

Accessible version of:

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NB – this edition of the journal took the format of a Symposium on the book *Outside Verdict* by Harry Reid.

**Death by Committee  
Michael Rosie**

In Harry Reid’s words, the “state and prospects of Scotland’s national church” are “dire, confused and hopeful”. Reid succinctly states the parlous position in which the Kirk finds itself: “Is the Church of Scotland in crisis? Of course it is. It is haemorrhaging members; it has lost 700,000 in the past forty years, and the loss is accelerating. In 1957, it had more than 1,300,000 members. Now it has barely 600,000”. By and large the Kirk’s membership is dying off, the haemorrhage less from a mass exodus of members than a failure since the 1960s (and probably earlier) to persuade young people to become members:

The Kirk has lost confidence; it is failing to recruit enthusiastic new and young members; it is clearly irrelevant to many Scots, partly because it is not punching its (still considerable) weight, as one prominent layman told me, partly because of the uncertainty of its spiritual response to an aggressively secular, selfish and hedonistic society. Does it go with the tide or defy it? <sup>1</sup>

Such views are hardly novel – Reid quotes Lewis Grassie Gibbon on the situation facing the Kirk in 1934: “the young are leaving the Kirk, how may they be reclaimed? The tides of irreligion and paganism are flooding in upon us: how may they be stayed? A similar tidal problem once confronted King Canute”. It seems remarkable that Gibbon could evoke such a downbeat view of the Kirk just five years after the grand reunion of Scottish Presbyterianism, but it came shortly after the failure of the initial post-union venture, the ‘Forward Movement’. Broadly, the Forward Movement was a grand project to energise the faithful, cement their loyalty to the new united Kirk, and to ‘win back’ the unchurched:

... there remain, of our own Scottish folk, and not taking into account the alien population, some one and a half million souls who are as sheep without a shepherd. They belong to all classes

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Reid, *Outside Verdict: An Old Kirk in a New Scotland*, Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2002: vii., xxix, xxx

of society ... But wherever they are, and whoever they are, they are the 'lost sheep' who ever lie near to the Saviour's heart, and whom He has specially committed to His Church's care.

The architects of the Movement were blunt as to the extent of the Kirk's estrangement from a significant section of Scotland's people:

Reliable statistics have established the fact that 36% of the adult population, of Scottish blood and birth, have no Church connection, and that fully 30% of the children of purely Scottish parents are un-baptised year by year. It is not as though this great multitude were indifferent merely. Very many of them are estranged from the Church and embittered against it, scorning it as a middle-class institution; while others, influenced by the secular thought of the time, regard it more or less contemptuously as obscurantist and effete. For this unhappy state of affairs the Church must bear part of the blame. <sup>2</sup>

In passing it might be noted that the focus of the Movement's evangelical concern was "our own Scottish folk" of "Scottish blood and birth", and explicitly not "the alien population". These were, as Reid notes in his creditable critique of the Kirk's disgraceful inter-war campaign, Scotland's Catholics of Irish descent. Whilst Reid focuses on the leading figure in the campaign, the Rev John White ('The Kirk's Bad Man'), the rather casual exclusion of the 'alien' from those worthy of 'His Church's care' reminds us that the 'Kirk's Disgrace' went far further than some influential bad apples.

The key point arising from the Forward Movement, however, is that the bluntness of this *official* reaction to rising unchurched-ness in the 1930s is actually more refreshing than Reid's *unofficial* and often vague prescriptions for Presbyterian renewal in the face of calamitous decline seven decades later. It sometimes seems that Kirk-folk are so used to hearing about crisis that it has ceased to mean much – after all, despite forty-odd years of 'crisis' the Kirk is still here! Nevertheless, some Kirk voices warn that the crisis is at a crucial stage. At the 2002 General

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<sup>2</sup> *The Call to the Church: The Book of the Forward Movement of the Church of Scotland*, Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 1931: 37, 47.

Assembly the Board of National Mission warned that membership decline was catastrophic:

... it is projected that if this continues the Church of Scotland, as we know it today, will have ceased to exist by the year 2050. Many reasons can be given for these trends ... but the principle reason most often recorded in surveys is the lack of relevance of the Church in peoples' lives.<sup>3</sup>

The *irrelevance* of the Kirk in the lives of millions of Scots is not a thistle grasped by Reid. Rather he notes the advice of one minister that we:

must not become 'hypnotised' by numbers and by the statistics of decline, or matters of structure or organisation. These were ultimately irrelevant, he said; and he talked movingly of the creativity within the Kirk, and the potential which was as yet unleashed, and other such things.

Reid, holding faith with these 'other such things', concludes his argument with an optimistic homily about a minister preaching to an empty kirk:

... the minister speaks with that sublime, compassionate defiance which is Christianity at its best ... a defiant, persistent compassion. The minister continues to speak with compassion to the people who are not there. And then the door creaks. Someone comes in. And then someone else. And then someone else. <sup>4</sup>

Such unqualified optimism sits uncomfortably with a deliberately 'hard headed' and 'business-minded' approach elsewhere in the book. What firm, after all, could persist with a product which had lost its every consumer? The logic of business would dictate that the minister change the line of his business given that his "sublime, compassionate" Christianity was finding no buyers.

Reid's is, to some extent, a Jekyll & Hyde of a book, combining a lively business-like critique of the Kirk's administrative flabbiness and Byzantine 'democracy' with flashes of vaguely defined optimism.

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<sup>3</sup> Board of National Mission, *Report to the Church of Scotland General Assembly 2002*, available at [www.churchofscotland.org.uk](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk)

<sup>4</sup> Reid, pxxx, 219-220

The first of these is by far the stronger part and undoubtedly the key part of Reid's purpose. Yet it is the other aspect of the book – the optimism for better days to come – that strikes me as worthy of close attention. To some degree Reid's optimism seems to spring from the personal epiphany he experienced in the course of his research, and which he describes movingly in the book. In short, if an 'outsider' like Reid could find so much to admire in the Kirk that he became a member, there must be real grounds for optimism!

As to quite how spiritual renewal can be achieved, Reid has one major, and more or less concrete, proposal – and it is deemed important enough to come first in his 21-point plan to revitalise the Kirk. *Proposal One* argues for “a great revival of Easter as *the* Christian festival” in part through the Kirk instigating “mass rallies or services ... preferably outdoors” as part of “an exciting, all-Scotland, evangelical enterprise:

Yes, so many people, of all ages and backgrounds, Christians as well as non-believers, in Scotland today are asking a very simple question (they ask in different ways, but it is essentially the same question): What is life for? Where better to start to give the answer, the Christian answer, than before thousands in Holyrood Park or Glasgow Green on Easter Sunday? Why not, for heaven's sake? .... That is what the Kirk, ultimately, is for: to tell us what life is for. Many in the Kirk might be surprised; there are so many, many more of us out there who want to hear, who are waiting to hear.<sup>5</sup>

Here is Reid's optimism in a nutshell – there are many more of 'us' waiting to return to the bosom of the Kirk. The Kirk may be in trouble, but if it will only reform its structure and its culture of committee, 'aye been' and 'anent', rebrand itself in an confident marketing campaign, engage with the political world as well as the spiritual - then the door *will* creak, the people *will* come back.

As a rallying call to the weariest of the Kirk's faithful this reads well – but is it a realistic prospect? Where are these thousands flocking to Easter rallies to come from? Are there grounds for Reid's optimism?

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<sup>5</sup> Reid, xxi-xxii, 157

One possible source of evidence are the social surveys routinely carried out in Scotland and which, among other things, record religious beliefs and behaviour. These surveys hardly support Reid's optimism. In the Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys of 2000 and 2001 less than a quarter of Scots (22% in 2000 and 24% in 2001) *claimed* to attend religious services at least once a month. A majority (59% in both surveys), said that they 'never' or 'practically never' set foot in a religious building other than for weddings and funerals. One has to treat such data with caution, as they are likely to *overstate* the frequency of actual attendance. After all, the 1994 Scottish Church Census found just 14% of adult Scots in Church on 30 October, down 3% from 1984<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, it does suggest that around a quarter of adult Scots have regular contact with institutional religion, or perhaps wish that they had such contact. As well as this group, an additional and substantial proportion in the 2001 survey (37%), claimed that they *used to* attend regularly. This survey, therefore, suggests that a majority of Scots (61%) either say they regularly attend religious services, or that they used to do so. This, then, is the broadest constituency which we might term as being, or having been, connected to institutional religion in Scotland.

So much, though, for the good news. There is a distinct age gradient in the data, and whilst a large majority of the oldest cohorts are either current or former regular attenders, this falls to below half amongst those born from the mid-1960s onwards. Put another way, the proportion who have *never* attended on a regular basis rises consistently across cohort - suggesting that relatively little potential exists for attracting younger people to religious activities. And unless the Kirk can recruit substantial numbers of young people, it will continue to decline:

Born:	1901-1924	1925-1934	1935-1944	1945-1954	1955-1964	1965-1974	1975-1983
Regular attender	43	43	31	26	20	13	9
Former regular attender	42	33	38	42	39	32	36
Never regular attender	15	25	31	33	40	56	54
<i>Base</i>	<i>111</i>	<i>171</i>	<i>230</i>	<i>258</i>	<i>324</i>	<i>284</i>	<i>215</i>

*Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 2001*

<sup>6</sup> Peter Brierley & Fergus Macdonald, *Prospects for Scotland 2000: Trends and Tables from the 1994 Scottish Church Census*, London: Christian Research/ National Bible Society of Scotland, 1995.

Again, however, these data show only the most optimistic of positions – when former attenders were asked whether they had ever given serious consideration to returning to regular attendance, only one in four answered positively. We can, therefore, create a very crude definition of those most receptive to religion, who would be the likeliest ‘potential audience’ for the kind of revitalised Kirk that Reid argues for. This group would consist of both those who claim to currently attend religious services regularly, and those former attenders who have seriously considered a return to regular attendance. In addition to the 24% claiming to regularly attend in 2001, there are only 9% who fall into the latter group. When the ‘potential audience’ is viewed across cohort, a very stark picture emerges:

Born:	1901-1924	1925-1934	1935-1944	1945-1954	1955-1964	1965-1974	1975-1983
Regular attender	43	43	31	26	20	13	9
Former attender, has reconsidered	10	8	12	12	8	9	7
<b>Potential</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>16</b>

*Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 2001*

Put bluntly, and this should surprise nobody given it has been said so often before, organised religion in Scotland is declining across all age groups but most markedly (and from the Churches perspective, most catastrophically) amongst the young. With each passing year these ‘younger groups’ are, of course, getting older, but they are also drifting *further* away from organised religion. There is absolutely no evidence that as these younger cohorts get older they become more predisposed to going to Church. Indeed, as this table - based on respondent’s claims about their past and present behaviour - suggests, even amongst the oldest cohort the level of claimed attendance has fallen by almost one-third since 1965:

Proportion claiming to have attended at least monthly by cohort, 1965-2001 <sup>7</sup>:

	1965	1975	1985	1995	2001		<i>Base</i>
Born 1901-34	60	56	52	48	42		<i>286</i>
Born 1935-44	53	46	42	38	31		<i>231</i>
Born 1945-54	54	38	32	31	26		<i>256</i>
Born 1955-64	-	45	34	26	20		<i>326</i>
Born 1965-74	-	-	27	18	13		<i>284</i>
Born 1975-83	-	-	-	20	9		<i>215</i>

*Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 2001*

Reading this table from top to bottom it seems clear that for each time point older people are more likely to recall regular attendance than younger people. But of more significance, when reading this table left to right the trend is resolutely downward, each cohort recalling more regular attendance in the past. To a large degree this reflects organised religion's failure to persuade childhood attenders to continue their connection into adulthood. Among former attenders born between 1945 and 1974, just over half (51%) said they had ceased attending regularly between the ages of 12 and 20. Gibbon could comment in 1934 that "the young are leaving the Kirk": by the end of the century many had never been there in the first place. Over half of those (57%) born after 1965 in the 2001 survey had *never* been in regular religious attendance.

It might be objected that the data presented above relate to Scotland as a whole, and not to the constituency of the Kirk. True, but there is a twofold reason for presenting the broader Scottish picture. Firstly, the Kirk routinely describes and regards itself as the 'national' church and, so long as it does so, it cannot ignore the 'national' picture, cannot retreat into its own 'constituency'. What is more, the specific situation of the Kirk is actually far worse than the picture outlined above. Secular erosion of church connection has bitten deeply amongst those who

<sup>7</sup> The proportions in this table have been calculated using another useful question in the 2001 survey where former attenders were asked at what age they had ceased attending.

describe their own, or their parents', religious background as Church of Scotland. Of those describing their family background as Church of Scotland, around one-third (32%) describe their current religious affiliation as 'no religion'. This proportion rises substantially amongst younger groups, amounting to just under half (47%) among those born after 1965. Conversely, of all those describing their current affiliation as 'no religion' a very substantial proportion (44%) are from Church of Scotland family backgrounds. Very few people move in the opposite direction: 94% of those describing their current affiliation as Church of Scotland claim to come from a Kirk background, while just 1% are from no religion backgrounds. In other words the Kirk is failing to hold on to its existing members; is failing to recruit the children of members; and is failing faster than other major denominations. Many people are thus lost not simply to the Kirk, but to organised religion as a whole. However, the second reason for using the broader picture of the ongoing disaffiliation from organised religion is the most compelling – Reid's *Outside Verdict* does not engage with the *international* scope of this phenomenon.

At points in *Outside Verdict* Reid alludes to a general crisis for Scotland's organised religion, and for Christianity in particular: "In Scotland, we are still, just about, a Christian people; but we are well on the way to becoming a godless nation. Time is not on the Kirk's side"<sup>8</sup>. Yet the breadth of this crisis sits uneasily with the language of business that Reid adopts (at many points to very great effect) in his arguments for reform. Put bluntly, it is not simply that the 'market' for the Church of Scotland is in decline, but rather that the 'supply' of organised religion in Scotland, in Britain, and in Northern Europe, far outstrips an inexorably declining 'demand'. In place of Reid's rather hopeful story about the minister preaching to an empty church, imagine a hat-maker. This craftsman ignores the fact that he has fewer and fewer customers each year, that his remaining customers are (quite literally) dying off, and that no young people have bought one of his hats for as long as he can remember. The hat-maker has two choices – to treat his failing business introspectively, rearrange his window display, streamline his accounting procedures, and carry on making hats that no-one buys in the hope that the door

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<sup>8</sup> Reid, 204.

will creak open and someone will come in. Alternatively, he might research his market. Are *all* milliners struggling to find customers? Is the actual problem that people simply don't wear hats in the same way that they wore them in the 1930s and 1940s? Wouldn't a rational, objective analysis suggest that the hat-maker should sell up and move on?

No-one, of course, would seriously take the business analogy quite so far, but it is a limitation in Reid's analysis that he considers *only* the crisis in the Kirk, and not the crisis for religion more broadly. This is *not* primarily a crisis of creaking administration, although Reid provides a biting and useful critique of that. Rather, the crisis is a decline in the social significance of religious belief and religious activity itself – in short, and using a term wholly absent in *Outside Verdict*: secularisation. This is not to say that Reid's critique is without worth, for (borrowing again from business) a leaner, fitter, and more flexible Kirk will undoubtedly be better placed to decide what exactly it is *for* in an increasingly secularised world. By this I mean not simply what initiatives or modern processes the Kirk should be welcoming or opposing, but the more general question of what the *function* of the Kirk is in a Scotland where irreligion is increasingly the norm. There are many possible futures for the Kirk and Reid offers glimpses into two.

The first is the future of the outdoor rally, the mass choir, the reassertion that Scotland is, *after all*, a Christian country. Is assertiveness the way forward for the Kirk? Would offering moral certainties in a morally ambiguous age rekindle Scotland's bond with its Kirk? Or might these 'moral certainties' be seen as moralising unsuited and offensive to a pluralistic and diverse society? Even if the Kirk could attract thousands to its Easter rallies, what message would it put across, and would it be welcomed or abhorred? These are hard questions Reid does not address, although he is clearly uncomfortable that many ministers would be happy to campaign on, or rather against, homosexuality. How would Scotland receive a Kirk campaigning 'on the stump' on morality and politics? Here the surveys suggest that the Kirk would not simply be in danger of alienating many of the sheep already lost to it but might well estrange some of its committed

members. The following table notes the proportions regarding it as ‘generally right’ for religious leaders to ‘speak out’ on various issues, and compares the views of regular Kirk attenders, with those who have moved from a Kirk background to being of ‘no religion’:

‘Generally right’ for religious leaders to speak out on:

	All sample	CoS - Regular attenders	CoS background now ‘no religion’
World poverty	81	89	77
Environment	64	73	59
Education	51	67	44
Abortion	40	52	33
Sexual behaviour	38	48	30
<i>Base</i>	<i>1610</i>	<i>157</i>	<i>239</i>

*Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 2001*

On certain issues there may well be support for a strong Kirk stance, but on others, most notably sexual behaviour and abortion, most Scots would seem to prefer that religious leaders maintained a relatively low public profile. What seems striking is that very significant proportions of the Kirk’s regular attenders would feel it was *not* right for the Kirk to ‘speak out’, to *campaign*, on issues of sexual behaviour. Similar conclusions can be drawn from a series of questions about potential ‘problems’ that religion might exacerbate or create in society. The following table notes the proportions ‘agreeing’ or ‘agreeing strongly’ with a series of statements:

Proportion agreeing/strongly agreeing that ....

	All sample	CoS - Regular attenders	CoS background now 'no religion'
Churches have too much power?	23	8	77
Religions bring more conflict than peace?	71	59	59
People with strong religious beliefs are often intolerant?	74	60	44
Scotland would be a better country if religion had less of an influence?	44	25	33
<i>Base</i>	<i>1523</i>	<i>166</i>	<i>267</i>

*Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 2000*

Here we find very strong support for the propositions that religion produces more conflict than harmony and that strongly religious individuals are often intolerant - even amongst the Kirk's regular attenders. This hardly suggests that an assertive Kirk, insisting that in a 'Christian country' preference must be given to 'Christian morality', would do anything but cause dissension within its own ranks.

The second vision comes by way of Reid's understated and highly moving 'Envoi', an account of an ecumenical mission feeding, clothing, and sheltering Edinburgh's homeless on a freezing January night. The work is hard, and often thankless, but "all around us is the practical evidence of utilitarian assistance: bubbling urns, the rich smell of heating food, the black sacks full of bedding. This is pragmatic and direct help for the poor and the outcast ..."9 Here is one future (and indeed a present) for the Church of Scotland, a future of service to the most needy of people. Yet it seems a far way from the Kirk which dominates *Outside Verdict*, a Kirk mired in 'aye been', labyrinthine committees, and the semblance (if not the practice) of democracy. This, perhaps, is the greatest strength of Reid's research - if the work of the Kirk is to reach out to those outcast and lost in a society rich in material goods but often lacking in compassion, then Reid shows how far the Kirk has lost its way. A 'streamlined' and more efficient Kirk is

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<sup>9</sup> Reid, 222

not the answer to the crisis of secularisation, but it *is* a way to respond to it, to find a new role for ‘an old Kirk in a new Scotland’ (for the old role of keeper of the nation’s morals has gone forever, and thankfully so), and a way to release resources and energies for the kinds of practical ‘Good Samaritanism’ of Reid’s ‘Envoi’. But such a Kirk must also surrender to the fact that Scotland is *not* ‘a Christian country’ (whatever that might mean), but a multi-faith (and indeed non-faith) society, within which Christianity is, and should be, only one way of understanding life. There are many potential futures for the Church of Scotland, but the one Reid clearly fears is that of administrative stagnation in the face of catastrophic membership decline. *Outside Verdict* may not engage critically with the real, the underlying, crisis of secularisation, but it engages passionately on the need, and possible means, to drag the Kirk into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Reid’s fears seem very well founded. It seems remarkable to one unversed in the ways of the Kirk that the General Assembly could respond to the Board of National Mission’s warning about the potential *extinction* of the Church of Scotland by .... setting up a committee! For ‘task force’ read more paperwork, more reports, more ‘anent’, more talk, more inaction – death by committee. Could there have been more striking proof of the timeliness of Reid’s critique of the Kirk’s ponderous bureaucratic culture than this?