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When the Lights Go Out: The Death of a Denomination

When a church forfeits its doctrinal convictions and then embraces ambiguity and tolerates heresy, it undermines its own credibility and embraces its own destruction.

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Adrian Hamilton is concerned that the Church of England “will not survive my children’s lifetime and quite possibly not even my own.” Writing in *The Independent* [London], Hamilton writes of a Church of England that remains established as the national church, but is no longer established in the hearts of the nation.



Interestingly, Hamilton argues that the very fact that the Church of England is an established state church is among the chief causes of its predicament. For most Britons, he argues, the role of the nation’s state church means very little — “some exotic clothes and ritual prayers on state occasions.”

And yet, what Hamilton notes most of all is this: “What is really worrying for the future of the Church, however, is that its leaders themselves seem to have ceased to believe in it.”

Hamilton is not a conservative. He rather smugly dismisses controversies over sexuality and gender. Those debates are not killing the church, he argues. Instead, it is the unspeakable apathy that marks the British people with regard to their state church. “The majority of people are quite happy to profess themselves Christian and Anglican,” he says. “It’s easier to accept than asserting a different faith. But they are not so happy to go to church services or take an active part in its activities.”

Consider this assessment:

The figures are truly dire. While non-Christian faiths have grown stronger and the evangelical Christian churches flourish, the story in the Church of England has been one of almost continuous decline since the war:

Despite a series of initiatives such as Back to Church Sunday and some improvement in the numbers of young people participating in church activities, attendance figures amongst Anglicans have dropped by some 10 per cent over the last decade. Only 1.1m people, some 2 per cent of the population, attend church on a weekly basis, and only 1.7m, or 3 per cent, once a month. This in spite of the fact that around half the population still profess themselves Anglicans.

The decline in paid clergy has been even more rapid. On the Church’s own statistics, the beginning of the new millennium has already seen a fall in over 20 per cent to barely 8,000. On present trends clergy would disappear altogether within half a century.

This is a stark portrait of a church in deep trouble. The status of the Church of England as the established national church has granted its leaders a false sense of security and importance. There are more principled reasons to oppose the very idea of an established church, but this practical effect is no small matter.

The formality of state occasions may provide drama and a sense of vitality, but these are masks. How many in the

congregation gathered for last week's royal wedding knew any of the words to the great hymns that were sung? Only three percent of the nation's population attends Church of England services even once a month. Given current trends, few Anglican parishes will have ministers in just a few decades. Like many other historic churches and denominations, the Church of England is passing through decline, and it faces nothing short of demise unless these trends are somehow reversed.

As valid as the institutional question of establishment may be, the more important factor in this pattern of decline is theological. Churches and denominations decline when they lose or forfeit their passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ and for the Bible as the enduring, authoritative, and totally truthful Word of God. If life and death are no longer understood to hang in the balance, there is little reason for the British people to worry about anything related to Christianity. If a church is not passionate about seeing sinners come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, if there is no powerful biblical message from its pulpits, then it is destined for decline and eventual disappearance.

When a church forfeits its doctrinal convictions and then embraces ambiguity and tolerates heresy, it undermines its own credibility and embraces its own destruction.

Hamilton is surely right about one thing. It is true that the Church of England's disastrous controversies over gender and sexuality are not the causes of the church's decline. They are instead symptoms of a far deeper theological disease.

Hamilton's closing words bear close scrutiny: "The Church of England was founded as a political act against the wishes of much of the population and is now dying out of political irrelevance and popular unconcern. History, as we know, moves on, taking no prisoners."

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

Adrian Hamilton, "[Will the Last Person to Leave the Church of England Please Turn Out the Lights](#)," *The Independent*, Monday, April 18, 2011.

Image: *The Coronation of Queen Victoria at Westminster Abbey, London, June 28, 1838.*

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