The Rise of Megachurches: Innovation, Stagnation, and the Future of Christianity in the United States and the United Kingdom

“A church which pitches its tents without constantly looking out for new horizons, which does not continually strike camp, is being untrue to its calling…It must play down a longing for certainty, accept what is risky, live by improvisation and experiment.”

--Hans Kung

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I. The Invisible Churches: An Introduction

This past summer, I visited more than fifteen churches scattered all over Great Britain during a month-long journey through Europe, to learn more about their individual responses to the increasingly profound cultural change and secularization the country has recently experienced. Most of my visits were quite fruitful—and I expected the same of my last two meetings, at long-established and high-profile Anglican churches in London. I was disappointed—not because they had nothing of interest to tell me, but because I couldn’t even find them to begin with. Mind you—this was not being unprepared, or even for lack of trying. I followed the directions I had and arrived in time for my appointment, only to find myself standing in front of a converted old cathedral that was now serving as a primary school. You can draw whatever conclusions you’d like from this—but, regardless, what I found most telling was the utter lack of knowledge about either that church or the second one I also couldn’t find the next day. I made a point to ask passerby if they could point me in the direction of the church—and of almost twenty of them, not one had even heard that there was a church in the area at all. An established, supposedly prestigious, Anglican church, no less. At first, I tried to rationalize this. Perhaps the passerby I encountered were simply passing through the area, and didn’t have much local knowledge. Perhaps, for some reason, I only encountered people who had a particular aversion to the Church of England. But when the same situation occurred the next day, it just couldn’t be coincidence. Churches were the only thing that I was on my own in finding—helpful locals could direct me to places to eat, local attractions, you name it, but about churches, they knew nothing. As it was indicative of the very social trend I was there to study, perhaps I should not have found this so earth-shattering, yet it was. And I never did find that one church—turns out, it had moved its church offices a few blocks away and allowed a local primary school to use the actual church full-time.

The phenomenon of the ‘invisible church’ differed greatly from the multitude of thriving megachurches I had earlier visited in California and Texas. Evangelicalism in the United States has been bolstered immeasurably by its latest manifestation—the megachurch—while there is growing acknowledgement that the infamous “secularization of Europe” has in recent decades pervaded the United Kingdom to an ever-increasing, and increasingly alarming, degree. Indeed, it is impossible to deny that the developmental trajectories of the state-supported Anglican Church of England and American evangelical Christianity have varied tremendously in the centuries since their beginnings, almost to the point where they would appear to have only a minimal theological skeleton in common. Despite their divergence, these two Christian institutions have reached a parallel watershed, a defining and critical moment that surprisingly intertwines these two superstructures and has long-reaching implications for the subsequent iterations of religion around the world, for it turns out that the Anglican Church is beginning to address its crisis in ways that would feel familiar to the congregants of an American megachurch.
I. The Economic Framework

As developed by sociologists Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and Steven Pfaff, the model I will utilize to illustrate this duality is a “market-oriented lens,” an economic approach that can “illuminate what might otherwise seem a very disorderly landscape.” It analogizes churches as individual firms, which naturally want to maximize their ‘profit’ (which is, in this case, understood to be the number of believers they can amass in the areas they influence). From this foundation, the state support of the Church of England legitimates a monopolistic religious ‘economy’ in the UK: the constant and reliable influx of state funds has ensured the survival and relative stability of the church regardless of its clergy’s response (or lack thereof) to the needs of its congregation. With little to no serious competition or outside threats, this supply-side stagnation facilitates the increasing decline of religion in the UK because there is no automatic mechanism to ensure that models of ‘doing church’ still sufficiently relates to the people as their progressive or post-modern society takes incremental steps away from dependence upon it. Thus, although both American and British societies, if left alone, gradually and naturally become less traditional, I argue that the response of churches to these shifts determines the extent of secularization in the society, and furthermore, that their response is shaped by the type of religious economy exhibited in each nation.

The British religious monopoly relates to the vibrant megachurch movement in America, a movement best analyzed in the context of the competitive and diverse American religious economy, in that it is a direct result of American churches’ acknowledgement of and response to the modernization of society. American megachurches can be explained as the most recent iteration of religious innovation in a society which intrinsically places a high value upon innovation, modernism, and change in general, and which has a history of adaptation in religion dating back to its colonial days and the various revivals and permutations of faith it has witnessed. In this nation of “rational choice,” consumers of religion choose the firm which best suits their personal preferences, which are deeply impacted by the culture in which they live. Although British culture may seem substantially more agnostic than its American counterpart, I argue that Britons too are consumers of religion in that there is less religious involvement in the UK because their only choice suits fewer people—if the UK had similar religious diversity, there would be more interest in it, and that could possibly have even prevented some degree of its society’s departure from spirituality to begin with.

So while the cultural upheaval of the 1960s onward spurred corresponding adaptation in the practice of American Christianity, it correlated instead with religious stagnation and a sharp decline in church attendance in Britain. As demand decreased—or, in other words, as British society became more predisposed to secularism—there was nothing preventing this shift, no

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change in supply that reached out to Britons and convinced them that the church was still relevant, in some way, to their changing lives.

II. An Economic History of American Religion: Historical Precedents for A Modern Phenomenon

“The most striking trend in the history of religion in America is growth,” begins The Churching of America, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark’s comprehensive volume on American religious history. And we can see clearly the truth in this statement—having immigrated to the colonies primarily to escape from religious persecution in the first place, colonists quickly established religious freedom in the soon-to-be United States as an unshakable and defining tenet of life. This famous separation of church and state that so proudly differentiated America from Europe created an unregulated religious market and rampant pluralism of the Christian faith—manifested consistently throughout the nation’s history in its myriad of denominations. As Stark and Finke note, some scholars argue that “pluralism [should instead weaken] faith—that where multiple religious groups compete, each discredits the other, encouraging the view that religion per se is open to question, dispute, and doubt.”

But there is no doubt that an analysis of religious participation in America does, indeed, show an indisputable long-run growth trend despite the expected cyclical upheaval. Even while consistent decline is exhibited in other regions of the world, American participation in organized religion has increased markedly over its two centuries of history.

What can explain this? Finke and Stark’s prominent economic analysis points not to differences in demand for religion—indeed, they claim that all humans, across the globe, have the same innate desire for spiritual life and fulfillment. Instead, he credits the high level of supply in the United States compared to other nations and, furthermore, the actions which this “competition” encourages. His supply-side theory of competition conjectures that this religious market in America allows for the “rational choice” of the nation’s religious consumers mentioned in passing earlier. Mimicking the way in which Americans choose what products to consume in their everyday trips to the grocery store, this model asserts that churchgoers rationally, if subconsciously, assess the marginal benefit afforded to them by each church, based on their personal preferences, and choose the one with the highest benefit and lowest cost. In short, it allows each person to find the spiritual experience which suits them best, while it logically follows that, in nations lacking this religious choice, there is less involvement in religion because the only option suits fewer people. Americans, as well as Britons, “shop around

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3 Finke and Stark, 1
4 Ibid, 18
6 Finke and Stark, 39
for their spiritual needs.”

This idea of “rational choice” inevitably inspires consideration of demand-side theories that counter that religious phenomena in America and elsewhere can in fact be explained by fluctuations in demand—what we know as shortages and surpluses. Some argue that different cultures beget different levels of spiritual dependence, taking Stark’s constant “innate demand” and adjusting it from nation to nation, continent to continent—a theory that is not without its merits, and will be discussed later in relation to the evolution of contemporary British society. But, without discounting the impact of these hypotheses, I advocate a second, more active way to address demand, focusing on demand-side interventions: in other words, churches in America have, through the years, purposefully intervened to keep demand high. Surprisingly, this can fit with Stark’s supply-side hypothesis like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Ultimately, only with competition and the desire to stay ahead of the curve would these churches actively try to augment religious demand; in a monopolistic environment, this would be unnecessary.

Assuming each American church desires to be the religious choice of a maximum number of Americans possible, the consistent shift in the practice of American religion—a movement that reflects both sociocultural change and America’s religious growth trend—signals exactly such a relationship between ample supply and changing demand. First, let us explore the reality that, unfortunately for some churches, not every denomination or segment of American religion has been fortunate enough to share in this general long-run growth trend. Herein lies the most crucial principle to grasp, the one which illuminates why there has been a trend of change alongside that of growth and one which is rooted in the straightforward realities of a laissez-faire free market. From the perspective of an individual church, if it wants to grow and become increasingly popular, its goal is simple: it must continuously reinvent itself to ensure that, as people change, it still identifies with as many of them as possible—and not every church is able, or even insightful enough, to do this. As Finke and Stark assert, the “churching of America was accomplished by aggressive churches committed to vivid otherworldliness.” In other words, the most successful churches learned how to attract, commit, and retain followers in a changing world, by responding and adjusting to the changes in society that their customers had already grown accustomed to—before those changes could drive a wedge between them and Christianity. As many churches have found, it’s a skill vitally important if they wanted to make a profit of believers.

Viewing American religious history as “a history of human actions and human organizations, not a history of ideas” does not suggest that the ideas underlying each denomination’s unique theology are wholly unimportant, but rather emphasizes that churches which center on “theological refinement” progress in a way which ultimately “results in organizational

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7 Davie, 39
9 Finke and Stark, 1
10 Ibid, 1
bankruptcy.” From an economic perspective, the effectiveness of a church—just like any business—depends upon not only their organization and their product but also “their sales representatives and marketing techniques,” which are ways to unilaterally increase demand that played a huge role in the success of American religion. The idea of marketing and “sales representatives,” when translated into language that relates to the history of American religion, sounds suspiciously like evangelization, evoking names like the famous “fire and brimstone” preacher George Whitefield. The Great Awakening which Whitefield pioneered was essentially a “well-planned, well-publicized, and well-financed revival campaign,” one which capitalized on the spirit and fervor of the era—a still-popular tactic, just one which changes with the times. It helps to think of Whitefield and his fiery camp meetings in the context of the American landscape during his lifetime: as, “quite simply, one of the most powerful and moving preachers” of the time, he drew crowds that gathered outside to hear him speak wherever he traveled, and his loud voice captivated everyone like none else could. His revivals were revolutionary, almost shocking, to attendees, simply because of the rather subdued—even “secular”—nature of church preaching until then. His Great Awakening had several important ramifications for the future of American religion and helped to shape even the development of the megachurches so common today. How? Primarily, it “demonstrated the immense market opportunity for more robust religion,” setting a precedent for later preachers and whetting American churchgoers’ appetite for it as well. At a time when society had begun incremental steps away from traditional religion, this movement quite literally “revived” it. Also, Whitefield’s popularity has an eerie prediction for the plight of mainline denominations today: it was the disillusioned members of long-established churches, more than any other group, who flocked to and benefited from his preaching…just as the so-called “nondenominational” megachurches draw lapsed members from the established denominations today.

It could be argued, then, that the rise of Whitefield contributed to, or at least coincided with, to the “decline of the old mainline denominations,” caused by “their inability to cope with the consequence of religious freedom and a free market religious economy,” especially when a venerable competitor arose—a real-life example of the failure to keep up just discussed. Around this time developed the idea of revivalism: outbreaks of public piety occurring throughout various American locales in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, planned and conducted periodically “to energize commitment within their congregations and also to draw in the unchurched.” The camp meeting, developed in the early nineteenth century, became hugely

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11 Finke and Stark, 5
12 Ibid, 17
13 Ibid, 46
14 Ibid, 49
15 Ibid, 51
16 Ibid, 51
17 Ibid, 54
18 Finke and Stark, 88
popular in rural America, at least in part because it was a religious practice that could take place in a venue familiar and agreeable to attendants: the open outdoors. This comfortable setting mirrors today’s casual, come-as-you-are megachurches that shy away from traditionally ornate or grandiose environs. A contemporary observer noted, “Take away the worship [at the camp meeting] and there would remain sufficient gratifications to allure most young people”—in other words, camp meetings made Christianity comparatively fun to the young people of that time.

Fast-forward to the 1960s, where we see how the Great Awakening was only one of a series of innovative changes throughout the history of American Christianity that occurred in response to cataclysmic social shifts. The cultural crisis and questioning of the “hippie” sixties generation coupled with the increasing unease and outright protest brought about by Communism abroad, the Vietnam War, and Watergate encouraged disillusionment in what was often perceived as religion that was out of touch with the gritty real world. Suddenly, traditional or “mainstream” churches, with their white steeples, Sunday school, and potluck dinners, began to experience a period of decline that still continues today and has slowly but surely in some way affected almost every one of the nation’s numerous established denominations. The mainline denominations “always have the advantage when the official culture is secure and expansive,” but “they suffer in times of cultural crisis or disintegration [like during the 1960s and 1970s], when they receive blame for what goes wrong in society but are bypassed when people look for new ways to achieve social identity and location.” The only segment that benefited from this trend, or at the very least was unhurt, was burgeoning evangelical Protestantism, most famously manifesting itself in the 1970s with the establishment of new, unorthodox churches that reached people within the context of their radically changing lives. Ultimately, “religious organizations do not exist in a vacuum, and they cannot therefore be studied in isolation from their sociocultural environments,” summarizes Rodney Stark. The 1960s and the response (or lack thereof) of traditional American denominations proves a true testament to the importance of innovation in a changing society’s competitive religious market.

III. American Christianity Today: A Survey of Megachurches Across the Country

The generalized failure of traditional denominations of Christianity to recognize and respond to the apparent changes in American society in the 1960s and 1970s could be attributed to a reluctance to admit that they could have so quickly lost their status as more or less an immovable ‘institution’ of American life—after all, they had enjoyed new all-time attendance records (some estimates as high as 62% of Americans) only a decade or two prior. Yet it

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19 Ibid, 96
20 Ibid, 96
21 Ibid, 246
23 Finke and Stark, 29
was the recognition of their shortcomings by new competitors who emerged in the American religious market to take advantage of them—and the dynamic, cyclical innovation that this spurred—which ultimately illustrates the differences between the Anglican monopoly on religion and the competition allowed by the separation of church and state in the United States. This innovation is typified in the American megachurch, a phenomenon that has grown incredibly quickly and has enjoyed unheard-of popularity and notoriety, despite still being in its relative infancy as a social movement. So what exactly is a megachurch, and how do they relate to Christianity in Britain?

Beyond the enormous size implied by their name, the atmosphere and congregations of megachurches are the exact opposite of what you would typically conceptualize or label as conservative or evangelical Protestant, and this is a distinction important to make. Their congregations are highly diverse and visibly differentiated from the attendees of a more mainstream, traditional Protestant church, and that is a fact they are proud of. Most megachurches utilize modern rock music at their Sunday morning services, making them resemble a theatrical production more than a church service and helping today’s “entertainment generation” feel at home. Perhaps in an attempt to buoy often disparaged attendees, megachurch pastors habitually avoid mentioning the words ‘sinner’ or ‘hell’ in their Sunday sermons. Gone is the fire and brimstone preaching of the old days; gone even are sermons that impress upon attendees the need to repent and do good works. According to Jim Kok, the current Executive Pastor of Crystal Cathedral in Anaheim, California, Robert Schuller Sr.’s famous and groundbreaking theology centering on the “power of positive thinking” has been adopted by pastors like Joel Osteen (of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas), who espouses the uplifting self-focused (rather than God-focused) “feel-good mentality” that pervades society and consequently seems to attract so many people today, including the tens of thousands who visit Lakewood every Sunday morning.24 It’s a message that basically conveys to churchgoers that God loves and watches out for them; instead of threatening hell, it stresses how effortless it can be to go to heaven and prosper on this earth, whether via Osteen’s inspirational venues to success or pastor of the prominent Saddleback Church Rick Warren’s exhortation to “help others to help yourself.”25

Gone, also, is any specific doctrine of church beliefs; most megachurches are ostensibly non-denominational, a characteristic resulting overwhelmingly from their formative years. A substantial fraction of American megachurches were started at least in part by one of the numerous “Jesus movements” that swept the United States in the late 1970s and 1980s, in which people broke away from the supposedly repressive and strict established denominational churches and began a new genre of warm and welcoming churches (even if you show up in a bathing suit and carry a surfboard). Instead of following a catechism, the church establishes its direction (and often its generous monetary support) from the personal preferences or beliefs of

24 Pastor Jim Kok (Crystal Cathedral), Personal Interview, June 4, 2008
25 Pastor Dick Whitton (Saddleback Church), Personal Interview, June 12, 2008
the founding pastor, who is often almost immortalized and is always comparatively “famous,” or from the books that he writes to propagate those beliefs—just one example is *The Purpose-Driven Church* and the following *Purpose-Driven Life* by Saddleback Church’s pastor Rick Warren; the books, which fundamentally delineate methods of organizing both one’s church and personal life, have sold millions of copies worldwide and made Saddleback one of the richest churches in the country.

We’ve discussed rock music, informality, and watered-down theology—but what other factors define a megachurch? My travels through California two summers ago paint a portrait of megachurches as varied and diverse—and not all commonly thriving, adding a footnote to their ‘success story’ that the type of innovation, and the methods in which it is carried out, is crucial. Crystal Cathedral of Anaheim, a Los Angeles suburb most famous for its Disney resort but with a substantial poverty-stricken population, is considered the first of the modern megachurches and was made famous decades ago by its worldwide TV broadcast. Yet since its booming beginnings in the 1970s it’s been steadily losing members—one young staff member, who wishes to remain anonymous, even claimed that “this church is dying.”

Coupled with the aging congregation at home (which has simultaneously decreased its ability to lend volunteer power to the church and made it less attractive for new, younger families to join), the loss of the enigmatic Robert Schuller Sr. as pastor, and the increasing popularity of newer megachurches who emulated and improved upon what Crystal Cathedral had done, the church started down a slippery slope of decline—to the point where, today, many people who live in Anaheim don’t even know that Crystal Cathedral is an actual church and not just a TV set for its Sunday morning broadcast.

From this I learned that the life cycle of the megachurch, in comparison to other social organizations, seems to have a highly compressed growth, short-lived plateau, and decline; it made me wonder if the other megachurches, booming now, will eventually follow suit—or is Crystal Cathedral’s decline a unique case? Arguably, as their senior pastor told me that the recently popular megachurches of today have simply taken what the Cathedral pioneered and polished it further, it could be again a problem of not keeping up with the competition, something that, as they’ve learned, even megachurches must do in the face of nonstop innovation—which is why they are, today, reevaluating the distribution of their resources and innovating groundbreaking ways to connect not only with their members but with members of the community and with their enormous base of consistently loyal TV fans.

Two churches I visited—Angelus Temple of Los Angeles and the Church on the Way, slightly north of the city—were, to my great surprise, Pentecostal in origin, although this is a part of their history they’ve kept buried; although they claim to have broken from the original Pentecostal church and started their own national movement which they call “Foursquare,”

26 Anonymous Personal Interview, June 4, 2008
27 Ibid
they still abide by many of the most unique of the Pentecostal beliefs—speaking in tongues and receiving visions are commonplace in both their everyday culture and their church services. This made me wonder if perhaps they had purposefully hidden or not advertised their Pentecostal roots in an attempt to perhaps attract more followers who might otherwise been scared off by the relatively extreme, mystical connotation of the traditional Pentecostal church; it could have also been simply another attempt to break off and form a more “watered-down” version of Pentecostalism, that hadn’t succeeded as fully as it was intended to. Yet another church I encountered, the Rock Church, with a quaint suburban San Diego location and a mostly white, well-to-do congregation, is pastored by a middle-aged African American ex-pro-football-player who keeps the church probably as secure as the Pentagon. Why? According to members, his controversial and “outspoken nature” causes him to receive death threats as often as once a day.

Even if they have different ways of structuring them, every church I visited utilizes small groups as an integral part of church life for their members. Saddleback considers them the backbone of the church and the most important, if not sole, way to ensure that its members don’t get “lost in the shuffle” and the enormity of the church congregation as a whole. Their groups meet weekly in the home of each group’s leader, and they are organized around any activity or characteristic that the group members could possibly have in common, from their professions to their life stage to even a certain hobby. That common bond allows the members to worship together and make friends in a group that is already guaranteed to find something in common amongst its members. Saddleback considers itself the pioneer of this small group model just as Crystal Cathedral considers itself the developer of megachurches’ positive message, and they hold yearly conferences where they teach churches from all over the country how to implement a small group program themselves so that they, too, can reap the benefits.

Ironically, several of these ostensibly “non-denominational” churches have begat progeny, so-called “offspring” churches in other suburbs of California, and these “satellite campuses” soon grew into a movement that spread across the country with the help of published materials and a philosophy that placed heavy emphasis on evangelizing. As an example, one such church, Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa, has grown into an entire “brand” of religion, with its own publishing company, radio station, schools, and a network of thousands of similar Calvary Chapels across the country—and even around the globe.

In a related vein, it seems that megachurches also focus on missionary work and evangelism—both at home and abroad, but to varying degrees. For example, Crystal Cathedral is launching several new initiatives to draw local Hispanic and Middle Eastern immigrants to the church, including fun “community fairs,” multilingual small groups and church services, a partnership with the local elementary school (75% of whose students live below the poverty line), and a Sunday school program tailored to children who are just learning English. Vineyard Anaheim reaches out to the Anaheim community with its fully-stocked warehouse of food and donated clothing; once a week, they open it to families in the community to come in for a hot
meal, a new outfit, food for the week, and a Bible study and church service to go along with it. I found Lakewood Church in Houston to be the least devoted to any kind of missionary or philanthropic work, which is in tune with the “I”-focused theology preached by Joel Osteen. About a decade ago, Angelus Temple, which is housed in a huge building in one of Los Angeles’ poorest neighborhoods, founded the “Dream Center,” a center for disadvantaged and troubled youth; they take in teenagers who have nowhere else to go or have just gotten out of juvenile detention and try to reform them by giving them a place to live, schooling, job training, and involvement with Angelus Temple’s community outreach activities. Saddleback, although founded and based in large part on the tenet of helping others and finding yourself in the process, places much less focus on their community outreach programs, except for their world-renowned counseling program, on which they concentrate a lot of resources.

Overall, missional outreach is a fundamental part of the megachurch template—and one that plays an especially important role in my research, as some megachurches I visited, having already planted daughter churches across the United States, have recently turned their attention to Western Europe, and Great Britain in particular, hoping that ‘exporting’ their model could perhaps contribute to the reversal of European secularism.

IV. The Effects of Megachurches on Mainline Denominations: Joining the Bandwagon?

First, however, we will look at the effect that these megachurches have had on traditional churches in America. As megachurches have modernized the American religious landscape, they have split religious leaders—not everyone was immediately willing to adapt their established, historically tested way of ‘doing church,’ but we will see that this hesitancy, and its consequences, lend further credence to the importance of innovation in gaining, and retaining, believers. While megachurch pastors openly trace their successes from a purportedly ‘God-given’ willingness to open their eyes to the ongoing changes in society, other traditional churches see the direction of American culture as something almost evil, something to which they must actively prevent people from succumbing. They strive to keep Christianity unchanged—pure, strict, pious, and timeless (here, think of the stagnation of the Anglican church over time)—believing that it is indeed the individual’s responsibility to conform themselves to what the church expects of them rather than to expect the church to reach out to them, conforming to the expectations of society in the process. Not surprisingly, one of the biggest common critiques of the megachurch is that it offers churchgoers little more than that watered-down theology, a manifestation of the tradeoff that these churches face. Changing to fit society, even with the ultimate goal of getting more people into church or to make their already hectic lives less stressful, is no reason to let people off the metaphorical “hook,” claim many advocates of traditional church.
Sociologist and religious historian Robert Wuthnow argues that it shouldn’t be alarming that these megachurches no longer conform to the idea of traditional religion, and in fact, he asserts, this trend doesn’t signal a larger impending problem for religion at all—only a change, viewed as inevitable, in the entire meaning of spirituality and religion. And if you look closely, it’s possible to refute the entire argument that these megachurches voluntarily undergo negative changes in their attempts to fit society—simply with a look at another feature megachurches use to differentiate their “product”: Christian rock music in services and other programming. Some claim that the use of ever-popular rock music in church services—something radically different from the traditional, established norm—is a perfect example of how the modern church is acquiescing to pop culture in an attempt to lure people through their doors and increase waning demand for their religious “product.” But it can be claimed, with equal credibility, that the decidedly Christian bent of the lyrics of these churches’ modern songs illustrates the adaptation of a secular trend to religion—in essence, churches are supposedly changing society. By taking the harmless aspects of the music itself and coupling it with wholesome, God-praising (if not, in some cases, directly God-referencing) lyrics, they can attract people with an affinity for rock music, without sacrificing their ideals—and maybe, they hope, even entice people whose aversion to traditional hymns might have otherwise kept them away from “stuffy” churches, saving more souls in the process.

Many megachurch members and pastors with whom I spoke praised the recently-increasing mainstream acceptance of the Christian rock genre as a legitimate and popular music variety. But critics emphasize that most of the songs and bands that have garnered widespread popularity, and even some which are still restrained to Christian audiences, exhibit the same watered-down theology evident in those same churches’ sermons—some never mention God or Jesus directly (even though these songs are often played at the beginning of megachurches’ worship services) and there has been a small but vocal backlash from traditional churches, accusing such music of defaming traditional Christian thought and practice—and even God himself.

The megachurches recognize that society’s direction is all but inevitable. By making a few small concessions in the style of worship to better conform to the times, they hope to continue people’s interest and affinity for the church, prevent the alienation of the general public, and even perhaps attract even more people by breaking down the barriers that have until then kept formerly ‘unreligious’ people from stepping into church. These megachurches, in being mindful of their changing demand and adapting to reflect it, must thus be commended for successfully reaching out to their customers. And a growing number of once-traditional yet comparatively more progressive-minded churches, faced with a stark and increasingly evident choice between decline and change, have opted to moderate their positions to attract members rather than losing all their members entirely, and have thus tried recently to incorporate aspects

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of the megachurches in an attempt to diversify and modernize their church bodies. Only these American churches entrenched in their scorn for innovation are the ones struggling to survive—something to keep in mind as we turn our attention to the development of Anglican Christianity in the United Kingdom.

V. Anglican Monopoly: An Economic Rationale for the Secularization Thesis

In contrast to the free market American religion we’ve just analyzed, “there is ample evidence that in [Western] societies with putative monopoly faiths, religious indifference—not piety—is rife.”29 Within the largest single example of this—Europe—there are exceptions to the rule, like Italy and Ireland, both of which exhibit levels of religious involvement and participation almost as high as in the United States, while other European countries very strongly support this hypothesis—unsurprisingly, I will center on Britain.30 Admittedly, after consideration, the British religious environment might seem counterintuitive—as did the coupling of growth and pluralism in the United States. Why, then, does this paradox occur at all?

There are a few primary problems faced by any religious monopoly that Adam Smith himself first unearthed in The Wealth of Nations and Whitefield later confirmed: firstly, a “single faith cannot shape its appeal to suit precisely the needs of one market segment without sacrificing its appeal to another.”31 Therefore, as the rational choice model supports, it lacks the ability to mobilize massive commitment because of its intrinsically smaller customer base, a structural explanation for the decreased religious demand that we later see.32 Furthermore, simply and just as compellingly—“monopolies tend to be lazy.”33 But why, according to Smith, did the Church of England have no reason to fear obsolescence? Monopolistic state support of a single Christian denomination has long afforded to that church a natural advantage in established resources that has generally thwarted competition.

In contrast to the vast variety of churches in the US, the relative singularity of Christianity in Britain forces congregants to either conform to it or choose not to attend altogether. Throughout the centuries—even once other churches have been technically ‘allowed’ to exist in the United Kingdom—the Church of England has maintained its virtual monopoly simply because it is nearly impossible for independent churches to begin and constitute any type of threat—the resources required for that kind of mobilization just do not exist. And so the ‘lazy’ Anglican church has remained exactly the same—stagnant in church hierarchy, theology, worship style, and even the dress of church leaders. Although, over the years, it might have faltered

29 Finke and Stark, 19
31 Pfaff, 35
32 Finke and Stark, 19
33 Pfaff, 34
in the face of serious competition, it simply hasn’t faced any—none has arisen because of the asymmetric base of power which supports Britain’s official religion. Without those multiple-denomination challenges omnipresent in American religious society, religion in Britain has settled into a pattern where there’s no need to continually reinvent or innovate, change with the times, or “exert themselves for the spiritual welfare of their respective congregations” as their American counterparts must.\(^{34}\)

This stagnant, monopolistic supply is one rather quantitative depiction of the British religious market that leads logically to both the conceptualization and the justification of recent scholars’ “secularization thesis.” Derived from painstaking analysis of years of Europe’s church attendance and religious adherence, the secularization hypothesis claims that Europe’s citizens and entire society are slowly but surely moving towards an utter lack of religious iconography and away from even the slightest semblance of religious presence in everyday life. This is evidenced by the declining numbers of church attendance in recent decades and even from national polls in which more and more Europeans—and Britons in particular—claim to have “no affiliation with religion.” It’s a widely believed hypothesis, one that leads famous and influential thinkers such as French family sociologist Martine Segalen to claim that European nations are becoming simply “post-religion societies.”

I do not dispute the merits and conclusions of the secularization thesis; it seems impossible to. Based simply on membership and attendance statistics if nothing else, it’s clear that something serious has happened. Yet the secularization thesis rests much on perceived demand-side decline, that “Europe’s religious institutions, actions, and consciousness have lost their social significance.”\(^{35}\) Proponents point to industrialization, urbanization, and a conglomerate of constant yet gradual forces propelling the world into post-modernism and together signaling the unavoidable downfall of religion there. The pervasive view that the evolution of European society towards an embrace of science and modernity will gradually sentence the “death of religion” representing the future of all societies across the globe—the ubiquitous progressiveness of Europe has simply led them to become the first on the globe to literally not need religion. Inevitably, they argue, secularization is an “absorbing state—that one achieved, it is irreversible and institutionalized, instilling mystical immunity.”\(^{36}\) They claim that the increasing lack of depth or substance in religious services illustrates a decline in public commitment to religion that foreshadows an imminent, rapid decay, and there is nothing that can (or should) be done to correct this—it’s simply the natural path of an increasingly enlightened global society. With this perspective, the now-thriving American churches would explained by the idea of “American exceptionalism”—that the American deviation from this so-called norm is a “case of arrested development, whose evolution has been delayed” and, soon, American religious demand will

\(^{34}\) Finke and Stark, 19  
\(^{35}\) Ibid, 230  
\(^{36}\) Ibid, 230
decline just as it has in Britain.\textsuperscript{37}

VI. **Britain: The True ‘Exceptional Case’?**

Let us first return to Adam Smith’s discussion of religion, with something to keep in mind: addressing state-sustained European churches, he warned that “in general, any religious sect, when it has once enjoyed for a century or two the security of a legal establishment, finds itself incapable of making any vigorous defense against any new sect which chooses to attack its doctrine or discipline.”\textsuperscript{38}

For centuries since its founding, the Church of England consistently enjoyed high membership, attendance, and tithing from the citizens of Great Britain: this was the period where a traditional—arguably stagnant—church aligned with a similarly traditional society, enabling the majority of Britons to feel that the Anglican Church was relevant to their lives. The first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century seemed no different—in fact, general enthusiasm and affection for the church reached an all-time high. Between “1945 and 1958 there were surges of British church membership, Sunday school enrollment, baptisms and religious solemnization of marriage, and the vigorous reassertion of traditional values.”\textsuperscript{39} “Religion mattered and mattered deeply in British society”—as in American society—“in the 1950s.”\textsuperscript{40} The Church of England, having remained essentially the same in almost every aspect since its beginnings, felt safe and comfortable with its position within the state.

But the cultural shifts of the 1960s onward facilitated an ever-widening gap between British culture and religion that ultimately correlated with a sharp dropoff in church attendance. This is, of course, the basis for the secularization hypothesis, although there’s a distinction to make here: secularization, although valid, wasn’t a lingering or drawn-out affair—statistics show that Britons lost interest in the Church quickly following its mid-century peak. As prominent British sociologist Grace Davie notes, “it is not exaggerated to conclude that between 1960 and 1985 the Church of England was effectively reduced to not much more than half its previous size.”\textsuperscript{41} Callum Brown summarizes that “it took several centuries to convert Britain to Christianity, but it took less than forty years for the country to forsake it.”\textsuperscript{42} This fact is augmented by statistics: in 1990, 13\% of Britons attended church once a week; 56\% never attended.\textsuperscript{43} By the year 2000, that number had dropped to the single digits: only an astonishing 8\% went to weekly church attendance.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 221
\textsuperscript{38} Finke and Stark, 52
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 6
\textsuperscript{41} Davie, 53
\textsuperscript{42} Brown, 1
\textsuperscript{43} Davie, 9
services. “Anglican church authorities” in the UK “every week now deal with ‘down-sizing’: the disposal of church buildings by selling them off as carpet showrooms or for conversion into flats, while older cathedrals and ministers survive by transformation into heritage sites for historical-religious tourism” like that seen in the abundant gift shops and tour buses flanking Liverpool’s two enormous, and infamous, cathedrals.

It is at this moment in a parallel timeline which the differences between the monopolistic and competitive religious markets become truly noticeable: while in the US, decline of the mainline denominations encouraged the entry of new ‘firms’ into the market and spurred intense competition, realized in the form of changing styles of worship and ultimately the megachurches of today, in the UK, the Church of England refused to evolve or adapt with society, leaving it an outlier as social change became more and more profound. In Britain, Callum Brown argues, “the cycle of inter-generational renewal of Christian affiliation, a cycle which had for so many centuries tied the people to the churches and to Christian moral benchmarks, was permanently disrupted in the ‘swinging sixties.” I agree that this is true—but what is different is that this same kind of disruption had the potential to happen in the US, yet was prevented by churches that recognized the need for innovation and change to retain the hearts and minds of the people.

I traveled to Great Britain this summer expecting to learn more about the success (or lack thereof) which American megachurches were having in their attempts to take their evangelical mission overseas. I arrived in London skeptical of the degree to which Britons would embrace such a uniquely and stereotypically American phenomenon, but of all possible emerging ‘competitors’ in the British religious market, American megachurches’ almost limitless financial resources and manpower appeared to certainly give it an edge that no other had. Based on that fact alone, I expected that this would be the most viable way in which the Anglican monopoly could be broken, and Britons would be drawn back into (admittedly much more updated, modern and socially relevant) churches. As I traveled through the country, visiting all manner of churches possible to prove this hypothesis—Anglican, Catholic, and everything in between—I quickly learned that some things they had in common, and some things were radically different, but above all, my expectations were turned upside down.

First let me explain the foundations of what I found. Just based simply on the variation in the churches I encountered, it’s impossible to say that there are no other forms of Christianity in Great Britain besides the Anglican Church. There are a multitude of very small independent churches, and there are also plenty of Catholic churches, some of which rival in size and stature the Anglican churches in the same diocese (see Liverpool’s twin cathedrals as an example). However, despite the fact that their odds have admittedly increased with the recent Anglican decline, alternative churches have faced and still do face serious comparative advantage problems as they try to take advantage of that downfall—not simply a dearth of resources, but

44 Brown, 3
45 Brown, 4
also Britons’ long-held association of any form of religion with their increasingly unpopular official Church.

None of these independent ‘start-up’ churches are more than 50 years old; in fact, most of them are brand-new, having started within the last decade or two, and they most closely resemble megachurches in the US—except for their size. With at most around three hundred to four hundred members, they appear to be similarly non-denominational, similarly modern, and similarly casual, yet stunted in their growth. Why? The presence of the Anglican Church in the UK is the defining factor in their success (or lack thereof): even with the decreasing social importance placed upon religion, the persisting image of the Anglican church as the primary definition of British Christianity, in addition to its extensive and established resource base, has impeded the ability of smaller churches—that start out typically as only a man or a group with a mission—to gain traction or receive attention within communities. This problem of asymmetric competition is further exacerbated by the very social disattachment from church that has grown unabated since the 1960s: any British church, even the Church of England itself, now faces an uphill battle against time—because it’s been decades since most Britons stopped attending church, long enough that their children, and their children’s children, might never have stepped foot in a church at all. Even in a less secular society than Great Britain’s, it’s much more difficult to draw the unchurched into a spiritual environment for the first time than to convince those whose attendance has simply lapsed—and it’s an even more daunting task for a new, un-established church with limited resources.

It was for this reason why I expected American efforts to establish megachurches in the UK would succeed: their extensive resources could afford them a double advantage. We can assume that, like in the US, modern worship services that are more in line with changing society are more appealing as a whole to British religious consumers; if Britons would go to a church at all, it’s safe to assume they would prefer one that is relevant to their lives, because it was irrelevancy itself that caused the decline of the Anglican Church to begin with. Add the financial resources of American megachurches, and as long as they were careful to mind the cultural gaps that do exist between British and American society, American efforts would seem to be the best possible competition against the persisting Anglican monopoly. Yet this is not the case. The extent of successful US involvement in British Christianity, except for a handful of unique cases like the spread of Calvary Chapels to Britain and France, has so far been limited to their financial support of and partnership with those burgeoning independent churches which are homegrown in the UK—allowing them to pose more serious competition with the Anglican Church.

These independent churches seem in so many ways to be similar to American megachurches, yet they have one important characteristic that belies simultaneously the reason for their success and for the failure of early American mission efforts in the UK: their indigenousness. Even though, in many cases, they have patterned their services and church structure after the megachurch model, the fact that these churches are homegrown, started by
inspired Britons, altogether avoids the social implementation problem faced by churches transplanted from America. Why is this ‘native’ nature, or at least the perception of it (as many of these churches are at least in some way tied to American groups), so crucial? It’s simply a problem of a stereotype that’s so far been impossible to overcome: what I found to be the highly negative opinion of Christianity as associated with the political “religious right” in the United States—Britons simply don’t want their churches, or the people who attend them, to be like that in any way, although they do embrace the style of worship found in those churches.

Let’s now look at the Anglican Church. I expected to find that the Anglican Church, still entrenched in the norm under which it’s operated for thousands of years, would simply be undergoing its slow downfall, a testament to the long-term effects of religious stagnation in the face of increasingly legitimate competition. Yet what I found were the surprisingly dramatic effects of its twofold impetus to change: first is the increasing popularity of these independent churches; second was a revelation about the impending loss of their monopoly. Upon Prince Charles’ ascendancy to the throne, he is expected to officially separate church and state, rescinding the Anglican Church’s financial support and sociopolitical status as the ‘official’ religion of the Kingdom. It is a decision purportedly based on his belief that all religions are equal, and that none should be singled out by a ruler; regardless of his reasons, this is something that has become widely known in the community of Anglican leaders, and an apparent inevitability which has sent them into a frenzy of activity.

In an attempt to sustain an unofficial monopoly on the minds of the people once its official control is lost, they have realized the urgent need to change to be more in tune with those people. These widespread efforts to “re-church” the indigenous population have taken many forms in recent years, some more successful than others. But underlying my more detailed upcoming discussion of them is an overarching theory to keep in mind, articulated repeatedly by the progressive Anglican pastors I spoke with all over the country, that ties together the need for innovation as the principal reason why a competitive religious market encourages the vibrancy that has, until now, been absent from Anglican Christianity in the United Kingdom.

Given their apparent aversion to some stereotypical aspects of American Christianity, I was surprised to find that the leaders of the Anglican Church seem to be gradually acknowledging the idea that American Christianity—or at least its innovative and competitive nature—is the way church is ‘supposed to be,’ and in doing so, they have fundamentally altered the very theology of the stagnant Church that has existed for the past 300 years. For all that time, the Church was viewed as something in society that wasn’t supposed to change—while society changed around it, it was supposed to be a rock or anchor, keeping people in line with ‘true’ spirituality, the way it was intended to be—an argument reminiscent of the recently deteriorating mainline denominations in the United States. But the competition inherent in American

46 Steve Hollinghurst (Sheffield Church Army), Personal Interview, August 12, 2009
47 Alice Morgan (Church Mission Society), Personal Interview, August 15, 2009
48 Ibid
Christianity ensured that, despite the objections of a few, innovation—and not stagnation—was the norm. Without that competition, a pathological stagnation was legitimized and justified as a positive trait in the Church of England’s clergy until very recently, the product of Adam Smith’s ‘lazy monopoly’ on religion because the Church simply didn’t need to reach out to the citizens.49

The downfall of that mentality, likewise, resulted from the clearly impending loss of their monopoly: accompanying the realization that change was necessary was the legitimizing realization that church in Britain, since its first inception as the Church of England, had been acting directly contrary to not just the rest of Christendom but to the actual intentions of the Bible itself. Monopolistic Britain, not the competitive religious market of the United States, has been the anomaly in Christian history.50 The very reason for the success of the early Christian church lay in its willingness and ability to adapt to each new society or culture it came in contact with, a mandate its leaders of the time viewed as both Biblical in origin and crucial for its survival. Among other things, this tradition explains why, as the church expanded, we celebrate Easter and Christmas when we do—not as arbitrary holidays, but as holy days centered around the original pagan festivals of the Roman Empire. State support of the church—which occurred with the establishment of the Anglican Church in the UK—gives that church enough stability that it no longer needs to pay attention to the ways in which the world around it changes.

Steve Hollinghurst, one of the directors of Church Army, a research group funded by the Anglican Church to seek out exactly what to change and how to do it, analogized this paradigm shift to the experience of Marks and Spencer’s, a superstore similar to Wal-Mart and omnipresent in Britain, during the past half-century. For decades, Marks & Spencer’s offered traditional food and traditional clothing—inexpensive, yet very plain, very conservative, and with little variety. Until the 1960s, this was a strategy that served them well; they expanded, opening stores all over Britain, and became one of the foremost and best-loved such stores in the UK. But suddenly they began experiencing huge losses; they had to close stores and, at one point, faced bankruptcy. Their dire situation stemmed from Britain’s sudden cultural change; Britons were no longer interested in buying and wearing the same thing as everyone else—they wanted to be unique, modern, and individual. Marks and Spencer’s experimented with a new corporate philosophy, one of dynamism and perpetual adaptation—they watched fashion trends closely, and quickly brought the latest designs to their stores. They applied the same strategy to food, responding to increased consumer desire for organic produce, easy-to-make meals, and international cuisine. Today, Marks and Spencer’s has reported off-the-charts profits, and the company is doing better than ever. It’s this kind of innovation, Steve Hollinghurst explained to me, that the Anglican Church is learning how to mimic.

49 Steve Hollinghurst, Interview
50 Ibid
VIII. The Nuts and Bolts: Similarities, Differences, and Methods of Outreach to an Unchurched Britain

I found the churches I visited in the UK each trying, in their own way, to fulfill Michael Frost’s exhortation to “live out the gospel within its cultural context rather than continuing to perpetuate an institutional commitment apart from its cultural context”—this fact alone, aside from the many ways of implementing this, is the single most dramatic change that has occurred in the recent history of British Christianity.\(^{51}\) Let’s first look at the independent ‘start-up’ churches I visited: how are they approaching church in the UK? Renewal Christian Centre is a relatively large church in Solihull, a medium-sized town in the West Midlands of England that encompasses both the most prosperous and most impoverished areas in the country. The 1990s closing of a large automobile manufacturing plant slightly outside the city center caused much job loss and strife in the area, but the old factory was purchased by the church as its first location. RCC is Methodist, associated with the Free Methodist movement that’s linked to independent churches of Methodist origin in the United States. Like its American cousins, it has a job ministry, a shelter that provides food for the homeless, and an extensive youth program. It began with humble roots: its founder and current pastor advertised the beginning of a new church in the local newspaper, and it took a long time to gain its following of nearly two thousand people today (one of, if not the, largest independent churches in the UK). Also like American churches, its increasing size caused some discontent within the congregation, which was wholly unused to a church body as large as it was. To combat this problem, they used the small-group model synonymous with the American megachurch: often called cell groups or ‘connect groups’ in British churches, they split up the congregation into groups of ten to twenty people who meet weekly, get to know one another, and serve as their ‘family within a family’ in the church—it’s something done at every independent church I visited in the UK. Renewal Christian also has been trying to expand as its success has grown: they have a live feed of their services in Stratford-on-Avon, about an hour away, and have established small church plants internationally, in Ireland, Bulgaria, Thailand, and India.

Here is where they differ from megachurches in one unique way: succession planning, and the emphasis they place on a larger institutional framework. They believe that independence is dangerous; they see beyond the enormous popularity many notable American megachurches have enjoyed due to highly personable and charismatic ‘maverick’ pastors to their future without those leaders, foreseeing their eventual decline. It is for this very reason why they place huge emphasis on the mentoring of future church leaders that can take over for their current pastor, and why they believe that a fully independent church will ultimately fail—it needs a hierarchy and institution to provide a competent, reliable successor.

Next I visited Abundant Life Church in Bradford, a city that’s been plagued by drugs, prostitution, and gang-related violence since the loss of its steel industry in the 1980s. Abundant Life was hosting RockNations, its yearly youth conference, over the weekend I was there, and it was a high-energy event full of rock music and speakers that were meant to inspire the thousand or so young people who attended. Abundant Life, self-described by one of its pastors, Owen Crane, as an “enclave” within the greater Bradford community, tries through this yearly conference to open itself up to even the worst parts of the city, an effort continued by its outreach programs tailored to “call the city back to God.”

Yet another entire segment of discussion must be devoted to the efforts of the Anglican Church, which, in conjunction with those of the independent churches described above, seem to have at least a decent chance at rejuvenating British churchgoing. First that must be addressed here are the efforts of the Church Mission Society in Oxford, just one of the groups that have started to look at why the Anglican Church deteriorated and how to fix it. Alice Morgan and the others whom I spoke with while there pointed to its lack of response to a fundamental paradigm shift in society; while the Church of England had focused on replicating a stagnant model, it should have changed as it grew, a consumer product like any other. Morgan said that there has been a partial shift from “maintenance to mission” but that this shift needs to be fully actualized, and that the Church can’t deal with its potential ‘death’ by reaching out to the rest of the world—it has to reach inward. It is a problem illustrated by the simple fact that there are far more practicing Anglicans in Nigeria than there are in Britain to begin with—this is because, when the Anglican Church first noticed decline at home, it seemed easier to transplant new churches to places that would be more easily accepting of it (“from the West to the rest,” so to speak), rather than to change their domestic approach to church. But here I can draw a parallel with the experience of Crystal Cathedral, that famous megachurch in Anaheim—if you devote all of your resources and attention to outreach abroad, even for the most valiant of reasons, and despite the most notable successes you may have there, you’ll inevitably face exacerbated problems at home. Some Anglican leaders, she admits, are still resistant to the change others have realized must take place—countering that a consumer church isn’t a genuine church—but they are being gradually won over by simple statistics.

Michael Moynagh, an Anglican advisor and academic at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford’s premier religious studies college, is one such leader. After coming to this realization himself, he has devoted himself to new models expressing Anglican Christianity and their implementation. He focuses on the need to capitalize on what he calls “implicit or vicarious belief”—the reservoir of belief in Christianity or Christian framework that still exists in Europe, and in the UK, that manifests itself by the fact that people still get married in churches, and attend funerals in

52 Owen Crane (Abundant Life Church, Bradford), Personal Interview, August 20, 2009
53 Alice Morgan, Interview
54 Ibid
55 Ibid
churches. The importance of incorporating diversity and relaxation in the Anglican tradition is something that he has encouraged: a “mixed economy” of religion that retains an institutional structure, but doesn’t get tied up in the exact specifications of canon. Under his watch, Wycliffe Hall has pioneered new church planting models: while in the 1990s, the Anglican church tried unsuccessfully to buffer its decline by planting churches in areas that were perfect copies of an original successful one, new models focus on the importance of contextual, or ‘bottom-up’ planting: they utilize community mission, where leaders are sent out into the world as individuals not to reinforce paradigms but to draw in those around them, “combining scale with micromanagement.” He cites Neil Cole’s “Organic Church” model in Sheffield, which focuses on the importance of getting beyond the church fringe and planting churches amongst those with no religious background. He admits, however, that the Church is polarized. Some within the Anglican community dislike this ‘bottom-up’ idea, saying it lacks the infrastructure and institution necessary for long-term success.

The Mission-Shaped Church Report, published in 2004, and the following Report of Church Army’s Theology of Evangelism one year later detail these problems, solutions, and the overarching new direction for the Anglican Church. Fundamentally, these reports verbalize the unspoken knowledge that the UK has become “a foreign mission field”—re-evangelizing Britain is now a cross-cultural mission. It details the Anglican Church’s acknowledgement that “church must reflect culture”—for how else, ultimately, can it connect to the people? Yet there still exists the danger of church becoming just culture—there must be a palpable underlying base of Christianity. They focus also on the “passive receivers’ problem”—the need to really involve churchgoers in the religious experience, making them committed and discipled to reach out to others and perpetuate their faith, for without that aspect, “even the most radical movement conceivable becomes boring.” This method is summarized as the “incarnational church model,” recognizing that individual churches are most successful if they are founded by believers in their own way, as a natural outgrowth of the local culture and its needs—and if those churches continue to respond to how those needs change.

As stated in Inside Out, Church Army’s 2004 Working Report, “effective mission and evangelism (and therefore authentic church) happen when the church is ready to be turned inside

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56 Mike Moynaugh (Oxford Wycliffe Hall), Personal Interview, August 9, 2009
57 Mike Moynaugh, Interview
58 Ibid
59 Ibid
60 Ibid
62 Ibid, 15
63 Ibid, 19
64 Steve Hollinghurst, Interview
65 Church Army Working Party, 31
Church Army states one of its fundamental tenets as “pioneering willingness to embrace fresh models of ministry, to be responsive to changes and needs in society.” Ben Edson, a Church Army evangelist, relays his experiences in youth ministry in Manchester, where he was commissioned to “explore an alternative to traditional church.” Sanctus 1, “a Christian community for a variety of young adults,” is “engaged in a journey of creative exploration into faith, worship, evangelism, friendship and lifestyle.” As Edson says, “culture is changing and the church needs to adapt with it, finding other models that complement what already exists.” Church Army focuses on “the importance of transformation and context.” They challenge the Church of England to be a “ministry that involves risk”—to live in “a tension of relating on one hand to local culture, a moving target, and to an established authoritarian church on the other.”

Alice Morgan at the Church Mission Society was only one of the many British religious leaders whom I spoke with regarding Alpha, the Anglican Church’s supposedly highly successful outreach program that it pioneered in the early 2000s, and its benefits and drawbacks in implementation. Alpha is a course that anyone, at any point in their life and with any faith background—it is, in fact, targeted to those who have never attended a church—can begin; it runs for eight weeks throughout the year at Anglican churches all over the UK, and its creators at Holy Trinity Brompton, a famously pioneering Anglican church in London, credit it with the making of thousands of new believers across the country, thanks to an aggressive marketing campaign and a “come-as-you-are” mentality. The course is administered in questions—from the basic “Why am I here?” it builds up to more complicated questions of theology, making it appropriate for people of varying religious backgrounds.

However, I heard from many about the negatives of the Alpha program, which Steve Hollinghurst and his team at Church Army are working on correcting. They have observed what they believe is the plateau of effectiveness that this kind of program can have, and expect that, if it isn’t tweaked yet again, it will begin to have less of an impact. This is not only a problem of necessary innovation but also of an excessively programmatic approach to religion, they believe: it’s difficult to make people of all different “faith places” feel comfortable, and a program like Alpha, although it starts all attendees off at the same place, gives too little allowance for variation in their life stages or personality types. They advocate a more individual-focused approach to outreach, representing a larger shift to organic, rather than institutional, church models and planting. Furthermore, in discussing the Alpha program, Michael Moynagh of Wycliffe Hall brought up the “revolving door” effect that American megachurches have had to deal with: people might be initially interested and come to the church (or the Alpha program).

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66 Ibid, 40
67 Church Army Working Party, 15
68 Ibid, 24
69 Ibid 24
70 Ibid 24
71 Ibid 26
72 Ibid 76
They might even join the church, or graduate from the Alpha program. But then what? With megachurches, their immense size was the issue—it was simply too easy for individuals to get lost. With Alpha, though, the problem has been that there is no ‘beta’—there is nowhere to go after finishing the course. Perhaps, as an attendee, you feel more in touch with your spirituality; perhaps you are even encouraged to begin attending a church regularly. But so much of what the Alpha course did was to connect those people with others like them, and once the program is over, there’s nothing connecting them. Individuals, like those in a megachurch, are again left “floating,” are still the seekers they were before. It’s this sustainability problem that Anglican leaders like Moynagh have now realized they must correct.

The “backdoor” problem is one that St. Thomas Church Philadelphia, in Sheffield, has intentionally made a focal point of its ministry efforts as the church has grown and established satellite locations. As Lindsay Locher, director of their “missional communities” program, explained to me, they immediately involve new members in small groups for “belonging and discipleship,” allowing anyone who desires to become a leader within their small community to do so, with “vision and values” instead of social engineering. They believe in the necessity of “re-evangelizing” Britain—not just coaxing people into a short-lived, passive relationship with the church. They try to relate to everyone, not just the middle-class educated people who often attend their services, but to everyone in the area.

VII. Conclusions: What Happens Next?
“The same pressures that threaten the continued survival of some churches, disturb the confidence of others, and devalue the meaning of them all can actually be helpful in providing an opening for new possibilities.”

Facing bankruptcy and the threat of losing its official position upon the ascent of Prince Charles as king, the Church of England is consciously attempting to reinvent itself. Additionally, it has noticed the competition from the independent start-up churches that are, slowly but surely, making inroads upon a market we no longer can consider a true monopoly. It is thus reasonable to expect, in this gradual transition to British religious diversity hundreds of years overdue, that the ensuing innovation and adaptation could contribute to the reversal of secularization in the United Kingdom. And, if in the coming decades the Anglican Church continues to embrace change, it has the potential to not only survive but thrive. Its modern “incarnational church model” that I witnessed firsthand is proudly indigenous, yet surprisingly analogous to what I saw in megachurches across America, an acknowledgement that church must reflect local culture and that contextual, “bottom-up” networks, rather than traditional “top-down” hierarchy, best accomplishes this—even if it includes the hearty blend of rock music, casual attire, and small groups visible in any American megachurch.
