

14th November 2022

Secular

**"From that day to this
I have thought of myself as a wholly secular person."**

Sir Salman Rushdie, *In God We Trust*

Scotland became a secular country before we realised it, and when we did, we struggled to do anything about it.

In 1994, my church statistics told an interesting story. That August, 70 children, aged around 5, were admitted to Primary 1 in the local school, with the same catchment area as my parish. I checked 1989 in the church's Baptismal Register, and discovered I'd baptised none of these children. Even with the multi-cultural nature of the school, population movement and other Christian denominations, I would have expected *some* children to have been baptised – if only for family, traditional or even superstitious reasons. But even those loose ties to the Church had gone. I'd had a few baptisms, of course, but only from "church" families, people who were already part of the worshipping Christian fellowship. That was a strong indication of a secular country, of the severing of even the most tenuous of ties people had with religion. But my fifteen years as a hospice chaplain told a different story. People had not lost their fundamental spirituality. The search for meaning, purpose and fulfilment was as strong as ever.

What happened to create such a dichotomy, the separation of the secular and the spiritual? There are many complexities in an exploration of that, from a Church and societal perspective. But I'll take a stab at it from the Church's side. If the "non baptisms" of thirty years ago were an indication of people moving away from the Church, the Church as a religious institution failed to follow them in their leaving, expecting them to come back if the Church "modernised" itself, while not understanding that the ties had been well and truly broken – and perhaps for good.

The Church should be where people are, with all the uncertainties and implications of that. Might that mean the Church leaves behind cherished familiarities and starts again? Perhaps. But if that happens, we need to work on creating new and stronger ties that aren't so easily broken, perhaps elastic enough always to bring us back to the principles of the Gospel, while allowing us to stretch out further than ever before.

A prayer for today

Lord, in the Church, help me to move with the times – and with the people. Amen

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