

A Godly People? Aspects of Religious Practice in the Diocese of Oxford, 1738–1936*

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I

The religious historiography of the past quarter century has been characterized by a marked shift away from the traditional preoccupation of ecclesiastical history with issues of theology and church polity, towards a greater focus on the beliefs, attitudes and practices of ordinary people in a wide variety of temporal, geographical and cultural contexts, studied with the aid of conceptual and methodological tools drawn from the social sciences, especially sociology and anthropology. So far as the English situation is concerned, much of the best of this recent research, often still in the form of unpublished theses, has been of a localized nature, with a limited chronological range (frequently no more than half a century and sometimes even less). This has hindered the identification of longer-term trends, except by means of a potentially misleading synthesis of the results of surveys from a number of communities which may have differed significantly in their socio-economic and religious compositions. The present article is a modest attempt to overcome this problem and to examine the process of long-term change, over a period of two centuries, whilst holding the geographical variable constant by restricting the analysis to a single diocese of the Church of England.

The diocese of Oxford¹ was created from the diocese of Lincoln in 1542. Until the early nineteenth century it was coterminous with the city and county of the same name, but in 1836 it was enlarged by the transfer of the archdeaconry of Berkshire from the diocese of Salisbury and in 1845 of the archdeaconry of Buckingham from the diocese of Lincoln. By mid-century, therefore, it covered some six hundred parishes in three counties with a population of half a million and with something of a reputation for religiosity. The number of sittings in churches was equivalent to 64 per cent of the population, eleven per cent greater than the national average, whilst the index of attendance (the aggregate of congregations at all services expressed as a percentage of the population) stood at seventy-four compared to sixty-one per cent in England and Wales as a

whole. The Church of England was also in a much stronger position *vis à vis* Dissent than in many other parts of the country, accounting for forty-eight per cent of all places of worship, sixty-one per cent of sittings and fifty-six per cent of attendances, figures which were respectively seven, nine and seven per cent greater than the norm.² This denominational advantage was doubtless attributable in some measure to the fact that the diocese was overwhelmingly rural and agricultural in nature, Reading and Oxford being the only large towns, with few industrial developments. This essay therefore complements the recent work of authors such as Urdank, Obelkevich and Clark³ in deflecting attention from the study of religion in highly urbanized and industrialized environments which, so far as the English religious scene is concerned, have tended to receive the lion's share of scholarly treatment.

No attempt has been made to examine every possible indicator of religious faith and practice, and no claim is therefore advanced that this survey will necessarily contribute to the long-running debate about the secularization of society and culture. As in much other recent research, churchgoing on Sundays has been taken as a measurable and public expression of identification with organized religion, one to which the various denominations themselves attached great importance, as a positive duty and not just as a token of commitment, and one which most lay people would have readily accepted as a mark of religiosity. Historical evidence about churchgoing in England falls largely into three categories.⁴ First, there are the published and unpublished reports and impressions of the leaders, national and local, of the Churches about the state of religion in the nation or in their particular areas, reports which are actually or potentially tinged with a bias born of the leaders' professional loyalty to institutional Christianity. Secondly, there are data collected through external observation, most notably in local censuses of church attendance or social surveys in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which tend to be freer from sectarian prejudice (it should be noted that the 1851 religious census falls, not into this second but into the first category, since the returns were largely made by the ministers or other officials of each place of worship). Third, there is the evidence directly provided by the people themselves, to town missionaries from the 1830s, to oral historians for the 1890s onwards,⁵ and to professional opinion pollsters from the late 1930s.

This account of the diocese of Oxford uses only the first of these three forms of evidence. The three counties which comprise it have not been well served by local enumerations of church attendance, even during the so-called 'census movement' of October 1881 to February 1882, whilst only in recent years is there significant interview material, particularly in the social surveys of Banbury conducted by Margaret Stacey in 1950 and 1967.⁶ Even for the first category, this study deliberately bypasses sources such as sermons, diaries, letters, church records or newspapers,

which other researchers have found useful in investigating religious practice, to focus on a set of clergy visitation returns which, probably uniquely for an English diocese, are available continuously, mostly on a triennial basis, over a period of two hundred years.

The process of episcopal visitation,⁷ the inspection of the temporal and spiritual affairs of a diocese under the bishop's control, was perfected in England in the Middle Ages and was increasingly accompanied by the issue of articles of enquiry to guide ministers, churchwardens and sidesmen in rendering an account of the state of their respective parishes and, more particularly, in the presentment of lay and clerical offenders. By the end of the seventeenth century, and especially after 1687 when the disciplinary jurisdiction of the Church of England began to decline, this presentment mechanism had become increasingly formalized and redundant, and returns of *omnia bene* from the parishes to the bishops became commonplace, even though it was self-evident that individual and collective transgressions of ecclesiastical law continued. To maintain the flow of information prior to visitation, a supplementary strategy had to be devised, and the bishops therefore turned to asking questions directly of the clergy alone. Examples of this new policy can be found from the 1680s (for example, in 1682 Bishop John Fell of Oxford verbally requested the clergy at his visitation to furnish details of Dissent in the diocese),⁸ but it was not until 1706 that William Wake, the future archbishop of Canterbury, in his primary visitation of the diocese of Lincoln, devised a set of printed questions for circulation to the clergy prior to visitation which established a pattern that, with considerable refinements, has survived largely to this day. By the 1760s most English dioceses appeared to be using questionnaires of this sort. The practice was introduced to the diocese of Oxford by Thomas Secker in 1738, apparently following his introduction of it to the diocese of Bristol in 1735.⁹

The completed clergy visitation returns were not necessarily retained by the bishop or his diocesan staff, and there are several dioceses where they were lost or destroyed. For Bristol, for instance, there appear to be no returns extant for any date. For Bath and Wells the earliest surviving returns are for 1814 and for Gloucester for *circa* 1825. In some cases this loss or destruction can be attributed to the fact that key information in the returns was abstracted for inclusion in a diocese book or *speculum*, of which several examples exist in print.¹⁰ Of those returns which were preserved, very few indeed have been published,¹¹ and most must therefore be consulted in the respective diocesan archives. A comprehensive listing of these manuscript returns has never been compiled, but in 1984, when the present author undertook a limited survey in connection with a research project on eighteenth-century religious practice sponsored by the British Academy, he found that these diocesan archives contained clergy

visitation returns for fifteen of the twenty-three English dioceses in the period up to 1806. Scholarly use of the returns has been patchy and far from systematic. Mather and Gill¹² have dipped into them in several dioceses for comparative purposes, whilst other writers have consulted the returns for particular dioceses as one type of evidence amongst many. Only Barrie-Curien, however, in her studies of the eighteenth-century diocese of London,¹³ appears to have used clergy visitation returns as the pivotal source in research on English church history. Generally speaking, they are a remarkably underexploited fund of information on religious as well as a range of social affairs.

The Oxford diocesan clergy visitation returns are especially comprehensive and valuable, in terms of their historical continuity, the range of data which they include and the generally high response rates which they attracted. They survive – now at the Oxfordshire Archives, formerly at the Bodleian Library – for no fewer than fifty dates between 1738 and 1936 inclusive.¹⁴ Thirty-two of these fifty sets have been examined for the purposes of this present paper in an attempt to determine the changing patterns of allegiance to the Church of England in particular and to organized religion in general, *as they were perceived and reported by the parochial clergy* – an important qualification in view of the inevitable temptation, to which some ministers must surely have succumbed, to moderate if not actually to distort their replies in the interests of acceptability to episcopal eyes and ears. Wherever possible, as a cross-check on their typicality, data are expressed as statistics (often as a simple percentage of the total parochial returns for a given date or dates, and with no adjustment for different parish sizes or types), but not at the expense of recourse to spurious quantification. Thus a decision has been taken not to use Easter and other communicant figures in the returns as a proxy for enumerations of worshippers.¹⁵ As Gill has recently argued,¹⁶ communicants have only ever represented a minority of regular Anglican attendances, and the relationship between the two indicators has fluctuated sharply over time and space for reasons which are not altogether clear. The discussion here, therefore, concentrates on the act of churchgoing *per se*, dividing into two sections: a chronological review of the evidence about the level of church attendance in the diocese, followed by a briefer analysis of some of the major variables which conditioned it.

II

In 1738, and throughout the eighteenth century, one of the questions which the bishops of Oxford put to their clergy in the articles of enquiry sent out in advance of their visitations was: 'Are there any persons in

your parish who profess to disregard religion, or who commonly absent themselves from all public worship of God on the Lord's Day?' To judge by the returns extant in the various diocesan archives, an identically or very similarly worded question was included in the articles used in five other English dioceses in the later eighteenth century: Canterbury in 1758 and 1786; Norwich in 1777, 1784, 1794, 1801 and 1806; Chester in 1778, 1789 and 1804; Salisbury in 1783; and Durham in 1792. Secker obviously provides the link between the sees of Oxford and Canterbury, 1758 being the year in which he was translated from Oxford to the archbishopric, and it is tempting to regard him as the instigator of this line of investigation. In fact, its roots go back to the Toleration Act of 1689 which, in granting liberty of conscience and freedom of worship to professed Dissenters from the Church of England, had also potentially opened the floodgates for those whose preference was to forsake the public worship of God in any form. Certainly, with the Anglican monopoly of the country's religious life formally broken, it became increasingly difficult to enforce the requirement, originally laid down by the uniformity legislation of 1552 and 1559 (and not formally repealed until as late as 1846), that all people should attend a church of some persuasion under pain of ecclesiastical and civil penalties. By 1690 the bishop of Chichester was already asking his ministers and churchwardens whether there were 'any in your parish who, under pretence of liberty of conscience, wholly neglect all publick worship of God . . . ?' It is known that this question was widely repeated, with minor rewording, elsewhere in the next thirty to forty years. Examples include the diocese of Lincoln in 1690 and 1693, the diocese of Norwich in 1692, the diocese of Ely in 1704, the archdeaconry of Worcester in 1706, and the diocese of Canterbury in 1720 and 1728. The queries of the bishops of Oxford were not, therefore, a new departure but a continuing reflection of the threat which a liberalizing state was perceived to have posed to universal church attendance.

An aggregate of the replies to this question has been made for five visitations between 1738 and 1793. Twelve per cent of incumbents chose to ignore the question entirely or to insist that they were unable to answer it. Twenty-six per cent claimed that they had none who professed to disregard religion and/or no absentees whatsoever, and fifteen per cent asserted that there were no absentees so far as they knew. Nine per cent denied that there were any absentees, but in such qualified or ambiguous terms as to suggest that the opposite may actually have been the case, sometimes implying that there were no absentees except for the aged and infirm, or that irregularity rather than outright neglect was the difficulty. The latter was certainly the case at Lillingstone Lovell in 1738 where there were 'None who . . . so commonly absent themselves from p. wor-

ship as to come within the reach of the canon' and at Rotherfield Greys in the same year where, 'Absenters (totally) from ye church or other place of worship (I think) none . . . [but] There are a great many yt come but seldom.' Twenty-seven per cent reported that there were several or a few absentees in their parishes, often adding that the numbers were either decreasing or static and not generally significant. In the minority of instances where actual figures were given, the average was only one habitual absentee for every twenty families or houses, these evidently being the most hardened cases like the two or three individuals at Heath in 1738 who had not been seen at church in twelve years except for a funeral. Nine per cent admitted to the existence of widespread non-churchgoing, including most of the Oxford city parishes; however, there was no automatic correlation between the complaint and parish size, it also being heard from places with fewer than one hundred or even fifty families. At Bletchingdon in 1759 the absentees numbered between thirty and forty people from a total of sixty-four families; elsewhere they were simply described as 'many' or 'too many'. In almost every case, seemingly by way of apology, the admission was qualified by a statement that absenteeism was not generally attributable to any professed disregard of religion but to indolence, leisure pursuits, family duties, business, illness, 'want of decent apparel', distance, or insufficient sittings in church. The return from South Weston in 1738 was typical in this respect: 'Too many . . . absent from the publick worship of God on the Lord's Day, but we have none who do it professedly, neither need we fear attacks of infidels from such quarters. Infidelity is a stranger here.'

Taking the returns at face value, and excluding non-responding incumbents, permanent absenteeism from all public worship apparently existed to a greater or lesser extent in at least forty per cent of parishes. There are grounds for believing that the returns should not necessarily be taken at face value. Certainly the minority of clergy who admitted to absenteeism believed that the problem was reasonably widespread. Thus, at Bladon in 1738 the incumbent tilted at 'that general decline of zeal and inclination to divine things in any shape', adding that 'There are, in all places, more absentees than dissenters . . .'. Similarly, from Alvescot in 1759 came the lament that 'There are too many in most parishes (more the pity!) who are too remiss in their duty', and from Hook Norton in 1774 that 'There are in this parish, as in all others, too many persons negligent in their attendance upon the public worship of God.' From Great Haseley in 1793 came the report that 'in all parishes there are too many who neglect the public worship', whilst at Shutford in the same year 'Inattention to the public offices of religion prevails in some degree here as . . . in most other places.' Bishop Secker himself clearly had few doubts as to the real situation, as is evident from his visitation charges to the diocese of

Oxford. In 1738 he bemoaned the fact that 'an open and professed disregard to religion is become, through a variety of unhappy causes, the distinguishing character of the present age', and that it had 'greatly increased the disregard of public worship and instruction'. By 1741 he was still more specific, referring to 'the great numbers which I find there are in many, if not most, of your parishes that omit coming'.¹⁷

Although many clergy were at pains to inform the bishop of their endeavours to persuade neglecters to mend their ways, and threatened presentment before the church courts if their efforts met with no long-term success (in accordance with Secker's explicit instructions to pursue this policy, once private reasoning and cajoling had failed, 'to prevent the contagion from spreading, of which there is else great danger'),¹⁸ this was evidently something of an empty threat. The prospect of the exercise of ecclesiastical discipline against lax worshippers no longer held any terrors, as is clear from several of the 1738 returns. At Lewknor, for example, 'I have several times sent ye churchwardens to ym and threatened ym with a presentment, but to no purpose', and at Witney 'Many have been presented and paid their fees at court, but have not reform'd upon it.' By 1774 at Bix it was no longer considered worth the effort of naming offenders, 'as a person presented at Dr. Barton's last visitation has had no notice taken of her, that I have heard of.' A particularly effective tactic for the accused to adopt, as at Crowmarsh in 1738, was to issue a counter-threat to desert the Established Church in favour of Dissent if disciplinary action was initiated. This was a sufficiently widespread phenomenon for Secker to issue guidelines to his clergy on the subject, conceding that, although 'Such will seldom do what they threaten', in the last resort, 'tis better they should serve God in any way than none; and much better they should be a disgrace to them than to us.'¹⁹ The civil power was even less inclined to take action in this area; indeed, at Standlake in 1738 it was said of the justices that 'some are unwilling and some dare not punish them for fear of lessening ye revenue of ye excise.'

The question put to incumbents in the early nineteenth century was couched in rather simpler terms: 'Are there any persons who absent themselves from all public worship?' An aggregate of the returns for eight visitations between 1802 and 1823 shows that, on average, thirteen per cent of parish clergy ignored this question or said that they could not answer it. A further twenty-three per cent claimed to have no habitual absentees, and sixteen per cent stated that none were known to them. Twenty per cent denied the existence of absentees, but in such obscure terms as to suggest that they did. Typical were statements to the effect that the church was *generally* well attended; that afternoon congregations were larger than those in the morning; that all came to worship except for the very old, the infirm and those who lived at a great distance; that

nobody was absent through any particular principle or professed disregard of religion; and, most commonly, that parishioners – however irregular – were not totally negligent. There were a good many comments along the lines that ‘all come sometimes but with no proper regularity’ (Stanton St John, 1802), ‘many rather remiss; none who absent themselves entirely’ (Beckley, 1808), ‘there are no persons who absolutely absent themselves altogether from public worship, tho’ many attend very seldom’ (Cuxham, 1808), ‘The people are indifferent attendants on public worship – few or none absenting themselves entirely’ (Finnere, 1817), and ‘Many stay away generally, but come occasionally’ (Islip, 1820). Another twenty per cent admitted to the incidence of non-churchgoing on a limited scale, with a mean of one habitual absentee for every forty families (half as many as in the eighteenth century), and six per cent had a large-scale problem with many absentees. Oxford was once again something of a blackspot; in the parish of St Thomas in 1808, for example, ‘the numbers are too great to mention’, whilst in St Mary Magdalen in 1817 ‘Nearly half of the adults absent themselves from church.’ However, there was no automatic linkage between urbanization and alienation from public worship. There were certainly some villages, such as Barford St John in 1805, where ‘there are too many persons who absent themselves from public worship’, whilst at Great Haseley in 1823 ‘There are many who never set their foot within any place of public worship.’ Equally, there were some Oxford parishes, such as St Mary the Virgin in 1808, where the number of absentees ‘is not considerable – perhaps fewer than the usual average of such persons in towns’ or, like St Aldate’s in 1814, where they were ‘much diminished, and the church much better filled with attentive hearers than a few years back’.

Excluding non-responses, it would therefore seem that, at least on the surface, the proportion of parishes experiencing some degree of persistent non-attendance had fallen by one quarter, to thirty per cent, since the middle and later years of the previous century, but that irregularity in churchgoing was as prevalent, if not more so, as it had ever been. There was certainly sufficient anxiety about overall levels of religious practice for the bishops of Oxford, following the precedent established in the diocese of Chester in 1821, to include in their episcopal visitation queries from 1831 a question which demanded a more quantifiable answer: ‘What is the average number of the congregation, and what proportion does it bear to the population of the parish?’ The resultant data are not always easy to interpret but appear generally to relate, not to the total number of Anglican worshippers at all Sunday services, but to the congregations, adults and children (although the latter were sometimes expressly excluded), at the most numerous service (generally speaking, one held in the afternoon in summer, bad weather often making

the roads and pathways to church impassable and the conditions in unheated places of worship intolerable for the aged and infirm). This distinction between average and total attendances needs to be especially borne in mind in any attempt to construct time series, given that the middle years of the nineteenth century constituted the period when double duty was becoming the norm throughout the diocese²⁰ and that the congregations at each service were to a large extent composed of different persons. Equally problematical was the fact that a significant number of incumbents chose to ignore the question, or to reply in purely qualitative terms, so that it was rarely possible to arrive at a definitive aggregate for the diocese as a whole, a consideration which failed to deter the bishops from publicizing the figures as though they were comprehensive and capable of being exploited comparatively.²¹ For 1831 usable data survive for ninety-four parishes in which the average congregations ranged between seven and 100 per cent of the population. Sixty-six of the ninety-four parishes returned figures equivalent to between one quarter and one half of the population. Of the eighteen parishes which reported rates of attendance which exceeded one half of the population, sixteen had fewer than 500 inhabitants and nine had fewer than 250, suggesting an inverse relationship between churchgoing and parish size. The position was much the same in 1834 when average congregations represented just under a third of the total population of the diocese.²²

Statistics of average congregations are of particular interest for the 1854 visitation when they can serve as a cross-check on the accuracy of the 1851 ecclesiastical census returns, whose reliability was vigorously disputed by Samuel Wilberforce, the bishop of Oxford from 1845, in two debates in the House of Lords, one (27 March 1851) on the eve of the enumeration, an intervention which undoubtedly contributed to a substantial boycott of the census by the Anglican clergy of the diocese (with twenty-seven per cent non-respondents in Oxfordshire alone), and the other (11 July 1854) some six months after the results were published.²³ Only 4 per cent of the 595 incumbents chose to ignore the question asking for details of average congregations in 1854, with a further twelve per cent giving a qualitative answer. The remaining 498 or eighty-four per cent estimated average congregations, of whom twenty-seven per cent returned a figure rounded to the nearest hundred, and fifty per cent one rounded to the nearest ten. Of these 498 parishes twelve per cent had one service per week, twenty-five per cent had two or more services on Sundays and returned a separate attendance figure for each, and sixty-three per cent had two or more services but did not return separate attendance figures. In seventy-two per cent of cases the clergy supplied a fixed attendance figure, and in the other twenty-eight a minimum-maximum was given, the maximum being on average twenty-four per cent

above the minimum. Only thirteen per cent of parishes clarified their procedures for dealing with schoolchildren, with children being twice as likely to have been excluded from the attendance data as to have been included. In reply to a supplementary question, thirty-three per cent of incumbents reported increasing congregations, with thirty-five per cent stationary, three per cent decreasing, and the other twenty-nine per cent offering no comment.

The 1854 visitation returns survive for all three archdeaconries in the diocese, but detailed study of the Anglican attendance data has been confined to 202 Oxfordshire parishes where the data were available for both 1851 and 1854.²⁴ Three separate analyses have been undertaken. First, the actual attendance on census day (30 March 1851) was compared with the average congregations during the previous twelve months as returned at the census. In fifty per cent of parishes the actual attendance was said to be lower than the average, in twenty-four per cent it was higher, and in twenty-six per cent it was about the same. Overall, the average was seven per cent above the actual figure.²⁵ Secondly, the actual attendance on 30 March 1851 was compared with the average congregation as returned at the 1854 visitation. In sixty-one per cent of cases the 1851 figure was lower than that for 1854, in thirty-three per cent it was higher, and in six per cent it was much the same. The aggregate attendance in 1854 was nineteen per cent more than on census day in 1851. Thirdly, the average attendance in 1851 was compared with the average attendance three years later. In fifty-three per cent of parishes the 1851 congregation was smaller than in 1854; it was greater in thirty-eight per cent and in nine per cent it was unchanged. Overall, there were eleven per cent more worshippers on a normal Sunday in 1854 than in 1851. Thus, although the 1854 visitation returns do tend to confirm Wilberforce's suspicions that Anglican attendances in the diocese were underestimated by the 1851 census, the level of under-reporting was hardly dramatic, probably no more than ten per cent once allowance is made for any growth in population and/or religious practice between the two dates. Indeed, in his 1854 charge he was eventually forced to concede that the clerical estimates of that year did 'not materially differ' from the published results of the census.²⁶

The legitimacy of Wilberforce's criticisms of the 1851 census is also brought into question by the replies to another of his 1854 visitation queries: 'Can you give me any information as to the correctness of the numbers given in the recent census of members of the Church and of Dissenters, or as to the mode in which the returns were made on which those estimates were founded?' If this was a calculated attempt to collect ammunition from his clergy to discredit the census results, which may well have been the intention since the queries were issued on 3 July 1854 with a return date of 8 July, just before the debate on the census in the

House of Lords, then it was an attempt which completely backfired. Thus, twenty-seven per cent of incumbents in the three archdeaconries offered no answer at all, and a further forty-nine per cent explained that they had no relevant information, including three per cent who claimed never to have heard of the census or to have seen the returns, and six per cent who had moved from another parish since 1851. The remaining twenty-four per cent comprised four per cent who refused or otherwise failed to complete a return in 1851 (some of whom like the incumbent of St Lawrence, Reading, now regretted their non-cooperation), eight per cent who believed that the congregations had been correctly stated, four per cent who were confident about the accuracy of the Anglican return but had no knowledge of the reliability of the Nonconformist data, two per cent who indicated that Anglican numbers had been underestimated or were below average (usually as a consequence of wet weather or absences on holiday), and just six per cent who were prepared to accuse the Dissenters of deliberately inflated or above average attendances.

Four main reasons were given for the inaccuracy of the Nonconformist data in this six per cent of parishes: the influx of Dissenters from extra-parochial neighbourhoods, sometimes (as at Burford with Fulbrook) from within a five-mile circuit; the tendency of many professed Anglicans to worship occasionally or regularly at chapels, particularly on Sunday evenings when there was often no service at the church (the phenomenon of 'conforming schismatics', as the vicar of Deddington described them); special efforts to attract larger than normal congregations, for example by advertising popular preachers, by multiplying the number of services or by 'whipping in' babies and young children; and wilful exaggeration, attention being drawn to several instances where the number of reported attendants at chapel exceeded by a large measure the available accommodation. These were much the same reasons given by Wilberforce in his attack on the reliability of the census in the House of Lords on 11 July 1854, although he laid particular emphasis on the fact that 'Many of their ministers were not often in the same rank of life as the clergy of the Established Church', being 'men who had not the advantages of education – and who were not the objects of general view and observation', thereby implying that they were somehow correspondingly less truthful and scrupulous.²⁷

The 1854 visitation returns, therefore, do not seriously undermine the accuracy of the 1851 ecclesiastical census as a guide to religious practice at mid-century. They also provide a wealth of incidental comment to enable the attendances recorded on one particular day to be broadened into a picture of the total worshipping constituency, highlighting in particular the differences between Anglicans and Dissenters. Whereas Dissenters, for example, tended to be in the habit of worshipping twice

on Sundays, the same was true of only a minority (perhaps a third at most, and fewer than a quarter on average) of adult Anglicans. Similarly, Dissenters were much more likely to be regular in their attendance week by week than their Anglican neighbours, a point seized upon by Wilberforce, in his commentary on the census returns, as conclusive proof that 'all calculations of the relative numbers of Churchmen and Dissenters based upon attendance at church or meeting on a census Sunday must, however accurately they are taken, be utterly fallacious.' He noted that 'in a large number of parishes, the average congregation rarely exceeds one-fourth of the professing Churchmen of the parish', whilst 'the Sunday's attendance at the meeting is so eminently the distinctive act in the religion of Protestant Dissenters that their ordinary congregations go far to exhaust their numbers remissness in attendance on public worship is a special sin of those who count themselves our people.'²⁸ The incumbent of Great Milton even tried to quantify the problem, dividing his flock into three sections: thirty-three per cent who were communicants, forty-one per cent who were good attendants but not communicants, and twenty-seven per cent who were middling churchmen. The state of the weather and the physical remoteness of the church from the centre of population were commonly cited as the reasons for irregular and variable attendance, congregations in the summer often being a fifth to a third larger than in the winter, with a decline setting in at harvest time. Occasionally, however, the reverse was true; thus at Quainton 'the having allotment gardens at some distance from the parish may in fine weather cause a less attendance.'

Details of average congregations were collected in connection with other visitations in the third quarter of the century. The data for 1866 are particularly interesting, for two reasons. First, they are more comprehensive than for most other years, the bishop having despatched a reminder in October to those incumbents who failed to reply to the original queries sent out in August. Secondly, manuscript notes and workings survive, apparently in the hand of the diocesan registrar, which give an insight into the methodology employed in collating the data. It was admitted that 'Complete accuracy cannot of necessity be obtained in this return, principally from the imperfect manner in which the questions have been answered.' Children were sometimes returned separately from adults, in which case they were omitted from the calculations, but were not differentiated in most parishes and thus appeared in the totals. The final figures related to attendance at one Sunday service, not to the sum of congregations at all services. Where individual figures for each service were given, a mean was obtained where the variation between them was not too great, but otherwise the higher figure was taken. Where a range was quoted for a single service, for example reflecting a seasonal fluctuation,

the mid-point was used. Overall, average Anglican congregations in the diocese were 126,000, a staggering 56,000 less than the inexplicably high figure for 1863, but consistent with the 131,000 returned in 1860.²⁹ The 126,000 was equivalent to twenty-four per cent of the estimated population of the diocese, twenty-three per cent in Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, and twenty-five per cent in Oxfordshire.

Further evidence of the state of religious practice in the diocese is available from the visitation queries of 1872, 1875 and 1878 when, in response to the question 'How many of your adult parishioners are habitually absent from church? How many of these may be reckoned as professed Dissenters?', ninety-seven parishes, about one sixth of the total and tolerably representative of the diocese as a whole, attempted a breakdown of their populations into three groups: churchgoers, Dissenters and habitual absentees from all worship. Although the data are necessarily guestimates, they provide an interesting snapshot of religious practice in the diocese which is broadly contemporaneous with the urban church attendance censuses of 1881-2. The proportion of Anglican churchgoers ranged from eight per cent (in South Banbury) to 100 per cent (in Sulham), with ninety-three per cent of parishes returning a figure between thirty-one and ninety per cent. There was some correlation between attendance rates and parish size: thus twenty-three of the thirty-nine parishes, where Anglican churchgoers comprised sixty-one to ninety per cent of the population, had fewer than 500 inhabitants, whereas thirty-three of the forty-one parishes where churchgoers comprised thirty-one to sixty per cent of the population, had more than 500 souls. There were twelve per cent of parishes which reported no Dissenters and eighty-three per cent which had between one and forty per cent. Although all the Dissenter-less parishes were very small, the largest having 540 residents, the incidence of Dissent was otherwise not strongly linked with community size; of the four parishes where Dissenters constituted half the people, three were villages with populations of 254, 260 and 537. All but one parish (Sulham, with ninety-five persons) reported some habitual absentees, with fifty-two per cent of the inhabitants of Compton Parva being so classified. In ninety-five per cent of parishes the absentees ranged between two and forty per cent of the adult population. Non-attendance was in part associated with parish size: thus, twenty-five of the fifty parishes which returned an absenteeism rate of less than twenty per cent had fewer than 500 inhabitants, whilst twenty-nine of the forty parishes with an absenteeism rate in excess of twenty per cent had more than 500 people.

The 1870s seem to have been something of a watershed in church-going throughout the diocese. In particular, the National Agricultural Labourers' Union agitation³⁰ was widely held (especially in 1875) to have

had a very serious effect on levels of public worship, the Church's stance on the issue driving as many working people into indifference as into the arms of Dissent, notably into those of the Methodists.³¹ The report from Easington and Cuxham was typical: attendance 'Decreased – in consequence of a spirit of insubordination and disaffection towards employers and clergy being roused by inflammatory speeches & publications of the ALU.' The commitment of those who remained nominally Anglican was also wavering. The already minority habit of attending two services on Sunday declined still further, even amongst the gentry and middle classes. Irregularity to the point of virtual non-attendance became an appreciable problem, with many coming to church only Good Friday, Harvest Festival or other special occasions in the Church's calendar. At Wootton in 1872 ten per cent of professed Anglicans were said to come once a year or less and a further twenty-three per cent to attend very badly. At Ardington in 1878 many Anglicans were described as 'very irregular, four or five times only a year but offended if told they do not come to church'. The difference in the size of congregations between the winter and summer months appears to have widened, especially in rural parishes with a dispersed settlement pattern, and/or inadequate heating provision in the church. Thus at Kintbury in 1875 attendance 'decreased to a large extent during the present winter on account of the unsatisfactory condition of the stoves'.³² Finally, the dividing line between the Church and Dissent was becoming increasingly blurred, not just in the countryside, where there had always been something of a tradition along these lines, doubtless attributable in part to the influence of old-fashioned Wesleyans who frequented both church and chapel, but also in the towns where, as at St Mary Magdalen, Oxford in 1872, 'wandering Christianity (or frequenting different churches according to taste) prevails much'.³³ At Souldern in 1878 the population was classified as fifty-three per cent churchgoers, thirty-three per cent chapelgoers and thirteen per cent attenders at both church and chapel.

The visitation returns between 1881 and 1914 inclusive suggest a further net overall decline in churchgoing, especially on Sunday mornings, despite continued evidence of a modest growth in a minority of parishes; as late as 1896, for example, forty-two per cent of incumbents claimed increasing numbers, although often of communicants as much as of ordinary worshippers. Three principal long-term explanations were offered for declining attendances. First, there were the effects of rural depopulation and the sale of farms and large houses, formerly occupied by loyal Anglicans, to non-churchgoers (many from London) and Dissenters. Secondly, there was the developing economic and political consciousness of the working classes which bred a suspicion of institutional religion in general and of the Anglican Church in particular.

Feelings against the Church were said to run especially high at general election times but were by no means confined to them; at South Moreton in 1896 the railway workers gave notice to the incumbent that they 'mean to do away with the Church'. Thirdly, the growth in alternative leisure opportunities threatened to usurp the church's role as a centre of social and recreational life. Although the winter months and bad weather continued to be cited as hindrances to church attendance in rural parishes, with sickness often referred to as a contributory element, it was the onset of summer and fine weather which diminished congregations in urban and riverside parishes from the 1890s, as the scope for Sunday pleasure-seeking increased and the custom grew up of making Sunday afternoons and evenings the occasion for visiting or receiving friends. Thus, from Colnbrook in 1899 came the lament:

The summer congregations on Sunday are smaller . . . The craze for bicycling – *thousands* pass through on fine Sundays from London to Windsor and Maidenhead, and draw others with them. Also Sunday boating trains to Staines – and, when her Majesty's band plays at the Castle on Sundays, a large number of people go, returning late in the evening.³⁴

There was obviously a strong causal link between this leisure factor and the demise of twicing, not just amongst the Anglicans but also in the local Free Churches where similar complaints could be heard.³⁵

The next set of visitation returns after those of 1914 were gathered in March 1918, and from the replies to two of the questions, it is possible to gain an impression of the short-term effects of the First World War on churchgoing in 330 of the diocese's 631 parishes. In thirty-nine per cent of parishes an absolute decline on pre-war levels was reported, usually on a very considerable scale, and despite the temporary increase that had been commonplace during the first few months of the war (when people were seeking divine blessing and protection for their menfolk at the war fronts), the effects of which had begun to wear off as the casualty rate grew and with it disillusionment in the power of prayer. The clergy did not seem unduly anxious to attribute this decline to any overarching spiritual cause, such as the questioning of faith itself against a background of so much suffering and destruction, but chose instead to focus on secular factors. One such, in rural areas especially, was the transfer of evensong to the afternoon on account of lighting restrictions, an afternoon service being said to be intrinsically less popular than an evening one (except among older people) and also prone to conflict with necessary Sunday labour by those engaged in agriculture. Other reasons which were cited included: the absence of men on active service or home defence; the billeting of soldiers; the enlargement of the workforce and the extension of the working week to undertake essential war-related tasks; materialism

and excessive wages; and the growing insubordination and indiscipline of youth. In thirty-four per cent of cases there had been no overall change in the attendance situation. In twenty-six per cent of parishes in the diocese as a whole (ranging from twenty-one per cent in Buckinghamshire to thirty-five per cent in Berkshire) churchgoing had increased during the war years, but invariably only by a small measure, with minimal impression made on non-churchgoers except for special services such as on the first Sunday of the year. Although the rise was said in a few instances to have been a direct result of the National Mission of Repentance and Hope of 1916, it generally predated this evangelistic initiative. Most clergy reported that, whilst the actual mission services had been well attended (even by adherents of the Free Churches in some places), outsiders had rarely been reached, the main permanent result being to strengthen the faith of existing churchgoers. As the incumbent of Wexham explained: 'the war . . . has, perhaps, made the casual churchgoers a little more regular in their attendance, but the indifferent remain just as indifferent as ever.'

The longer-term effects of the First World War can be gauged from the visitation returns of 1922, which were actually completed between May and September 1921, and particularly from the replies to the question, 'In what ways has the spiritual life of your parish been affected during the last three years?' Although there were signs of recovery in some parishes, especially with regard to the number of communicants, and even a few religious havens such as Woodeaton (whose inhabitants were described as 'On the whole a kindly, godfearing people. They shine in contrast to the men and women I have known in Camberwell slums and in the Prairie missions of Qu'appelle'), in most places the spiritual condition of the people, including the level of church attendance, was said to have remained unchanged or to have worsened during the triennium. Much harm was attributed to the war which had occasioned a craving for amusement, which many could now afford to indulge as a consequence of rising wages. The secularization of Sunday, or 'The growing tendency to turn Sunday into a weekly Bank Holiday' (as the incumbent of Littlewick put it), was to be seen almost everywhere, as a long list of summer distractions tempted worshippers away from the churches; these included trips by motor car or charabanc, boating, picnics, visiting, concerts, golf, house parties, reading newspapers, gardening, and paid employment (notably on farms). The demoralising influence of returning ex-servicemen attracted universal comment; they seldom or never came to church themselves, and young persons in general emulated their example. The end result, as at Baulking, was that 'Churchgoing is spasmodic & on no settled conviction for the most part', widely regarded, as at Edlesborough, 'more as an entertainment & singing concert than any-

thing else'. To judge from the handful of parishes where actual figures were quoted, those who, in effect, absented themselves from all public worship seem to have ranged from one fifty to three-fifths of the population, with towns such as Oxford and Slough in the latter category.

The five other sets of post-war visitation returns between 1924 and 1936, reinforce this impression of churchgoing's growing vulnerability to competition from other forms of leisure. As Bishop Thomas Strong remarked in 1931:

In the answers to the questions, there is a very widespread agreement that indifference to religious observances of every kind is on the increase. There are so many attractive ways of spending Sunday that the duty of the worship of God is in danger of being crowded out.³⁶

This was especially true of the summer months, when excursions and outdoor pursuits took a fairly universal toll on evening congregations, with the consequence that in country parishes such as Burghfield in 1934 'The public houses . . . do more trade on Sunday than in the rest of the week.' Newcomers were held to be most at risk to these secular temptations, notably the weekenders who bought country houses specifically as a base for Sunday recreations, or the commuters to London and other towns for whom the diocese was increasingly becoming a dormitory. Winter attendances were also liable to reduction, however, by the traditional influence of bad weather as well as by a new menace, the radio. Many people apparently now preferred to stay at home on Sundays to hear a religious service on the wireless instead. The incumbent of Hambleden in 1928 neatly summarized this seasonal problem: 'people attend church on the whole very well so long as weather is not too fine or too wet.' The evidence is too patchy to venture an accurate figure for the overall level of regular churchgoing, but it is certainly clear from some of the parochial returns that it was never practised by more than three quarters of the population and often by only a relatively small minority. Thus at Chalgrove with Berrick Salome in 1928 just thirty-six per cent went regularly to church or chapel. 'A solid wall of indifference', obtained at Ascot in 1934, with a mere 200 of the 3,000 nominal Anglicans coming to church. There were similarly many complaints of irregularity, to the extent that at Brightwell-cum-Sotwell in 1936, 'I may get an entirely different lot of people [in the evening] from Sunday to Sunday', and of a tendency to worship on special occasions only such as Armistice Sunday or Harvest Festival when congregations may have been twice the average. As the incumbent of Bray expressed it in 1934: 'It is curious how even the apparently indifferent attend church on the Festivals and use the church for marriages and funerals and baptisms.'

III

Sociological and statistical studies of churchgoing since the Second World War have identified strong correlations between religious practice and demographic variables. In particular, it has been shown that churchgoers tend to be disproportionately and increasingly female, old and drawn from the higher social classes. The Oxford diocesan visitation returns provide a range of impressionistic evidence to test the strength of these correlations on a longer-term perspective. Modern stereotypes do not necessarily have direct historical parallels.

Throughout the eighteenth century and the first third of the nineteenth century there is no conclusive proof that women were better churchgoers than men. In fact, there is some incidental comment which suggests that the opposite may have been the case. Thus, family responsibilities, notably the care of young children, were alleged to have kept many women from worship, as at Mapledurham in 1738, Cuddington in 1759, or Handborough in 1823. Women were also more likely to have been deterred from attending by bad weather and the notoriously poor state of the Oxfordshire roads, as the incumbent of Northmoor pointed out in 1811. During the second third of the nineteenth century, by which time double Sunday duty had become the norm in the diocese, congregations at each service had a different gender profile, the men favouring morning worship and the women, especially servants and the wives of labourers, predominating at afternoon or evening worship. Overall, if the diocesan confirmation statistics are any guide,³⁷ there would have been a slight imbalance of females.

In the final third of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth there seems to have been a fairly continuous decline in attendance by men, initially as a by-product of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union agitation, with widespread complaints about their irregularity in worship or total indifference to religion. A typical assessment came from Wallingford in 1878: 'Many of the men, I fear, never attend any place of worship, or if they do at all, very rarely. The women come much better.' Figures to substantiate such claims are seldom available, but it is unlikely that the relative proportions of male and female attenders will have differed appreciably from those prevailing amongst communicants in the archdeaconry of Berkshire in 1884, sixty-six per cent of whom were women. The situation deteriorated rapidly during the First World War, not a few clergy lamenting that 'the attendance at church . . . almost entirely consists of women'; 'the *men* are conspicuous by their absence', with absolutely no signs of any improvement thereafter. Indeed, a recurrent theme of the visitation returns of 1922 was the almost universal indifference of the ex-servicemen to churchgoing and

the way in which, to quote the incumbent of Cropredy, 'Their example seems to have worked like leaven of evil amongst the elder boys & younger men.' There was, as was pointed out at Kingston Bagpuize in 1936, 'a curious tradition that men do not come to church.'

Evidence of the impact of age on churchgoing is limited to the second half of the period under review and points to an unexpected conclusion. Generally speaking, before 1900, there were many more complaints about the irregular attendance or non-attendance of the middle-aged and the old than about the religious practice of the young. A partial reason for this may be found in the deterrent effects of bad weather and distance between home and church on older people, who were presumably more susceptible to illness and infirmity. However, this was clearly not the whole explanation; at Aston Abbots in 1854, for example, the incumbent bemoaned 'an inveterate habit amongst the old people of not attending any place of worship', whilst at Wheatley in 1872 it was said that 'many of the older inhabitants cannot be induced to come to church, some not once during my incumbency', which began in 1849. At Holton in 1875 the 'greater number of old people' was cited as the cause of dwindling congregations, and at Monks Risborough in 1878 'the middle-aged and the old are very slack in coming'. At South Moreton in 1890 the incumbent singled out 'the ignorance of the middle aged people, many of whom cannot read or write, and most of whom resist all personal efforts to induce them to attend church.'

Churchgoing by children, by contrast, was held to be very good, and they certainly constituted a significant proportion of average congregations (thirty-six per cent in 1854) where statistics are available. Young people also gave relatively little cause for concern in the nineteenth century, except at the height of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union agitation in the 1870s when there was some falling away, before a fairly rapid recovery with many reports in the 1880s and 1890s of improved attendance. At Ruscombe in 1890 congregations were said to be 'mainly composed of the young'. Only from the 1900s did the modern stereotype of better attendance by the old than the young begin slowly to emerge. There was a reference at Linslade to the 'growing custom among young people to get up late on Sunday mornings' in 1909. and at Newport Pagnell in 1918 attention was drawn to the 'loosening of moral and spiritual ties' amongst young people as a result of the war. The drift of the young from churchgoing was especially well documented in the visitation returns of 1922, various causes being given, including the demoralizing example set by ex-servicemen, the craze for going for long 'spins' on bicycles, and the attractions of the picture palace. In this and subsequent years the difficulties of the Established Church were increasingly explained by reference to the death or infirmity of older worshippers and by the failure of the young to take their place. The incumbent of Clewer lamented in 1928 that 'The rising generation appear to

have no idea of the need of going to church at all,' whilst at Crowmarsh Gifford in 1934 'Those confirmed tend to cease to communicate after 2 or 3 years.' Yet the transformation was by no means total, and there continued to be examples of the earlier pattern, as at Calverton in 1936 where 'The chief difficulty I have to contend with is the slackness and indifference of the older people. The young people and children are keen and attend the church and its organisations.'

The demographic stereotype receiving most confirmation from the visitation returns is that which links churchgoing and social class. Throughout the eighteenth century and the first third of the nineteenth, absentees were invariably described as being 'of the lowest rank', 'of the meaner sort', 'poor illiterate persons', 'chiefly servants', 'persons in very mean circumstances', 'common people', 'of low condition', 'mostly day labourers', 'not of any note', 'of the lower class', 'poor wretches', 'of very low degree', 'of little consequence', 'destitute of all the necessities of life', and so forth. Amongst the reasons given to clergymen for their absence was the Victorian stock-in-trade excuse of 'want of apparel thro' poverty', heard at Caversham and Garsington as early as 1759, and expressed rather less prosaically at Shipton-on-Cherwell in 1793 as 'they fancy their dress improper for a public appearance.' In reality, however, it seems more likely to have been indifference or pleasure which kept them away, as at Brightwell in 1771 where 'Numbers of farmers' servants absent themselves Sundays in the afternoon to play at cricket.' Only rarely were occupations of middling or higher status singled out for condemnation. These were usually farmers, publicans or tradesmen, with an occasional gentleman, whose lack of example was deemed to have had an adverse influence on the behaviour of the rest of the population. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, with the spread of double Sunday duty, the social profile of churchgoing became more complex, the gentry, farmers and other respectable persons tending to worship in the morning, with servants and other poor people coming in the afternoon or evening. Proportionately, though, the latter were still seen as rather worse attenders than the former, even allowing for the fact that a good many may have been chapelgoers rather than nothingarians.

The agricultural labourers' agitation of the 1870s seems to have had a dramatic and, in most instances, permanent effect in reducing the number of rural labourers at church by highlighting the clergy's apparent lack of sympathy for improving the lot of the working classes. This general sense of alienation was compounded by grievances specific to individual parishes. Thus at Wavendon in 1875 there was a 'widespread, though utterly groundless suspicion on the part of the poor that the parish charities are not fairly distributed – that the funds are misapplied, and that the poor are defrauded of their rights.' At Steeple Aston in 1899, 'There had

been a decrease in the vacancy of the living caused . . . by a sermon on "Thrift" preached by the curate in charge which was unpalatable to some of the working-men.' In other cases, the absence of the lower orders from church was attributed to the demands of their occupations, as with game-keepers, shepherds, stable lads, those engaged in servicing the London milk trade, railway workers, or Oxford college servants and lodging-house keepers who found it difficult to get the free time to worship during University terms but came in vacations. Sheer lethargy was also a contributory cause, including the growing fashion of spending Sunday mornings in bed, as was the want of proper clothes (still cited as a reason for absenteeism as late as 1922 at Great Marlow). The cumulative impact of these various factors transformed attendance at the parish church into a minority activity for the working classes in the final third of the nineteenth century. Typical was the situation at Wavendon in 1878 where only a fifth of the labouring men were practising Anglicans, half being Dissenters (mainly Primitive Methodists), and the rest going nowhere.

The church attendance of the upper and middle classes was said to have held up very well in the 1870s and early 1880s, and in some instances even to have increased. Within a very short time, however, complaints became common of 'oncing', irregularity or total absenteeism reaching these groups as well, generally speaking associated with the pursuit of Sunday boating, golf, tennis, motoring, and the growing predilection for weekend house parties. Farmers, whose dwindling religious interest was initially linked with the economic and psychological consequences of the agricultural depression, were the object of particular criticism, and at Hampton Poyle by 1909 'None of the farmers or their families in this parish ever enter any place of worship. They are spiritually dead!' At Standlake with Yelford in 1928 they had not quite reached this stage but they had still cut back their attendance to once a month. Even the gentry could no longer be relied upon: at Spelsbury in 1896 'The squire & his family set a very injurious example by never coming to church', and at Stoke Lyne in 1909 'There is hardly any congregation at all owing to a boycott organised by the squire.' This loss of upper- and middle-class support was alleged to have had serious financial consequences for the work of the Established Church in the years after the First World War.

IV

What, then, do the Oxford diocesan visitation returns tell us about patterns of religious practice between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries? Generalization is certainly difficult, partly because the evidence may be biased, representing only that portion of the total picture seen by

the Anglican parochial clergy, and seen fit to report to their superiors, and partly because churchgoing was not a static phenomenon, being conditioned by independent variables, and characterized by seasonal and other short-term fluctuations. However, the underlying trend seems clear enough.

Church attendance fell during the eighteenth century in the wake of a decline in ecclesiastical discipline which followed the Toleration Act, and a minority of the inhabitants chose to go to no place of worship. Although the number of absentees seemed large to contemporaries, measured against their very high expectations, the minority was probably a relatively small one by twentieth-century standards, with the vast majority of people continuing to practise their faith, albeit with varying degrees of regularity. Labourers and other working folk were especially negligent. In the early nineteenth century rather less habitual absenteeism, but possibly rather more irregularity, obtained so that by the 1830s average Anglican congregations at the best-attended service were equivalent to about one third of the population. Relative to many other areas of the country, churchgoing in the diocese remained high according to the 1851 religious census (with an index of attendance of seventy-four per cent), the accuracy of which is broadly confirmed by data from the 1854 visitation returns. By the 1860s average Anglican congregations represented perhaps one quarter of the population, with up to two-fifths coming to one Sunday service or another most weeks. By the 1870s parishioners could be roughly divided into one half practising Anglicans, one quarter Dissenters, and one quarter, for all intents and purposes, non-churchgoers. This decade proved something of a watershed, the Union agitation initiating a process of disillusionment with the Established Church which, during the next thirty years or so, drew much of the working class and most of the adult males away into the arms of Dissent or indifference. From the 1890s new leisure opportunities began to tempt away the upper or middle classes and the young. The First World War saw a further net decline in churchgoing, the combined result of changes in lifestyles which it introduced and, perhaps, of the questioning of faith itself in the face of such grievous loss of life. The trend was not reversed in peacetime, so that throughout the interwar period fairly regular church- or chapelgoing was likely to have been practised by perhaps one half of the diocese's population on average, rather less in most towns and rather more in rural areas. Nevertheless, vestigial contact with the Churches was maintained by many more people through attendance on the rites of passage and the occasional religious festival.

Although these clergy visitation returns do not necessarily pose a fundamental challenge to received wisdom about the chronology and scale of secularization in British society, their very frequency – almost triennial

in Oxford's case – makes it possible to plot the process of religious decline in far greater detail, and with far greater subtlety, than can be done through recourse to very occasional censuses of church attendance and other non-recurrent sources. They point to the need to consider churchgoing, not in the way that historians and ecclesiastics have so often viewed it, as an activity which individuals either choose to perform or not, but as a continuum. Attendance on a single day, epitomized in the census-based approach, is actually less meaningful than the size of the total worshipping community, the number of people in active contact with institutional Christianity over a given period of time, taking all the factors such as twicing, regularity, seasonality and denominational overlap into consideration. The clergy visitation returns give an insight into the behaviour of this worshipping community in ways which other kinds of evidence do not. In exploring the world of popular religion they are an indispensable, and an unjustifiably neglected, source.

Appendix

Clergy Visitation Returns for the Diocese of Oxford

Unless otherwise stated, these are preserved amongst the O(xford) D(iocesan) P(apers) in the O(xfordshire) A(rchives).

1738	O.D.P. d.552 (parishes A–G), d.553 (H–P), d.554 (R–Y) (printed by the Oxfordshire Record Society in 1957)
1759	O.D.P. d.555 (A–G), d.556 (H–R), d.557 (S–Y)
1768	O.D.P. d.558 (A–G), d.559 (H–P), d.560 (R–Y)
1771	O.D.P. d.561 (A–G), d.562 (H–P), d.563 (R–Y)
1774	O.D.P. d.564 (A–L), d.565 (M–Y)
1778	O.D.P. b.37 (very incomplete)
1781	O.D.P. b.37 (very incomplete)
1784	O.D.P. b.37 (very incomplete)
1787	O.D.P. b.37 (very incomplete)
1790	O.A. MSS Archd. Papers Oxon b.22–7 (very incomplete)
1793	O.D.P. b.6–18
1796	O.D.P. b.6–18 (excluding Witney and Woodstock deaneries), Bodleian Library MS. Top. eccles. e.1 (Witney and Woodstock deaneries)
1799	O.D.P. b.6–18 (very incomplete)
1802	O.D.P. d.566 (A–L), d.567 (M–Y)
1805	O.D.P. d.568 (A–L), d.569 (M–W)
1808	O.D.P. d.570 (A–L), d.571 (M–W)
1811	O.D.P. d.572 (A–L), d.573 (M–W)
1814	O.D.P. d.574 (A–L), d.575 (M–Y)
1817	O.D.P. d.576 (A–L), d.577 (M–Y)
1820	O.D.P. d.578 (A–L), d.579 (M–W)

1823	O.D.P. d.580 (A–L), d.581 (M–Y)
1831	O.D.P. b.38
1834	O.D.P. b.39
1838	O.D.P. b.40 (Berkshire), b.41 (Oxford)
1854	O.D.P. d.701 (archdeaconry of Oxford printed by the Oxfordshire Record Society in 1954)
1857	O.D.P. d.179
1860	O.D.P. d.180
1866	O.D.P. c.330 (Berkshire), c.331 (Buckingham), c.332 (Oxford)
1869	O.D.P. c.333 (Berkshire), c.334 (Buckingham), c.335 (Oxford)
1872	O.D.P. c.336 (Berkshire), c.337 (Buckingham), c.338 (Oxford)
1875	O.D.P. c.339 (Berkshire), c.340 (Buckingham), c.341 (Oxford)
1878	O.D.P. c.342 (Berkshire), c.343 (Buckingham), c.334 (Oxford)
1881	O.D.P. c.345 (Berkshire), c.346 (Buckingham), c.347 (Oxford)
1884	O.D.P. c.348 (Berkshire), c.349 (Buckingham), c.350 (Oxford)
1887	O.D.P. c.351 (Berkshire), c.352 (Buckingham), c.353 (Oxford)
1890	O.D.P. c.354 (Berkshire), c.355 (Buckingham), c.356 (Oxford)
1893	O.D.P. c.357 (Berkshire), c.358 (Buckingham), c.359 (Oxford)
1896	O.D.P. c.360 (Berkshire), c.361 (Buckingham), c.362 (Oxford)
1899	O.D.P. c.363 (Berkshire), c.364 (Buckingham), c.365 (Oxford)
1902	O.D.P. c.366 (Berkshire), c.367 (Buckingham), c.368 (Oxford)
1906	O.D.P. c.369, b.42 (Berkshire), c.370, b.43 (Buckingham), c.371, b.44 (Oxford)
1909	O.D.P. c.372, b.45 (Berkshire), c.373, b.46 (Buckingham), c.374, b.47 (Oxford)
1914	O.D.P. c.375 (Berkshire), c.376 (Buckingham), c.377 (Oxford)
1917–18	O.D.P. c.378 (Berkshire), c.379 (Buckingham), c.380 (Oxford)
1922	O.D.P. c.381 (A–H), c.382 (I–Y)
1924	O.D.P. c.383 (Berkshire), c.384 (Buckingham), c.385 (Oxford)
1928	O.D.P. c.386 (Berkshire), c.387 (Buckingham), c.388 (Oxford)
1931	O.D.P. c.389 (Berkshire), c.390 (Buckingham), c.391 (Oxford)
1934	O.D.P. c.392 (Berkshire), c.393 (Buckingham), c.394 (Oxford)
1936	O.D.P. c.395 (Berkshire), c.396 (Buckingham), c.397 (Oxford)

Notes

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¹ There is a very conventional, institutional history of the diocese in the Diocesan Histories series: E. Marshall, *Oxford* (1882). The most important modern studies of the diocese are W.M. Marshall, 'The Administration of the Dioceses of Hereford and Oxford, 1660–1760' (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, University of Bristol, 1979) and 'Episcopal activity in the Hereford and Oxford Dioceses, 1660–1760', *Midland History*, VIII (1983), pp. 106–20; and D. McClatchey, *Oxfordshire Clergy, 1777–1869: A Study of the Established Church and of the Role of its Clergy in Local Society* (Oxford, 1960).

² *Census of Great Britain, 1851: Religious Worship, England and Wales, Report and Tables*, Parliamentary Papers 1852–3, LXXXIX, pp. clxxxi, clxxxii, cxcvi, ccxviii, ccli. It should be noted that churchgoing in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire is now less than the national average, equivalent to 8.9 per cent of the adult population on 15 Oct. 1989 compared with 9.5 per cent in England as a whole: *Prospects for the Nineties: Trends and Tables from the 1989 English Church Census*, ed. P. Brierley (1991), pp. 20, 264, 268, 280.

³ A.M. Urdank, *Religion and Society in a Cotswold Vale: Nailsworth, Gloucestershire, 1780–1865* (Berkeley, 1990); J. Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey, 1825–1875* (Oxford, 1976); D. Clark, *Between Pulpit and Pew: Folk Religion in a North Yorkshire Fishing Village* (Cambridge, 1982). All three works originated as postgraduate research theses, a form in which other studies still remain; see, for example, D.A. Spaeth, 'Parsons and Parishioners: Lay-clerical Conflict and Popular Piety in Wiltshire Villages, 1660–1740' (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Brown University, 1985) and H. Burrows, 'Religious Provision and Practice in some mainly Rural Poor Law Districts of the Lowland Marches, 1815–1914' (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Council for National Academic Awards, Wolverhampton Polytechnic, 1991).

⁴ For a detailed guide to the available sources, both historical and contemporary, see C.D. Field, 'Non-recurrent Christian data', *Religion* (Reviews of United Kingdom Statistical Sources, ed. W.F. Maunder, XX, Oxford, 1987), pp. 189–504. For a valuable attempt to synthesize many of the quantifiable British data see R. Gill, *The Myth of the Empty Church* (1992).

⁵ See, especially, D.H. McLeod, 'New perspectives on Victorian class religion: the oral evidence', *Oral History*, XIV, 1, (1986), pp. 31–49.

⁶ M. Stacey, *Tradition and Change: A Study of Banbury* (1960); M. Stacey, E.V. Batstone, C.R. Bell and A. Murcott, *Power, Persistence and Change: A Second Study of Banbury* (1975). For a much earlier study of Banbury, undertaken by district visitors acting under the direction of the vicar, see B.S. Trinder, 'Banbury's poor in 1850', *Cake and Cockhorse*, III, (1965–8), pp. 83–128.

⁷ This paragraph owes much to the paper of W.J. Sheils, 'The Bishops and their Dioceses: reform of Visitation in the Anglican Church, 1680–1760', delivered to the Colloque de la Commission Internationale d'Histoire Ecclésiastique Comparée, Strasbourg, September 1983, and generously made available to the author by Dr Sheils.

⁸ *Bishop Fell and Nonconformity: Visitation Documents from the Oxford Diocese, 1682–83*, ed. M. Clapinson (Oxfordshire Record Society, LII, 1980), esp. pp. 1–32.

⁹ 'Bishop Secker's Diocese book', ed. E. Ralph, in *A Bristol Miscellany*, ed. P. McGrath (Bristol Record Society's Publications, XXXVII, 1985), pp. 28–9.

¹⁰ For example, the dioceses of Lincoln in 1705–23 and Worcester in 1782–1808: 'Documents relating to Leicestershire and preserved in the Episcopal Registry at Lincoln', ed. W.G.D. Fletcher, *Associated Architectural and Archaeological Societies Reports and Papers*, XXII, (1893–4), pp. 227–365 (archdeacons of Leicester); *Speculum dioceseos lincolniensis sub episcopis Gul: Wake et Edm. Gibson, A.D. 1705–1723*, ed. R.E.G. Cole (Publications of the Lincoln Record Society, IV, 1913) (archdeacons of Lincoln and Stow); *The State of the Bishopric of Worcester, 1782–1808*, ed. M. Ransome (Worcestershire Historical Society, New Series, VI, 1968).

¹¹ The only clergy diocesan visitation returns known to have been printed *in extenso* are: *Articles of Enquiry addressed to the Clergy of the Diocese of Oxford at the Primary Visitation of Dr. Thomas Secker, 1738*, ed. H.A. Lloyd Jukes (Oxfordshire Record Society, XXXVIII, 1957); *Archbishop Herring's Visitation Returns, 1743*, ed. S.L. Ollard and P.C. Walker (Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, LXXI, LXXII, LXXV, LXXVII, LXXIX, 1928–31); *Wiltshire Returns to the Bishop's Visitation Queries, 1783*, ed. M. Ransome (Wiltshire Record Society, XXVII, 1972); *The Diocese of Exeter in 1821: Bishop*

Carey's *Replies to Queries before Visitation*, ed. M. Cook (Devon & Cornwall Record Society, New Series, III–IV, 1958–60); *Bishop Wilberforce's Visitation Returns for the Archdeaconry of Oxford in the Year 1854*, ed. E.P. Baker (Oxfordshire Record Society, XXXV, 1954). In addition, there is a commercial microfilm edition of the returns for the dioceses of London, 1693–1815, and Canterbury, 1716–1806: *The Visitation Returns from the Dioceses of Canterbury & London, 17th–19th Centuries* (1983, 44 reels). For a commentary on Baker's edition see M. Smith, 'The Church in Oxfordshire in 1854: Taken from Archbishop [sic] Wilberforce's Visitation Returns' (unpub. B.A. dissertation, University of Birmingham, 1959).

¹² F.C. Mather, 'Georgian Churchmanship reconsidered: some variations in Anglican public worship, 1714–1830', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XXXVI, (1985), pp. 255–83 (dioceses of Chester, Lichfield and Coventry, London, Ripon, St Asaph, St Davids, York); Gill, *The Myth of the Empty Church* (dioceses of Canterbury, Carlisle, Chester, Durham/Newcastle, Lincoln, London, Ripon, York).

¹³ V. Barrie[Curien], 'Recherches sur la vie religieuse en Angleterre au XVIII^e siècle', *Revue historique*, CCLXVI, (1981), pp. 339–79; 'Déploiement du clergé et pratique religieuse à travers les visites du XXVIII^e siècle: le cas du diocèse de Londres', Colloque de la Commission Internationale d'Histoire Ecclésiastique Comparée, Strasbourg, September 1983; 'La vie des paroisses en Angleterre à la fin du XVIII^e siècle: encadrement et résidence pastorale', *Histoire, économie et société*, V, (1986), pp. 187–215; 'La pratique religieuse en Angleterre dans la seconde partie du XVIII^e siècle: le diocèse de Londres à travers les visites pastorales', *Revue historique*, CCLXXV, (1986), pp. 343–80; 'Clergé, pratique religieuse et société dans le diocèse de Londres au XVIII^e siècle' (Doctorat d'état, Université de Paris IV, 1989).

¹⁴ A full list of the extant returns is given in the appendix. In the interests of economy, quotations from, and references to, the returns are made in the text without further source notes. No attempt has been made to consult returns for the dioceses of Salisbury and Lincoln in respect of the transferred archdeaconries of Berkshire and Buckingham, even though some relevant material is available. See, for example, Wiltshire County Record Office D1/56/Berkshire 1783 for the Berkshire returns to Shute Barrington's visitation queries of 1783, omitted from Mary Ransome's edition published by the Wiltshire Record Society in 1972. In addition to the returns there are eight *specula* for the diocese which include, to a greater or lesser extent, data abstracted from the returns; O.A., O.D.P. d.579 (for 1759), d.760 (1768–75), c.327 (1778–1808), d.549 (1807–11), d.550 (1845–50), d.178 (1854–64), b.70–2 (1855–69), and d.761 (1870–88).

¹⁵ For a study of communicant data in thirty Oxfordshire parishes in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries see A.D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change, 1740–1914* (1976), p. 27, and R. Currie, A.D. Gilbert and L. Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 22, 26.

¹⁶ Gill, *The Myth of the Empty Church*, chapter 1.

¹⁷ T. Secker, *Eight Charges delivered to the Clergy of the Dioceses of Oxford and Canterbury; to which are added, Instructions to Candidates for Orders and a Latin Speech intended to have been made at the Opening of the Convocation in 1761* (1769), pp. 4, 6, 23, 70.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 70–4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁰ Cf. McClatchey, *Oxfordshire Clergy*, pp. 80–2.

²¹ Samuel Wilberforce, in particular, made a point of referring to data on average congregations in his episcopal charges: *A Charge delivered to the Clergy of the Diocese of Oxford at his Primary Visitation, September & October 1848* (1848), p. 52; *A Charge to the Clergy of the Diocese of Oxford at his Second Visitation, November 1851* (1851), p. 6; *A Charge to*

the Diocese of Oxford at his Third Visitation, November 1854 (1854), pp. 39–40; *A Charge delivered at the Triennial Visitation of the Diocese, November MDCCCLX* (Oxford, 1860), p. 10; *A Charge delivered to the Diocese of Oxford at his Sixth Visitation, November 1863* (Oxford, 1863), p. 14.

²² R. Bagot, *A Charge addressed to the Clergy of the Diocese at his Second Visitation, August 1834* (Oxford, 1834), p. 14.

²³ *Hansard*, 3rd. Series, CXV (17 Mar.–10 Apl. 1851), cols. 629–33, CXXXV (11 July–12 Aug. 1854), cols. 23–33.

²⁴ To ensure comparability between the two sets of data, the following adjustments have been made. Whenever a minimum–maximum figure was returned, either in 1851 or 1854, the mid-point has been taken. In 1851 the actual and average attendances have been used only when they relate to a service held at the same time of the day. The 1851 statistics relate only to the general congregations and exclude Sunday scholars. In 1854 an undifferentiated figure for a parish where there was more than one Sunday service has been assumed to relate to the congregation at the best attended service, and it has been compared with the attendance at the best attended service in 1851, regardless of the time of day of that service. All 1851 data are taken from *Church and Chapel in Oxfordshire, 1851: The Return of the Census of Religious Worship*, ed. K. Tiller (Oxfordshire Record Society, LV, 1987). There is a similar modern edition of the Buckinghamshire returns: *Buckinghamshire Returns of the Census of Religious Worship, 1851*, ed. E. Legg (Buckinghamshire Record Society, XXVII, 1991). The 1851 returns for Berkshire, by contrast, have not yet been published and must be consulted at the Public Record Office at Home Office 129/120–31.

²⁵ It should be noted that this percentage is lower than that suggested by the comparison, made by Wilberforce in the Lords on 11 July 1854, between the aggregate of Anglican morning congregations in the diocese on census Sunday and the average attendance recorded in the clergy visitation returns of 1851, the originals of which do not appear to have survived: 'In his own diocese, in which not a very great number of clergymen refused to send the return, he had desired that every clergyman should take the trouble, on several consecutive Sundays, to have the congregations numbered, and to send him the average of the congregations so numbered. The numbers in his diocese were 117,421 according to that enumeration; but in the same year the return of the Registrar General only gave the numbers at 98,410 . . .'; *Hansard*, 3rd. Series, CXXXV, col. 25. It is unlikely that this difference can be wholly attributed to the six per cent of Anglican churches in the diocese for which no record of attendance was obtained at the 1851 census; *Census of Great Britain, 1851: Religious Worship*, pp. ccxvi, ccxviii.

²⁶ Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Diocese of Oxford at his Third Visitation, November 1854*, p. 39. Wilberforce's implicit retraction was not lost on Horace Mann, the young barrister who was assistant commissioner with responsibility for the religious census; see his paper 'On the statistical position of religious bodies in England and Wales', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, XVIII (1855), p. 145, and his letter on 'The Religious Worship Census of 1851', *The Times*, 11 July 1860.

²⁷ *Hansard*, 3rd. Series, CXXXV, cols. 23–8. For a contemporary rebuttal of Wilberforce's claims see *Voluntaryism in England and Wales; or, The Census of 1851* (1854), pp. 11–15.

²⁸ Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Diocese of Oxford at his Third Visitation, November 1854*, pp. 40–1.

²⁹ Wilberforce, *A Charge delivered to the Diocese of Oxford at his Sixth Visitation, November 1863*, p. 14.

³⁰ For details of Union activities in the diocese see P.L.R. Horn, 'Agricultural Labourers' Trade Unionism in Four Midland Counties, 1860–1900' (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, University of Leicester, 1968); and *Agricultural Trade Unionism in Oxfordshire, 1872–81*, ed. P.L.R. Horn (Oxfordshire Record Society, XLVIII, 1974), including, at pp. 131–8, extracts from the clergy visitation returns for the archdeaconry of Oxford in 1875, 1878 and 1881.

³¹ Cf. P.L.R. Horn, 'Methodism and agricultural trade unionism in Oxfordshire: the 1870s', *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, XXXVII, (1969-70), pp. 67-71.

³² Cf. E. Bickersteth, *A Charge delivered at his Thirteenth Visitation of the Archdeaconry of Buckingham in June 1873* (1873), p. 13: 'The average attendance at public worship varies according to the season of the year and the situation of the inhabitants, namely whether grouped around the church or scattered.'

³³ Free Churchmen also complained of the phenomenon. Cf. *The Oxford Methodist*, II (1892), December: 'I do not know any town that affords more temptations to the development of wandering habits than Oxford does. The presence of special men and the holding of special meetings in the city is one of the greatest disadvantages possible to our ordinary church work and life. It tends to make our people religious Arabs instead of useful members of our churches.'

³⁴ Again, there are parallels with the Free Churches. Cf. *The Oxford Methodist*, II (1892), April: 'With the advent of Spring, increasing daylight generally makes its mark on the activity of the circuit. Meetings become less numerous because attendances fall off . . . Should not "the means of grace" be as much necessities in summer as in winter? Should not congregations be rather increased than diminished by the accessions of many of our invalid people who have been unable to face the rigorous nor'easter? How is it, when local preachers attend afternoon appointments on fine Sundays, the officers of the church are wont to remark "Our young people have gone for a walk"?''

³⁵ Cf. W.H. Fitchett, 'The neglect of public worship', *Oxford and District Free Church Magazine*, IV (1900), p. 174 and J.G. Greenhough, 'The duty of public worship', *ibid.*, VI (1902), pp. 6-7.

³⁶ T.B. Strong, *Visitation Charge of the Bishop of Oxford at the Diocesan Visitation, 1931* (1931), p. 3. Strong's much more optimistic report three years later was not wholly justified by the returns submitted by his clergy; such improvement as there was (sometimes linked to the influence of the Oxford Group) affected a minority of parishes, often manifesting itself in increased confirmands and communicants rather than ordinary worshippers: cf. T.B. Strong, *Visitation Charge of the Bishop of Oxford at the Diocesan Visitation, 1934* (1934), p. 4.

³⁷ Between 1854 and 1863 fifty-five per cent of confirmands in the diocese of Oxford were women: Wilberforce, *A Charge delivered at the Triennial Visitation of the Diocese, November MDCCCLX*, p. 9 and *A Charge delivered to the Diocese of Oxford, at his Sixth Visitation, November 1863*, p. 4.