

Christian Country?



Back in August my wife and I had the privilege of visiting Norway on holiday. One of the highlights was visiting a medieval Church made completely of wood. These beautiful 'stave' churches with their roof-top dragon motifs, a symbol of earlier Viking heritage, adorn many a tourist brochure. You could be forgiven for thinking that such churches stand at the heart of every Norwegian village, but the truth is that Norway only has 28 such churches left. Hundreds have simply rotted away over the centuries and few are now used for regular worship. Our Holiday Guide was quick to point out that Norway is a secular country. Less than 2% of the population are regular worshippers, nevertheless, 70% see Evangelical Lutheranism as part of their national identity. In the words of our Guide, "Norway is a secular country. But we are all Lutherans... Maybe we go to Church once at Christmas... Just in case!"

August also saw the publication of an important survey commissioned by The Times Newspaper, the first since 2014 of the views of Church of England Parish Priests. 64.2% of the 1100 parish priests who responded stated, ' We are a Christian country but only historically. We are not a Christian country today in practice.' My initial reaction to this was that this is not news. Those of us who work in ministry on the ground know all too well that the Church and all that it offers now exists in a complex marketplace in which the right of the

consumer to choose predominates. This is not necessarily a bad thing, indeed in multicultural Britain, in many respects, it is a good thing.

What The Times fails to mention is that what is happening to the Church of England and other mainstream churches is being replicated all over the Western world. The challenge to the local Church to flourish in the Diocese of St Albans is no different than the challenge that the local Church is facing in the Diocese of Oslo. Regular church attendance in our own village churches is often very low not least because for most people now Christian worship is alien and some would argue counter-cultural in the secular age. How many now understand what 'Holy Communion' means? Answer - Increasingly few in England, and in Norway, and in the rest of Europe. It isn't just the institution of the Church that is under threat, Christianity itself seems to be in decline.

And yet... No longer identifiable as a Christian country does not mean that we are not a Christian state. Herein lies a paradox. 'Norway is a secular country. We are Lutheran.' Britain, along with the rest of much of Europe, continues to look to Christianity for a religious framework, and still calls upon the Church both nationally, and locally, to be there when needed E.g., Carol Services, Christenings, Coronation. In the same way that secular Norway cannot quite conceive of itself not being Lutheran, here at home, relatively few can think of an England without the C of E.

Christianity and the Church might be struggling but it does seem as if secular culture hasn't quite done with it just yet.

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