

## Has religion really been in decline since the end of the nineteenth century?

It has often been assumed that religion declined as modern industrial cities developed and that church attendance was a characteristic of villages and towns rather than large urban conurbations. However, recent research has suggested that a simple story of urban religious decline does not reflect the real wide range of variation and fluctuation in religiosity.

**Look.** What structural/architectural evidence can you find for past religious energy? How many churches are there? The foundation stones and dedication tablets of parish churches will indicate when new Anglican parishes began. Alternatively, what structural evidence is there for religious decline? Is there evidence of a significant number of church closures and can you find out when these occurred?

**Listen.** You may well be able to interview individual clergy or older lay members of individual congregations. What stories can clergy tell you about their predecessors? What can they tell you about the religious history of the area? What is their perception of growth or decline? If lay members talk in terms of the 'good old days' try to find out to what extent this reflects nostalgia or reality. For more information on oral history see the Building on History website for further details.

**Read.** The following may be useful:

Rex Walford, *The growth of New London in suburban Middlesex (1918–1945) and the response of the Church of England*, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007.

Jeffrey Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth 1870-1930*, Oxford: OUP, 1982.

Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization, 1800-2000*, London: Routledge, 2009.

Sarah Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark, c. 1880-1939*, Oxford: OUP, 1999.

Jeremy Morris, *Religion and Urban Change: Croydon, 1840-1914*, Woodbridge: Boydell, 1992.

**Research.** There are various potentially fruitful ways of measuring levels of religiosity. One approach is to examine church attendances. Here it might be useful to contrast attendances indicated in the **1851 Religious Census**, the *British Weekly* census of 1886 (published as *The Religious Censuses of London* in 1888) and the *London Daily News* census (<http://www.archive.org/details/religiouslifeofl00mudi>). Other possible sources include the **Register of Services** and **electoral rolls** of individual parishes (many of these are held at the **London Metropolitan Archives**). For **clerical** and **lay** perceptions of religiosity in individual parishes the visitation returns (held at **Lambeth Palace Library** can be revealing, as, after 1919, can **PCC minute books**, many of which are also held at the **London Metropolitan Archives**.

See the Building on History website for further details.

This document is online at:

<http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/building-on-history-project/resource-guide/themes/decline.htm>