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BRITISH CHRISTIANITY ISN'T DYING. IT'S SLEEPING. EVANGELISM CAN AWAKEN IT.

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British Christianity is in pretty poor shape. A UK Social Attitudes survey has revealed that, for the first time in history, more people now regard themselves as having 'no religion' than being a Christian. A cultural shift is to blame: people raised in the faith but who don't practice it have ceased to identify with it. In other words, they're just being honest. Church attendance has been plummeting since the 1960s; hardly anyone baptises their kids anymore. Britain is slouching towards Gomorrah.

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But is Christianity in terminal decline? No. Those who say it is always compare its present state to around 1850-1960, when church attendance could almost be called a 'normal' or 'average' activity. But the history of British Christianity is actually one of peaks and troughs – and understanding how and why it has yo-yoed up and down helps us understand a bit better what we're witnessing today.

Compare the state of today's Christian churches to 1900 and things look bad. Compare them to the 18th century and things look pretty average.

Easter Day in St Paul's Cathedral in 1800: can you guess how many people took communion? Six. Six people took communion. In the late 18th century the Church of England was in a dire crisis. Churches stood empty, clerical numbers were dwindling, people complained that priests were out of touch with their congregations. Worse: scepticism was on the rise – even atheism – and Jacobinism, which was violently anti-clerical, was on the march in Europe. Every complaint made about contemporary Christianity was made in 1800. Including the sad decline of Christmas, although the problem back then was one of un-interest. Most public workers just got one day off work. Scrooge was the rule, not the exception

Why were things so bad? Again, the problems are instantly recognisable. The relationship between faith and the state was unhealthy. The state had co-opted one branch of Christianity, Anglicanism, and fiercely opposed dissenters like Catholics. England had witnessed a Reformation, a Civil War and a Glorious Revolution – all of which exposed the vanity, hypocrisy and cowardice of much of the religious establishment. With the rise of empiricism and new technology, it looked as if science might hold better answers than the Bible.

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But what bears most fruitful comparison with contemporary society is the impact of industrialisation. As people moved to the big cities, they were uprooted from their old parishes. Folk customs died out. City-living bred alienation. The symptoms? Promiscuity, broken homes, alcohol addiction. London entered a period of secularisation that, arguably, has never entirely gone away. In the 18th century it is estimated that some London Anglican churches saw only one to two per cent of parishioners take communion. Even at the height of London's spiritual renewal, in the late 19th century, still only around a quarter of the working-class went to Church.

So what changed? By 1900 interest in Christianity had reached a new zenith. One cause was that the faith simply became fashionable again. Swings and roundabouts. It caught on in particular among women, emerging as an outward sign of middle-class probity. It also rediscovered commercial viability. Christmas came roaring back in part because folks were looking for something to spend their money on. It's in the 19th century that people start exchanging cards, that Father Christmas becomes a figure of adoration for children and that the Christmas cracker is first pulled – invented in 1847. I've often thought Christianity would get a similar boost in the 21st century if we could only repackage it for the internet. And get Harry Styles to convert.

Immigration helped, too. The influx of Catholics to Britain created a vibrant new source of Christian witness in the Victorian era. Today, stats on church attendance point to a rise among Pentecostalism in the UK. Conservatives who complained that mass migration would kill British identity were wrong in at least one key regard: it's kept the native religion afloat.

THAT'S WHAT'S MISSING FROM 21ST CENTURY BRITISH CHRISTIANITY: EVANGELISATION. THE ONLY PEOPLE YOU'LL SEE DOING IT IN THE STREETS ARE THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND THE SCIENTOLOGISTS.

Most critical, however, was the rise of evangelism in the 19th century. The Anglicans turned things around by launching missions: they treated Britain as if it was near-pagan and needed to be brought back to the faith. They decided that the faith had to be seen to be relevant to people's needs – so it was the churches that campaigned for workers' protections, the outlawing of child prostitution and the creation of the welfare state. The early Labour Party was dominated by Methodists, many of them obsessed with the evils of alcohol. But the Victorians didn't just pursue social justice for its own sake – as many contemporary liberal Christians do – they saw it as a tool of religious mission. They sought to feed both the belly and the soul.

And that's what's missing from 21st century British Christianity: evangelisation. The only people you'll see doing it in the streets are the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Scientologists. Why are there no nuns, friars, preachers and vicars out there trying to win souls? You'll never bring people to Jesus if you don't tell people about him. And the Social Attitudes Survey proves that you can't rely on inherited tradition to bring people into the pews.

Put it this way. Imagine, say, that the Anglican Church was like Tesco. If Tesco stopped advertising, people would stop shopping there. If Tesco constantly banged on about how its own products are old fashioned and in need of updating, people would stop shopping there. If Tesco said that it would be nice if you'd visit once in a while but entirely understood why you don't, people would stop shopping there. Christians have become their own worst enemy – killing their faith with silence.

Advertise. Speak up. Tell people about your beliefs. At the centre of the faith is the truth that Jesus died and rose from death to herald a new era. The power of the Good News is so great that it cannot fail to win converts. Time to share it.