

Contemporary religion and church issues: Lessons from William Kiffin

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1) Introduction

This paper summarizes my comments delivered at the 2022 Adult General Meeting of the Japan Baptist Convention (August 27th), in response to Professor Onishi Haruki (Tohoku Gakuin University)'s lecture "From glove maker to trader — William Kiffin, a pioneer Baptist pastor".¹

The purpose of my comments is to first briefly introduce the major trends in religion in contemporary society, focusing on the church situation in Western Europe and the Americas, and then to consider some points about what we can learn from William Kiffin.

2) Situation in Western Europe

Regarding the situation in the churches of Western Europe, according to the results by the Pew Research Center conducted in 2017 in 15 countries, roughly 91% of the residents were baptized, 81% were raised as Christians, and 71% of them identified as

1 Both delivered in Japanese as 「手袋製造工から貿易商人へ — 初代バプテスト教会牧師ウィリアム・キッフィン」 (lecture by Professor Onishi Haruki), and 「現代社会と教会の課題 — 大西先生の講演を受けて」 (my response).

Christians. Yet, only 22% attend worship services at least once a month.²

3) Situation in North America

As for the situation of the churches in the United States, a survey from 2007 to 2019 first showed that the percentage of adults who identified as Christians decreased from 77% to 65%, while the percentage of religiously unaffiliated people increased from 16% to 23%.³

There appears to be a generation gap, with 84% of those born between 1928 and 1945 (Silent Generation) being Christian and 10% being unaffiliated, but among the successive generations we observe a gradual decrease of Christians, as well as an increase in the percentage of unaffiliated. Thus, for those born between 1981 and 1996 (Millennials), 49% are Christians, while the unaffiliated account for 40%.⁴

Moreover, we also observe generational differences in terms of religious participation. In the 1928-1945 generation, for example, 50% attended church services weekly, while in the 1981-1996 generation, only 22% attend weekly services.

4) Situation in Latin America

In 1910, 94% of the population in Latin America was Roman Catholic. In 2014, the percentage was 69%. On the other hand, Protestants, who were 1% in 1910,

2 Pew Research Center (2018): “Being Christian in Western Europe”.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/> (accessed July 22, 2022).

3 Pew Research Center (2019): “In U.S., smaller share of adults identify as Christians, while religious ‘nones’ have grown”.
https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/pf_10-17-19_rdd_update-00-020/ (accessed July 22, 2022).

4 Pew Research Center (2019): “Large generation gap in American religion”.
https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/pf_10-17-19_rdd-update-new2/ (accessed July 22, 2022).

increased to 19% in 2014, while religiously unaffiliated have increased from 1% to 8% as well.⁵

Although the situation might vary from country to country, we can observe general trends in the entire region. One change is the growth of Protestantism. Another issue is that even though Protestantism is growing, from these surveys we cannot see the internal diversity of Protestant bodies in Latin America. It is true that the number of Protestants is increasing, but in my view, converts often move from one church to another, so it is hard to confirm a steady growth within a particular Protestant organization.

5) About the increasing trend of non-religious people

a) Issues of secularization

The trend in recent years is an increase in religious unaffiliated and those who identify as non-religious. Since the 1970s, the number of non-religious people has been slowly increasing, with a trend in Western Europe and North America, and we should not ignore this fact.⁶

One reason for this is the issue of secularization. As we saw earlier, attendance at church services has declined. This is a problem for all religions in general, not just Christian churches. Basically, it is generally accepted in the sociology of religion that modern society has become secularized, although there are many exceptions and therefore it is difficult to generalize about the religious situation in the world.

This may be seen in Japan as well. Here, we are seeing a crisis in traditional religious organizations. This has become a problem not only in Protestant churches, but

5 Pew Research Center (2014): “Religion in Latin America”.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/> (accessed July 22, 2022).

6 Thanks to Professor Kanamaru Eiko (Seinan Gakuin University) for introducing me a recent work on this issue from both a social scientist and believer’s perspective: *The Nones: Where they came from, who they are, and where they are going*, by Ryan P. Burge (Fortress Press, 2021).

also in other religions. There is a problem of successors to Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. The new religions that were popular in the 20th century have also seen a downward trend in the number of believers in large religious groups since the 1970s. Overall, there is a crisis in religious groups in Japan as well.⁷ This means that the social influence of religion is declining. And such is the prediction of the secularization thesis: The role of religion in society declines, as the modernization process advances.

b) The emergence of spirituality

However, various criticisms have emerged against this secularization theory since the second half of the 20th century. One reason for this is the claim that there is a resurgence of religion in society, and one example is the fact that more and more people are identifying themselves as “spiritual”. Also, we can see an increase in the number of people who do not belong to a specific religious group but who have some degree of religious faith.

For example, according to the results of the Pew Research Center, most people in Western Europe identified as non-practicing Christians believe in God but not necessarily according to the Bible. When looking at this region’s percentages of people who believe in God according to the Bible, those who believe in a higher power, and those who do not believe in any higher power, we see that the largest percentage (38%) is still about those who believe in a higher power.⁸

Next, in the United States, as of 2012, 59% of people identified as both religious and spiritual, but that number has decreased recently to 48%. By contrast, in 2012, those who identified as “spiritual but not religious” represented only 19%, increasing to 27%

7 See Reader, I. (2012). “Secularisation, R.I.P.? Nonsense! The ‘Rush Hour Away from the Gods’ and the Decline of Religion in Contemporary Japan”, *Journal of Religion in Japan*, 1(1), 7-36. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/221183412X628370>

8 Pew Research Center (2018). “Most non-practicing Christians in Europe believe in God, but not necessarily as described in the Bible”, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/pf_05-29-18_religion-western-europe-00-03/ (accessed July 22, 2022).

in 2017.⁹ This spiritual but not religious phenomenon is a trend that has been seen since the 1970s, when it is becoming common place to find people who do not belong to a specific religious organization, yet they are interested in spiritual matters.

Religious Studies scholar Susumu Shimazono, describes this phenomenon as “new spirituality movements and cultures”, pointing out, along various scholars, that such a global phenomenon can be seen in Japan as well. Especially since the 1980s, various books have been published under the label of the “Spiritual World”, and at some time occurred various ‘religious booms’ containing such ‘spiritual’ themes like yoga, meditation, meditation, psychic powers, and the occult. After the Aum Shinrikyo incident, the label “Spiritual World” has largely been replaced by terms ‘spiritual’, ‘spirituality’, ‘therapy’ and ‘healing’.¹⁰

British sociologist Paul Heelas points out that a shift from religion to spirituality is taking place in contemporary society.¹¹ Heelas’ “spiritual revolution” is an expression which describes a change from religion — that is, living according to the external authority and expectations of the religious group, to spirituality — life according to one’s own authority and self-expression.

6) Lessons from William Kiffin (1616-1701)

Now I would like to close my comments by reflecting on some of the lessons we could learn from William Kiffin, vis-à-vis the challenges that the church is facing in contemporary society.

9 Pew Research Center (2017). “More Americans now say they’re spiritual but not religious”, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/> (accessed July 22th, 2022).

10 See: Shimazono Susumu (2005). *From salvation to spirituality: Popular religious movements in modern Japan*. Trans Pacific Press.

11 Heelas, P. et al. (2005). *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Wiley-Blackwell.

a) Role of lay believers and popular evangelism

From professor Onishi's lecture, we learned that Kiffin was actively preaching in the peripheral urban areas, instead of the city center. So we may assume that these areas were populated by the common people, instead of the elites. To reach out to the working class, Kiffin preferred the ministry of a lay preacher. And he insisted in involving lay believers in the leadership and of church activities. It is also interesting to learn that Kiffin understood church dynamism in terms of the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God, instead of relying on dry intellectualism.¹²

Looking at today's situation, although we can still see a number of churches in city downtown, the suburban areas are growing in population, yet church mission there is quite limited or even inexistent. Needless to say, with the current situation of decreasing number of pastors, we need to involve more the lay members in church evangelism, in order to reach out these huge population in the peripheral areas. And although I do not support an anti-intellectual approach, many of us may have the feeling that we need a special help from heaven to carry out such a gigantic mission plan.

b) The ideal of Freedom

We also learned that freedom was one of the central ideals in Kiffin's life. To him, freedom was necessary in matters of faith and conscience, and even in such practical issues as worship style and commerce. In his search for freedom and truth, Kiffin transitioned from the Anglican Church to separatist groups, and eventually moved on to contribute to the foundation of the Baptist movement.

Freedom leads to new exchanges among different people. The search for freedom also calls for both courage and humility. We need courage to be open to different ideas, different customs, different values. We also need humility to admit that our own resources, our own heritage, our own practices are not complete in themselves. That's where we need the freedom to search in others what we feel we lack.

12 For his lecture, Professor Onishi introduced his book 『海洋貿易とイギリス革命：新興貿易商人の宗教と自由』（法政大学出版局，2019）。

c) Personal piety

Finally, I found it very interesting to learn that Kiffin had a strong devout life. Even from the days he was still belonged to the Anglican Church, Kiffin used to attend prayer meetings and Bible study meetings very early in the morning.

This could sound somewhat paradoxical, because Kiffin was a practical person, interested in down-to-earth things like commerce, so I wonder whether Kiffin continued his zeal and devotion during his business life. Certainly, it is in the fire of personal devotion that much evangelistic zeal is born and maintained. I'm sure many in the church are feeling the deep longing for a spiritual life of personal intimacy with God.

And this is a universal longing that is manifested in contemporary society in the different forms of 'spirituality', which proliferate despite the effects of secularization. Perhaps, we should begin like Kiffin did: Kindling the fire of the small altar of the individual's heart, and the Christian home, and then the local church, and then the outreach programs.