 1984 and 2002, there was a net loss of 168,560 churchgoers over 15 years-of-age, of whom 129,040 (or 77 per cent) were female. Equally, there is evidence that the growth between 1945 and 2008 of those identifying themselves as being of ‘no religion’ has been accompanied by a significant increase in the proportion of ‘no religionists’ who are women: in Canada women ‘no religionists’ rose from 30.7 per cent of the total in 1951 to 45.4 per cent in 2001, in the USA from 29.2 per cent in 1957 to 39 per cent in 2001, in Ireland from 36.3 per cent in 1960 to 40.6 per cent in 2006, in Australia from 42.4 per cent in 1976 to 45.9 per cent in 2006, and in New Zealand from 44.4 per cent in 1991 to 47.3 per cent in 2001.

1 McLeod, Religion and the People of Western Europe, 35.
2 Calculated from data in Table 4.4, Brierley, Turning the Tide, 53.
In England, the evidence is more confused. Between 1979 and 2005, the proportion of women in the Christian churchgoing population in England as a whole rose from 55 per cent to 57 per cent (whilst the proportion of women in the population was largely static); the biggest increase was in the 45-64 age group, where the percentage rose from 55 to 58 per cent. However, there were significant regional variations; in Greater London, with a population of 7.5 million in 2005, the proportion who were female fell very significantly during 1979-2005 from 57 per cent to 52 per cent. Moreover, the highest levels of male participation were amongst the growing and least declining denominations: New Churches were 50 per cent male, Pentecostal churches 49 per cent, Independent churches 48 and Roman Catholic Church 45. Meanwhile, the lowest male participation was in the most crisis-ridden denominations: the United Reformed Church was only 35 per cent male, the Methodist Church 36 per cent, and the Church of England 41 per cent. What is also interesting is that London, experiencing growth in male participation, is the part of England where the high-growth churches, notably the Pentecostal churches, have been the most vigorous and important parts of organised Christianity. London had had the lowest rate of churchgoing in Britain for the majority of the nineteenth and twentieth century (and in 1979 still had the seventh lowest church going rate of English counties). But by 2005 the capital had become amongst the highest (being exceeded only by Merseyside) - resulting not from church growth but from a low rate of decline. In this regard, the question arises: has twentieth century secularisation been affected by changing gender composition in Christianity?

A major factor to contend with is that of changing ethnic composition of churchgoers, resulting from the large-scale immigration of non-white Christians (especially Black Caribbean and African) after 1945. In an examination of twenty-seven English counties (including Greater London) drawn from the Church Research organisation censuses, there was a very significant positive correlation of 0.6208 between the decrease in Christian churchgoing between 1979 and 2005 and the percentage of churchgoers who were black/Caribbean/African/other (BCA) in 2005; this suggests that the higher the proportion of BCA in congregations, the lower was the rate of church decline. But there was an almost equally significant correlation of 0.5396 between the percentage who were BCA and the density of men amongst churchgoers; this suggests that counties with high proportions of black Christians have a tendency to be areas also with relatively high density of men. Moreover, a correlation coefficient of 0.5237 was produced between churchgoing levels in 2005 and the density of males in Christian congregations. Taken together these data suggest a close connection between rising proportion of non-whites in Christian congregations on the one hand, and high male density on the other. However, ethnicity is only part of the explanation for high male density in the congregations of some regions of England. Part of the reason may be age: growing denominations may be younger in composition and recruiting more young people. Certainly, the gender ratio for churchgoers in 2005

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5 These figures calculated from data in Ibid, passim.
6 Density is here defined as the proportion of men in the population minus the proportion of men in Christian congregations.
was stronger in Greater London for under 20 year olds (at 8:7) than was the case for English Christianity as a whole (where the ratio was 1:1). But the changing construction of gender itself needs to be closely examined as a major determining factor.

In a further twist, there is evidence from England that during post-war church growth in the period 1948-1960 the role of women was extraordinarily important. In those years, female confirmations in the Church of England rose from 33.6 to 40.9 per 1,000 population (a rise of 28 per cent). By contrast, male confirmations were static at 27.3 and 27.6 per cent, showing no meaningful growth at all. This suggests that young women were very responsive in the 1950s to the last strong blast of the traditional discourse on femininity and piety that characterised this period. But, though from 1960 to 1974 female confirmations fell marginally slower than men’s (a drop of 52 per cent compared to 56 per cent), the male figures showed a continuous decline since at least 1934 (of 61 per cent) whilst female decline only started in 1960-1962. A haemorrhage of male recruitment had existed for thirty years prior to the 1960s, whilst women’s recruitment actually grew; the result was an ever-increasing imbalance down to 1960 towards a ‘woman’s church’ in the Church of England. When decline started, however, it was the change in female recruitment that was important, since there was no change to male recruitment. The implication is that the wider collapse of Church of England recruitment, church going and church membership in the early 1960s may have been triggered in 1960-1962 by suddenly slowing female recruitment.

These data are suggestive of a significant pattern to secularisation. They may be the first consolidated evidence that the gender imbalance in the worshippers who attend Christian church on Sundays - an imbalance stretching back at least four hundred years - is starting to narrow appreciably. It may be that secularisation turns out to be a highly feminine thing. This is important because the churches and historians have tended to look upon men as the more secular, and thus the more prone to secularisation. There may be a case for arguing that in the special circumstances of rapid church decline, it is women who leave the church faster and, or, show lower inclination to be recruited.

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9 Currie et al., *Churches and Churchgoers*, 129.
10 Field, “Adam and Eve”.
THE SECULARISED MAN AND THE RELIGIOUS WOMAN

The image of men as naturally ‘more secular’ has a long pedigree. It was certainly very strong in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{11} Within the twentieth century, little changed quickly. In the First World War, the traditional image of men as naturally impious was hardly shaken by the war. The natural goodness of women contrasted with men’s innate religious disorder. Physical prowess and bravery in battle came at a cost - men were naturally less likely to go to church and lead a religious life, were subject to weakness of character, and were tempted to drink, gambling and rough culture. In his New Year message at the beginning of 1918, the Archbishop of Canterbury said: “It is from sternly disciplined men, trench-trained and battle-hardened, that we are to draw and fashion for the coming years young clergy, young schoolmasters, young Parliament men. It is from the ranks of women who have toiled unceasingly, uncomplainingly, in humblest paths of common service, that our young wives and mothers will come. In a different sense from that in which the words were first used, the new world will come to redress the balance of the old.”\textsuperscript{12}

The vision here is profoundly conservative and backward-looking. Though he said that ‘what lies ahead must needs be new’, there is a certainty and desire for a return to old structures of gendered roles, of a society that will have middle-class men toughened in war serving in leadership roles in a new and strengthened manner, and women returning after war service to be wives and mothers. The sense of the ‘new’ is nothing like novel; the Archbishop was locating religious and social newness within unchanged structures of the status quo. In popular culture, too, traditional gendering of religion and morality was reinforced. Wartime fiction, and stories at the end of the war, continued the Victorian and Edwardian themes of men’s innate weakness and women’s inbuilt religious value. Adultery was an issue that was raised in popular culture during the war; with so many men away, wives and ‘sweethearts’ at home did not always stay faithful. Yet, stories tended to hinge their narrative interest upon men’s religious problems, not women’s.

This continued focus upon men became intensified within the churches. The nature of the Great War was seen as spiritually different from the peace or, indeed, of earlier wars. The trenches formed an environment of peculiar religious results. Firstly, there was the constant exposure to fear and to the smell and experience of death and mutilation. Secondly, men on their own lacked the important soothing spiritual comfort of womanhood; women were the very essence of Christian piety, and men without that were likely to drift from a true Christian path. The churches dreaded that British men were being brutalised beyond the reach of religion, perhaps permanently. An Anglican clergyman, Canon James O. Hannay, wrote of his experiences as a chaplain in France, and told an audience at a public lecture in January 1918 in London: “On the one hand, there were those who expect that the war would produce a tremendous revival of religion, a revival both at home and abroad, of the religious spirit latent in the nation; in the other, a smaller class, who expected with

\textsuperscript{11} Brown, \textit{The Death of Christian Britain}, 88-114.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Church Times}, 4 January 1918.
equal confidence that it would finally chip away the veneer of religion that made the nation appear Christian. After more than three years of war we know that it has done neither. There has been nothing like a general revival of religion either at home or abroad, and certainly nothing like a wave of definite unbelief. What has happened is that it has changed the average man's attitude towards religion.”

Before the war, he said, men had looked upon the church parson amiably, perhaps indifferently, but things had now changed: “There was little active hostility, though there was a suggestion of contempt. The ordinary man stood remote from the Church, neither blessing nor cursing; patient, tolerant, broadly indifferent. Now there is a change. Religion is still the parson’s job, or the padre’s, as the case may be. He is still paid for it; still has the church or hut; but no one expects any longer that it is all right; on the contrary there is a general feeling that the parsons have messed [up] their job. There is tendency to blame no particular individual or Church for the failure. The state of mind is just one of confused puzzledness; religion has failed us.” Hannay still had hope: “The average Englishman, the man of the workshop of yesterday, of the trenches of to-day, wants religion ... [But] his religion is an imperfect thing - Christ and the Cross are not in it. In some degree then, the Church has succeeded. The souls of men are not asleep. That is something.”

Other religious developments of the period reinforced the strong view that women remained the heart and soul of popular Christian piety. Christian Science and spiritualism, which were areas of significant growth during the 1910s, gave a boost to the place of women in religious matters. Spiritualism was overwhelmingly a woman's domain, and seen to be so, and its rise during the war years contributed to an acknowledgement by the churches that women's position in society was changing. Yet, for the conservatives in all Christian denominations, women were perceived as coming to the aid of Christ’s church in rather conventional ways. Anglo-Catholics in the Church of England saw women as having a role in fighting the threat of Protestantism: “Women are on the threshold of great and magnificent opportunities”. The Congregationalist evangelical preacher Dr John Henry Jowett said in a sermon two weeks after the Armistice: “They will bring to our national affairs a spirit that contends for the maintenance of the spiritual idea. ... The reforming fire needs to be fed by the breath of heaven. A woman’s power of spiritual vision is her supreme endowment. She reaches spiritual realities, not by a tedious train of reasoning, but by intuitive discernment. We men say that woman is naturally religious. Her chief task in the next twenty years will be to keep alive in England the sense of God. ... If our women abide by the Cross, they will save our Country.”

The role of women in sustaining the moral fibre of the nation in the aftermath of the Great War was perceived to be even greater in the countryside than in the towns. The British rural areas were seen to be in crisis - a crisis revealed during the war. The crisis was one of national ill-preparedness in which long-term out-migration

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13 *Church Times*, 4 January 1918; Bellasis, “Hannay, James Owen”.
14 *Church Times*, 18 January 1918.
15 Ibid., 20 December 1918.
16 Quoted in *British Weekly*, 28 November 1918.
from farming areas, including by those in small towns which sustained the infra-
structure of agriculture, had weakened the rural economy and the ‘yeoman’ heart of
the nation. The Board of Agriculture became so concerned that it became involved
from 1916 in developing a strategy. At the heart of this was the role that women should
play in preventing families from giving up life in farming areas. In turn, women were
perceived as possibly leading - or at the very least allowing - the haemorrhage of
country people. And women, the reasoning went, were inclined to accede to leaving
the countryside because they were bored. They craved the excitement of towns,
of meeting people, and of socialising. The countryside was seen to reduce women’s
natural instinct to meet and gossip, to support each other in creating a contented
rural life. So, the Board turning to a new-fangled idea from Canada - that of women’s
meeting groups. This led to from 1918 to the government supporting the foundation
and spread of branches of the Christian-aligned Women’s Institute in England and
Wales, and, its equivalent north of the border, the Scottish Women’s Rural Institute.
These two bodies became quickly seen as the bulwark to social life in the countryside,
and to this day are regarded as important facets of the life of British farming areas.
In this way, there was a translation into even apparently ‘secular’ organisations of an
ideal to uphold women’s key role in church and society.

Calls also grew for greater things for women. The admission of women to the
ministry and the priesthood in the Protestant churches seemed to become near
when an Anglican, Maude Royden (1876-1956), was close in the 1910s to being the
first to preach the gospels, and be a priest, in the Church of England, having strong
support from the archbishop of Canterbury; though she accepted a preaching post in
the Congregational Church, the strong opposition amongst Anglicans, notably high
churchmen, prevented this. Women’s suffrage, won in 1918, was enthusiastically
supported by evangelicals who associated it with continuing moral change. But the
war put into relief the chasm of thought between Christian feminism and a libertine
feminism; the flamboyant and secular-style ‘New Woman’ of the pre-war era, imported
from America, met with hostility by British churchwomen. It was a more traditional
vision of women’s influence in society that attracted British churchwomen.

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed renewed emphasis upon male culpability in the
threat to Christendom. This was particularly apparent in the moral campaigns of the
temperance, anti-gambling, anti-sport and anti-cinema movements. Women were
portrayed as the moral guardians of their families - of fathers, brothers, husbands and
sons. The British Women’s Temperance Association - known as the ‘White Ribboners’
because of their uniform - provided moral and spiritual protection for working-class
women in vulnerable occupations (notably mill-work) by confronting male drunken-
ness. Their main propaganda device was a community parade in which the daughter
of a well-known drunken father would be dressed in white and placed at the head of
the marching band. One woman to whom this happened in the early 1920s recalled:
“I went to the White Ribboners, and they had a parade. My father didn’t know that I

17 Fletcher, “Royden, (Agnes) Maude”.
had been going to the White Ribboners. But he was standing at the corner when he saw us coming down with the white banners, and somebody said: ‘My Archie, see who’s leading it?’ He says: ‘Aye, an’ I’m going to the pub tonight.’”

Virtue and piety were on parade, and they were female. In this way, on the face of it, men’s position in the Christian culture of the inter-war years seemed to be little changed from Victorian representation. For conservative Christians, and indeed for many women in British families, men remained the problem, and their moral disciplining was depicted as depending on self-discipline and deprivation of ‘natural’ instinct. In David Thomson’s Episcopal Church in Scotland, the minister was expected to prepare a boy for confirmation through introducing “his charge into knowledge of the physical transformation from boyhood into manhood”; as Thomson experienced it, the sex education was not merely clumsy but useless, surrounded by a blustered euphemism that left no boy in any clear idea of the facts of life. But the main point was that moral training for men was not about sex, but about gambling, games and above all drink. Unlike most protestant churches, the Roman Catholic Church in Britain often offered outlets for sports and games; games like billiards and cards were organised or permitted on church premises, in clubs designed to entertain young men and keep them from more dissolute activities, as well as keeping them within the general orbit of the Church. Only outdoor games were banned by Catholic families in many protestant areas for fear of adding fire to sectarian tensions.

The Protestant view on games was sterner. It was focussed especially on the keeping of the Sabbath. This was an issue that rose to new prominence in both England and Scotland in the inter-war years. In England, a sheaf of legislation came in the late 1920s and early 1930s, giving new prominence to Sabbath observance. This was the result of a long-term concerted campaign by English Sabbatarians who wished to close down male pastimes on the Lord’s Day. Acts of Parliament banned the sale of all but certain specified goods (like newspapers, newly cooked food and milk), and controlled the opening of cinemas and banned theatres. But in addition, there were campaigns until the end of the thirties to suppress Sunday golf; from 1906 the Evangelical Free Churches’ Council lambasted railway companies and golfers jointly for the spoliation of Sundays. In 1926, golfing was reported as becoming more restricted in England on Sundays where town courses were largely shut. The English urban middle classes were banned from playing on their local courses, so they took to country courses where they played “when they can break the Sabbath discreetly shrouded by trees”. One newspaper reporter found a Scots golfer who travelled to an English country course to play golf on Sundays: “Wild horses shall drag no more from me lest his cook, resenting the glare of publicity, should give him notice.”

20 Thomson, Nairn in Darkness and Light, 203-204.
21 Ayers, The Liverpool Docklands, 50.
22 Crampsey, The Young Civilian, 175.
23 The Times, 8 March 1906.
24 Ibid., 10 December 1926.
In the inter-war years, the English-based Lord’s Day Observance Society and the British Weekly newspaper campaign tirelessly against that most masculine of sports - boxing - when it took place on Sundays. Some 12,000 spectators turned up to watch boxing in a former evangelical chapel in West Bromwich in 1929; the paper said that “crowds of sportsmen (of a kind) gather Sunday by Sunday in order to satiate their basic instincts by gazing upon the brutalities of a Prize Fight” worth up to £400 to the winner, describing it as “a blot on a Christian land”. In 1929, the LDOS successfully got boxing contests at Ilford, Gravesend and Stratford stopped, and sought Home Office legislation to stop them nationally.25

In Scotland, there was little national legislation on the issue of the Sabbath; this was because few had thought it likely that there would be a significant breaking down of conventions on Sabbath keeping, and, in any event, there was already considerable power vested in local authorities to ban Sabbath games from council property (including parks) and from the streets. In Scotland, golf was mostly unknown on Sundays. The Times golf correspondent in 1926 wrote an eloquent tirade against the Scottish Sabbath, after travelling up from London to St Andrews on a Saturday to play (for no trains went on Sundays), and then of having to wait out Sunday with scores of other would-be golfers who roamed the Old Course, swinging their walking sticks in frustration at not being able to play: “I am on fire for this eternal Sabbath to end”.26 Sunday leisure was a growing target generally for Sabbatarian ire. The rich were targeted by many critics. In Lewis the presbytery of the Church of Scotland saved its greatest wrath for the shooting tenants “who drive on the Sabbath to the Druidic stones in Callernish [sic]” - the pagan destination compounding their neglect of Christian ordinances.27 There was particular furore with “the idle rich of Edinburgh” for Sunday leisure.28 A.H. Dunnett, a leading figure in the Church of Scotland in the early 1930s, attacked the rich man who played golf or drove his motor car on Sundays: “His soul is in darkness, selfish and arrogant and carrying of his heathendom on the wings of a prosperous independence.”29

Working-class men were the objects of the most severe criticism. In Scotland, working men’s clubs were a new fad early in the century, which had started in some small towns and were spreading to the larger ones; in 1900 it was estimated one Sunday that 1,380 men were entering clubs in Edinburgh.30 Those complaining of working men’s clubs were considered off beam by some; they weren’t ‘lost’ churchgoers: “A man does not spend part of his Sunday in church and another part in a Sunday drinking-club.”31 Ice-cream shops were a particular target of Sabbatarians as “they are a source of demoralisation to young lads and children and give an unhappy

26 Ibid., 27 August 1926.
27 Committee on the Observance of the Lord’s Day, Reports to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (hereafter RGACS), 1906, 1126.
28 The Scotsman, 29 May 1906.
29 Dunnett, The Church in Changing Scotland, 63.
30 Committee on the Observance of the Lord’s Day, RGACS, 1900, 1150-1152.
31 Ibid., 1902, 1152.
Sunday games, especially casual football matches, were a constant target. Unusually, the Revd D. H. Soutar of Tayport near Dundee defended Sunday football in 1935, saying he himself had played on that day, but his was a rather lone voice in his presbytery. Indeed, the attempt to suppress male games reached a new high point in that decade. In 1934, Glasgow Corporation - by 40 votes to 36, four abstaining - voted against allowing golf courses, tennis courts and bowling greens to open for play on Sundays. Paisley rejected Sunday golf in 1936 by 2 to 1, whilst in Edinburgh the town council by 37 votes to 26 refused permission for Merchants Golf Club at Craiglockhart (which was on council land) to play golf on Sundays. But the fiercest action was reserved for working-class men. In 1937, 26 men and youths were arrested in Prestonfield in Edinburgh one Sunday charged with playing football, gambling, and breach of the peace. Seven who admitted the charges were fined £2 or 20 days imprisonment; this was only achieved after a large planned operation involving scores of police hidden in bushes and woodland to catch the culprits in the midst of their game.

THE PROBLEMATIC MASCULINITY

Part of the drift detected by the churches lay in the paradox of plebeian male religiosity in the inter-war years. Masculinity was still seen as an innate problem for Christian faith, and something that needed the discipline of increased feminine attributes. Men were clearly alienated from churchgoing in very large numbers, making up no more than a third of congregations. Yet, the inter-war years witnessed perceptible innovations in working-class male spirituality. One was the crisis of the masculine body created by the death and maiming of the First World War. This led to a new culture - what Mike Snape has termed a remembrance culture - in which there was little glorification of war, but rather a new form of comradeship based from the 1920s around rituals (including the 11 November remembrance service each year), architecture (of bland war memorials and cenotaphs without any significant representation of war or its glories), and organisations of war remembering (notably the British Legion for ex-servicemen and the Anglican Toc H association that started in 1920 from impromptu wartime centres for men near the western front). A third development was the introduction from 1927 of religious themes into English FA Cup Final, including singing of the hymn ‘Abide With Me’, whilst Welsh rugby matches had choral hymn-singing. A series of cultural accommodations was growing, renegotiating men’s relationships with the Christian religion. Not centred

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32 Ibid., 1901, 1085.
33 The Scotsman, 3 October 1935.
34 Ibid., 30 March 1934.
36 I am grateful to Mike Snape for allowing me to use his term.
37 Nicholls, “Clayton, Philip Thomas Byard”.

so much on ‘churchianity’, nor even in a supportive role to female domesticity, what was emerging was something that gave men a religious focus within popular culture. And yet, these trends also acknowledged the alienation men felt from the churches; churches were not meeting their needs. As Hugh McLeod has observed: “For millions of working-class families it was a day for digging the garden, visiting relatives, or snoozing over the News of the World.”

The 1920s and 30s witnessed the rise of a longer-term crisis for British Christianity - that of sex and sexuality. Churchmen identified declining sexual morality as reducing the religious condition of the nation, with sex before marriage as a new critical indicator of de-Christianisation. Birth control clinics, starting with those of Marie Stopes, gave couples advice on contraceptive methods, responding to escalating demand for condoms to limit family size and pregnancy outwith marriage. For Catholic bishops, this was the beginning of a long-term struggle with artificial methods of birth control, which they saw as “examples of the breakdown of the moral life of the country”. Protestant churches were divided on contraception and whether it made sex immoral (or ‘unchaste’ as it was put). The Church of England and the Church of Scotland gave something less than wholehearted approval of condoms in the 1930s, and there was no cultural shift to open access; they remained items furtively bought and sold from men’s barber’s shops. Sexual affairs and scandals - ranging from the Anglican vicar Revd Harold Davidson’s relations with prostitutes to King Edward VIII’s love affair with Mrs Simpson - introduced a lasting obsession of the British press with the sexual antics of royalty and men of the cloth. Scandal made the churches objects of derision, and exposed their vulnerability to the accusation of sheltering scoundrels and deviants.

The mid-twentieth century seemed to indicate that British Christianity was still a strongly female affair. In a 1947 survey, 11 per cent of men and 18 per cent of women claimed to go to church weekly; a further 18 per cent and 26 per cent respectively claimed to go between once every 3 weeks and once every 2 months, whilst another 15 per cent of men and 12 per cent of women claimed to attend church less frequently. Added up, this meant that a total of 44 per cent of men and 56 per cent of women claimed to be churchgoers. This was a highly religious society, and one in which there was a significant gender imbalance.

The nature of the 1950s, as a period of sexual restraint and moral austerity, impinged strongly upon men as it did upon women. In the whole of the modern era, sexual activity outside of marriage appears to have reached its low point in the 1950s in England and Wales, and to have dipped dramatically in Scotland after a high point in the inter-war years. Across the whole of the UK in the late 1940s and 1950s, the low figures for illegitimacy confirmed the austerity of the moral and religious climate; in England and Wales, and in Scotland, the illegitimacy rate reached a low point of little over 4 per cent in the mid 1950s. This reflected a high degree of sexual abstinence before marriage - and of marriage following immediately upon any pregnancy. As many commentators suggested, virginity dominated amongst both men and women

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38 McLeod, Religion and the Working Class, 66.
39 The Tablet, 20 February 1937.
into their twenties in this decade. So much so that it became in the following, more liberal decade something of a standing joke, with men on national service being termed ‘the virgin soldiers’. The novelist Ian McEwen wrote of a young man undergoing national service as more morally naïve, unadventurous and abstemious than older men and women who served in the war: “It was not so extraordinary a thing in nineteen fifty-five for a man of Leonard’s background and temperament to have had no sexual experience by the end of his twenty-fifth year.” And as the poet Philip Larkin noted, sexual intercourse was not invented until 1963, “which was rather late for me”.40

**RELIGION AND GENDER AFTER 1960**

The decade of the 1960s is becoming the object of increasing attention from historians. It is being examined ever more closely to see if it deserved its reputation as an era of shocking sexual change, promiscuity and high levels of moral change.41 The decade certainly marked one of transition in Christian culture. No longer was the language of taken-for-granted moral rectitude accepted as normative; scandals of rank hypocrisy, such as that of Secretary of State John Profumo in 1963 when he was forced to resign after first denying, then confessing, an adulterous relationship with Christine Keeler, a woman tarred as a prostitute and a security risk because of her liaison with a Soviet official.42

The real significance of the 1960s is that it marked a profound sexual turn, and one affecting Christianity very deeply. In the sixties, the moral problem of British society changed gender - from male to female. An analysis developed in both the churches and in the wider throes of the establishment that the sexual revolution was being caused not by men, but by women. Girls and young women were seen in the sixties to lose their reserve and innocence over sexual matters. The willingness of many to adopt new clothing styles which bared more flesh than ever before, the tremendous popularity of the oral contraceptive pill (which became available for single women in Britain from 1968), and the rise of a popular culture based on ‘sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll’, signalled to many churchmen that there no longer was a reliable female model for piety and purity. It was the position of women in relation to sexual purity that was the hallmark of 1960s’ moral panic. The 1960s turned attention upon femininity and secularisation in a way unheard of really since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Women very suddenly became the problem for the churches in the 1960s. As the Church of Scotland most famously said, “It is the promiscuous girl who is the real problem here.”43 In this utterly sexist statement, the Church actually understood that

41 The key work here is McLeod’s *The Religious Crisis*. See also Marwick, *The Sixties*.
the sexual turn was in female permissiveness, not in men’s. The Christian churches were losing their central, popular paradigm of Christian behaviour - the respectable and sexually abstinent single woman.

The 1960s created a situation in which it was possible for the individual British young woman to legitimately, and quite without fear for her ‘reputation’, leave Christian religion and ‘respectability’. The possibility was one that was novel for women. Men had been able to leave, or forgo regular attendance, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But women had found such freedom extremely limited; only the necessities of family care had developed as a legitimate excuse for missing Sunday worship. But the late twentieth century introduced the wide possibility of massive change to women's lifestyle and religious activity. One of the major consequences was demographic. Women started to bear children out of wedlock in massive numbers; increasingly they got married without religious rites; and increasingly, they did not get married at all. These demographic consequences signalled the death of one of the grandest ideas of European Enlightenment culture - that woman was the pious core of modernity.

This opened up the possibility, perhaps the inevitability, that men would become more important to the Christian religion. If women’s changing relationship to religion lay at the heart of late twentieth-century secularisation, then men could become more important in the gender mix of the religious community. As the numbers going to church reduced, then men became more numerically significant. At the same time, perhaps masculinity became more important. The evidence of the 1990s seems to suggest that as churches contracted, they became more militant, and in the militancy of the modern Christian church, there was a growing role for laymen. Men might have declined as a proportion of the professionals in the Protestant churches. The ordination of women in the Church of England from 1992, and in the Episcopal Church of Scotland from 1994, led to a decline of men being ordained; only 26 per cent of ordinations in 1994 were female, but the proportion rose to 44 per cent by 1999 and remained at that level into the new century. Similar trends occurred in the Church of Scotland, creating competing militancies - between opponents and proponents of women's ordination. But the declining numbers of men in the clergy of the churches (including the Roman Catholic Church) masked the increasing role of men overall in the churches. Indeed, there may be an argument to explore that the decline of male clergy was a concomitant not of secularisation and a male crisis of faith as such, but was rather the product of a shift in Christian men's conception of religiosity away from professional vocations and towards secular roles. This is not to deny that secularisation has taken its toll upon male religiosity as a whole, as it has of women’s. Merely, there may be a case to examine that amongst men still in association with the Christian churches there has been a shift from the vocation to the secular. Masculinity may be being accommodated in the churches in a new way.

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64 See Brown, Religion and Society.
65 Calculated from data in The Church of England Yearbook 2003, xliii.
Femininity, by the same token, is not to be understood solely in relation to the ordination of women and the increasing role and freedoms of Christian women in Europe. By far the greater implication is that the decline of Christendom in Europe is being fuelled by the rapidly declining association of women with Christianity. Perhaps secularisation, in its format of de-Christianisation, is turning out to be woman’s thing, not a man’s, as we have been led to believe for so long.