

## WHO GOES TO CHURCH IN SCOTLAND?

### A Further Sociological Perspective

In a previous article<sup>1</sup> I was forced to admit that church-going statistics for Scotland have seldom been researched. Sociology of religion in general does not attract vast research grants – as might be expected – but a number of small surveys have at least established the general rate of church-going in England.<sup>2</sup> Religion in Scotland, however, has been comparatively ignored by the sociologists.

Even the research of Peter Sissons in Falkirk<sup>3</sup> did not establish an accurate picture of church-going. The aim of his research, of course, was to examine the specific category of church membership and at this level his findings are invaluable. But the particular way he examined church membership – and especially its social significance – precluded any serious understanding of society as a whole. His sample of non-church members was very small (35) and in any case it was not included in his tests of statistical significance. Possibly this was an error on his part – it certainly restricts the usefulness of some of his findings – but it does mean that he cannot be used as an accurate guide to church-going levels, even in Falkirk.

On the basis of the broad British statistics, however, I did suggest that, even though church-going figures have been declining for some time, the British may not actually be antagonistic towards the liturgical enterprise. Many theologians, sociologists and church leaders may have been too hasty in suggesting that we live in an age of ‘secularization’. Evidence gleaned from those who claim to watch religious programmes on television and to say private prayers, would seem to suggest that this age is not actually ‘secular’. It may be ‘religiously confused’ (according to your particular perspective), but it need not be actually ‘secular’. I have tried to explore this ambiguous state of affairs elsewhere – based on this occasion on statistics drawn from the West as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, however, I will review some of the fresh – and at times surprising – evidence that has emerged from a survey I supervised in the West End of Edinburgh. Of course, this evidence does not relate to the whole of Scotland, or even to the whole of Edinburgh, but it does, I believe, very partially fill a vacuum in existing research. Hopefully, others will be prodded into extending the

research elsewhere in Scotland. In the first part of the article I will review some of the main findings of the survey related to church-going and in the second I will briefly point out some of the possible consequences of these findings.

## I

The Edinburgh Survey was undertaken as part of a parish survey for Palmerston Place Church of Scotland and the Episcopal Cathedral Church of St. Mary in April 1974. An initial pilot survey was undertaken in March and the eventual survey was carried out by some 200 members of the two congregations after a half-day training session. Altogether 818 adults were successfully interviewed – about one-third of the population of the parish of Palmerston Place Church.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of the survey was that 35.7 per cent of the sample claimed to attend church 'most weeks', with another 10.6 per cent claiming to attend 'once a month'. Thus a total of 46.3 per cent stated that they went to church at least once a month. The somewhat generous estimate for Britain as a whole made by David Martin in the mid-1960s (since when most churches have declined significantly) of 25 per cent of the adult population attending church at least once a month,<sup>5</sup> shows just how high this figure is. Again, John Highet's 1959 estimate of 26 per cent of the adult Scottish population attending church at least once a week makes an interesting comparison. Even allowing for a certain amount of exaggeration on the part of those being interviewed in the Edinburgh sample (and in the long run this exaggeration balances itself out since it applies equally to all questionnaire-surveys), a figure of 46.3 per cent is surprisingly high. I shall, however, attempt to explain it later.

Despite this surprising finding, though, all the usual patterns concerning church attendance emerged in the survey. The near universal finding in the West is that such factors as age, sex and class have a significant effect on those who do or do not go to church. For Britain as a whole W. S. F. Pickering has suggested that 'the person least likely to be found in the churches is a married man, 25-45 years of age, of unskilled occupation, living in a large urban area'.<sup>6</sup> With the exception that this survey was conducted in a large urban area, this generalization would appear to be true for the West End of Edinburgh. Using standard tests of statistical significance ( $\chi^2$  amongst others), sex, age, marital status and class all proved important.

So, Chart 1 shows the influence of sex on church-going:

CHART 1: EDINBURGH SURVEY 1974

	Sex	
	Male	Female
Church attendance:		
Most Sundays	29.5	38.8
Once a month	10.4	10.9
Festivals	8.4	7.5
Seldom	30.7	27.0
Never	17.5	10.1
No answer	3.6	5.7

It can be seen that whereas only 39.9 per cent of the male sample claimed to go to church at least once a month, 49.7 per cent of the female sample so claimed. Further, almost twice as many men as women claimed never to go to church, and altogether 48.2 per cent of the men, as opposed to 37.1 per cent of the women, said that they attended church seldom or never.

CHART 2: EDINBURGH SURVEY 1974

	Marital Status		
	Married	Widowed	Single
Church attendance:			
Most weeks	31.1	48.4	36.1
Once a month	11.3	9.0	11.4
Festivals	8.4	3.3	9.0
Seldom	30.5	25.4	27.5
Never	14.2	8.2	12.3
No answer	4.4	5.7	3.7

Chart 2 shows the influence of marital status on church attendance. This evidence too tends to support Pickering's generalization. It can be seen that it is those who are married who attend church the least. Widows, on the other hand (most of the 'widowed' group were female), are significantly more inclined to go to church than others and few indeed of them claim never to go.

The sample was predominantly middle class, nevertheless the findings did indicate that those in manual occupations were significantly less inclined to go to church than others. It also contained a number of students (10 per cent of the sample) who appeared to be slightly more inclined to go to church than the general population – 51.2 per cent said that they went to church at least once a month.

The young as a whole, however, were not particularly inclined to attend church, as Chart 3 demonstrates.

CHART 3: EDINBURGH SURVEY 1974

	Age					
	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 +
Church attendance:						
Most weeks	29.3	16.4	32.8	31.7	42.9	55.8
Once a month	12.7	11.9	12.5	14.9	10.9	6.3
Festivals	10.5	11.9	4.7	7.9	7.6	4.2
Seldom	28.2	41.0	31.3	30.7	26.9	17.4
Never	16.0	17.9	17.2	8.9	8.4	8.9
No answer	3.3	0.7	1.6	5.9	3.4	7.4

Certainly it would appear that it is the 25-34 age-group which is the least inclined to attend church. Nevertheless, all the age-groups stand in sharp contrast to the oldest one. Amongst those aged 65 or over, 62.1 per cent said that they attended church at least once a month. In contrast only 28.3 per cent of those in the 25-34 age-group so claimed.

As in many other surveys, it was evident from the Edinburgh Survey that denominations varied considerably in the regularity of their members in attending church. So, whereas 33.6 per cent of those who identified themselves with the Church of Scotland claimed to go to church most weeks, 64.2 per cent of Roman Catholics made the same claim. Amongst the non-Catholic churches it was only the sects which showed a similar pattern of church attendance to the Roman Catholics – 63.6 per cent. A slightly larger amount of Roman Catholics – 15.1 per cent – however than other denominations claimed never to go to church.

Finally, the Edinburgh survey suggested that physical mobility exercises an important affect on rates of church-going, as Chart 4 demonstrates.

CHART 4: EDINBURGH SURVEY 1974

	Years spent at present address				
	0-1	2-3	4-5	6-10	11 +
Church attendance:					
Most weeks	24.1	24.0	51.1	38.2	47.1
Once a month	12.8	11.0	8.0	12.7	10.1
Festivals	12.8	10.3	3.4	1.0	7.4
Seldom	32.8	39.0	21.6	31.4	21.8
Never	14.9	14.4	13.6	10.8	8.9
No answer	2.6	1.4	2.3	5.9	4.7

It would seem that it is those who have lived in their present address for at least the last four years that are the most likely to go to church. The physically mobile are less inclined to go regularly.<sup>7</sup>

To summarize, it would appear from the responses to the survey that a surprisingly large number of people claim to go to church regularly – rather more than the most generous estimates that have been made for British or Scottish national averages. Nevertheless, it would seem that the same processes are evident in the West End of Edinburgh as elsewhere. Women go to church more than men: the unmarried and especially the widowed more than the married: the middle class rather than the working class: the old rather than the young: and those who have settled at one house rather than the physically mobile.

## II

It would be possible to comment on a number of features arising from this evidence on church-going in the West End of Edinburgh. However, I shall pick out just two.

The first point concerns the surprisingly high level of those claiming to go to church regularly. As I suggested earlier, it is unnecessary to be totally sceptical of such claims. There is no reason to believe that the people living in this area are especially dishonest or prone to exaggeration! Certainly they are no more so than anyone else – yet others advance much lower claims. Somehow the sociologist must explain this apparently high level of church-going.

It may be possible that the area studied presents us with something of a 'religious enclave'. Ever since the work of the French 'religious sociologists' in the 1940s and 1950s it has been known that rural areas are by no means uniform in their degree of religiousness.<sup>8</sup> Some areas conform more closely to the generally low level of church-going in urban areas than others. In Britain too it has been known since the 1851 Census that different areas have remarkably different patterns of church-going.<sup>9</sup> However, it is too easily assumed (as indeed it was by the French 'religious sociologists') that urban areas are comparatively uniform. The evidence from the Edinburgh Survey would suggest that this is not necessarily the case. It is possible that differences between one urban area and another may be as great as differences between one rural area and another. 'Religious enclaves' may exist in cities as well as in villages.

The other important point that seems to emerge from the Edinburgh Survey is that a variety of social forces affect whether people go to church or not. In my earlier article I suggested that a 'secularization' model was too easy. That is to say, it is too easy to assume that the current comparatively low rate of church-going is due to

widespread disbelief and rejection of the churches. The evidence from this survey and many others, however, seems to indicate that there are many reasons for people either attending *or* not attending church. Few of these social factors may be overtly religious. People in Scotland as elsewhere would appear to be influenced more by the sex they belong to, the age they happen to be, the particular class they belong to, whether or not they are married and whether or not they are physically mobile, than by personal conviction.

## NOTES

1. Robin Gill, 'Who Prays? A Sociological Perspective', *Liturgical Review*, III, 2, (Nov. 1973).
2. See W. S. F. Pickering, 'Who goes to Church?' in C. L. Mitton (ed.), *The Social Sciences and the Churches* (T. & T. Clark, 1972).
3. Peter L. Sissons, *The Social Significance of Church Membership in the Burgh of Falkirk* (Church of Scotland, 1973).
4. Robin Gill, *The Social Context of Theology* (Mowbrays, 1975).
5. David Martin, *A Sociology of English Religion* (S.C.M., 1967).
6. See Pickering, *op. cit.* p. 195.
7. Cf. G. Nelson and R. Clews, *Mobility and Religious Commitment* (University of Birmingham Institute for the Study of Worship and Religious Architecture, 1971).
8. See F. Boulard, *Introduction to Religious Sociology* (D.L.T., 1960).
9. See John D. Gray, *The Geography of Religion in England* (Duckworth, 1971).

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