

The changing face of Christianity in the UK

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Intro VO: Welcome to the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast from the University of Birmingham. In each edition we hear from an expert in a different field, who gives us insider information on key trends, upcoming events, and what they think the near future holds.

Lucy: Today we're with **Dr Andrew Davies** (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/tr/davies-andrew.aspx>) who is Senior Lecturer in Intercultural Theology and Pentecostal Studies. Welcome, Andrew.

Andrew: Hi Lucy.

Lucy: Could you translate that for me? What is it that you do?

Andrew: Yeah, sure. Intercultural Theology is really the branch of Christian theology that looks at the relationship of theology and culture, so it looks at how religion and issues of faith are expressed in different cultures and also how culture and cultural issues impact religion in today's world. Then as for Pentecostal Studies, the Pentecostal movement is a kind of renewalist, revivalist movement within Christianity that started about a hundred years ago and really has been one of the reasons for the dramatic change in the nature of Christianity in the world in the last century or so.

Lucy: And we're going to talk about the changing face of Christianity in the UK and we're wrong to think that religion is something that's fading away, that's less important now than it used to be. In fact your work shows that that's not true.

Andrew: Yeah, absolutely. They told us kind of fifty, sixty years ago that probably by the end of the last century we'd see the end of religion as a dominant force in society and if anything, exactly the opposite happened. Instead of becoming more secular, the nature of faith, the nature of spirituality in the UK has certainly changed but it's certainly not got any less important. It's almost as if it's moved into all kinds of different areas and taken us in different directions but it's still vitally important.

Lucy: And what's happening in Britain is of course affected by what's happening around the world and there's big changes in global Christianity as well.

Andrew: Yeah, about a century ago you'd be talking about 80% of the world's Christian population being based in Europe. Now it's kind of less than half that, we're talking around about 40%, so the whole kind of locus of World Christianity has moved southwards really so most Christians today are probably going to be based in Asia or Africa or Latin America; very strongly Christian continents all of those three.

Lucy: And a massive upsurge in **China** (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/aug/28/china-future-christianity>) as well.

Andrew: China's fascinating because despite the fact that Christianity's officially not recognised and not accepted by the State there, still around about 10,000 people a day the statistics tell us are choosing to convert to Christianity. So a very interesting situation there.

Lucy: Alongside that, possibly surprising, a rise in the persecution of Christians around the world.

Andrew: Yeah, again all the figures tell us that there were more Christians martyred for their faith in the last thirty years or so than in the whole of the rest of human history. So it's not that society's got more tolerant of faith but rather much the opposite.

Lucy: So what's happening in the UK specifically?

Andrew: Well the story that some people would have you believe is that church attendances is plummeting, that the Church is going to disappear within a few decades if we're not very careful. Actually that probably was the story of ten years ago but the latest figures are quite interesting because they do reflect something of a levelling off of those decline in church attendance. So there are wings of the Christian Church in the UK that are actually growing quite rapidly. What has happened is that the kind of nominal traditions of Christianity have tended to lose members quite dramatically and you're almost left now with a hard core if you like, so Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism for instance have grown quite dramatically, something like an 8% increase nationwide in terms of people attending Evangelical churches with other traditions within that growing even more rapidly than that.

Lucy: So it's the wishy-washy, C of E, turn up now and again people that have died away.

Andrew: Yeah, I think they've almost come to the conclusion that if nobody expects them to go to church for social reasons well why should they bother doing it? But people for whom Christianity is a vitally important part of their life, for instance something like 9 out of 10 evangelical Christians would say that their faith is the predominant factor in the decisions that they make in life and the choices they make. So they're really pretty committed to it and it's an important thing for them to be a Christian, compared to round about 1 in 2 non-evangelical Christians.

Lucy: The dropping off has been among the not-so-bothered but what areas are the ones that are growing the most rapidly?

Andrew: If I had to pick one tradition that really is exploding in terms of growth it certainly would be the black majority churches, especially the Pentecostal black majority churches. They're increasing around about 14 or 15% a year on average, which is a dramatic growth. I mean that's happening worldwide as well so independent churches throughout the world are kind of increasing in numbers and increasing in adherence quite dramatically but the biggest church in the UK as far as we're aware is Kingsway International Christian Centre in London which is less than twenty years old. It started off with a couple of hundred people and now has comfortably over 15,000 meeting every week. Largely West African but around about fifty different nations represented in that church. So there are a lot of churches that really are getting into kind of global mega-church levels now and really starting to be quite substantial churches.

Lucy: And these are churches which take their faith very very seriously and have quite conservative theological and social messages, aren't they?

Andrew: And very controversial for that in some sectors, for instance, so their attitude on whether you should take medicine for instance if you're sick has been in the news fairly recently. Sometimes they have attitudes on homosexuality and sex outside of marriage that are very very conservative and perhaps not in line with the majority view in the country. So they've been very controversial and of course as well have sometimes a very strong top down hierarchical approach to leadership which has also been very controversial.

Lucy: And when you've got 15,000 members in a church like Kingsway that's got to have a huge impact on the community around you. These mega-churches are...it's a huge development isn't it?

Andrew: Absolutely and a very big change when we're used to kind of a small village parish church that kind of twenty or thirty people saunter into.

Lucy: It's not really the Vicar of Dibley, is it?

Andrew: Not really, no! Kingsway in particular has had all kinds of hassles with planning and things like that over trying to just find a location where it can meet as one congregation. In fact pretty much every major city in the UK has a church round about 1,000 to 1,500 strong and many of those I know have been struggling to find locations. City centre locations in particular obviously for a church of that size would be quite challenging.

Lucy: Some of these congregations don't all meet in one central place, so they have several different locations.

Andrew: Yeah, absolutely. I mean the classic example of that perhaps is Kensington Temple in London which is a classic Pentecostal church which originally met in a kind of old congregational church in Kensington and could only accommodate 1,000 people or so there. They found that the best way of growing their congregation was to plant daughter churches so right throughout London they've got a network of probably fifty or sixty other congregations that all belong to the same church basically and meet in their own smaller halls at different times, as well as having now bought a new site that can cope with four or five thousand on that one site. So the whole approach to networking churches together is changing as well. That's another interesting development.

Lucy: There's always been people who would call themselves atheists but it seems that alongside the rise of some of the branches of Christianity, there's also been a rise of very vocal atheism in the UK.

Andrew: There's certainly been something of a retrenchment to the hard-line positions on both sides I think really and I think what's new about what sometimes called 'new atheism' really is the anger and the vociferous nature of it really. The hostility to religion has always been present but that seems to be being brought out more and more prominently and directed against Christianity, which Christians aren't really used to. They're used [to] historically to being in a position of power and influence in this country and I think sometimes they've struggled to get their head around the changing nature of society and being in a more multicultural more inclusive society. If you ask your typical Evangelical Christian they will certainly say that they are being opposed and persecuted and having more difficulties thrown in their way and thrown at them than they're used to having. Whether that's actually true is another kind of whole set of issues really.

Lucy: So what's next or where are these trends heading towards?

Andrew: There are some people who would say that we're looking at fewer larger churches in the UK. I think that is probably likely in some ways. I think some of the smaller churches will certainly cluster together and form bigger congregations that will seek more political influence and power. I think we can certainly expect to see the kind of immigrant-led churches becoming more and more prominent and that's certainly happening already and it's a tragedy that we have such a thing as black majority churches; that's a result of the racism really with which immigrant communities were met when they first came to this country. But those churches have certainly got a lot of influence in World Christianity and in British Christianity at the moment. I think we can expect to see that continue. So I see a more socially active church around the horizon. I see a more socially diverse church but also a more committed church and that's inevitably going to result in some kind of conflict with political powers and atheism.

Lucy: Dr Andrew Davies, thank you very much.

Andrew: Thank you.

Outro VO: This podcast and others in the series are available on the Ideas Lab website: www.ideaslabuk.com (<http://www.ideaslabuk.com/>). On the website, you can find out how to e-mail us with comments, questions or suggestions for future topics for the podcast. There's also information on the free support Ideas Lab has to offer to TV and radio producers, new media producers and journalists. The interviewer for the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast was Lucy Vernall, and the producer was Andy Tootell.

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