Factors Leading to Decline in Church Attendance in the Present Age

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Abstract

There are holy places in each religion, where its followers congregate to perform religious rituals such as supplications. Moreover, in these places sermons and religious messages are delivered by clergies and preachers. In Christianity, churches are holy places for worship, supplications, and some of the seven rituals. The following question has concerned clergies and preachers: given widespread evangelical activities of Christianity in many areas of the world, why do Christians show so little tendency to attend such holy places to perform their religious practices and hear religious messages from the clergies? Drawing on a descriptive-analytic method, this research deals with external factors (those outside the Church) and internal factors (those inside the Church), which have led to decline in church attendance.

Keywords: Christianity; church; low attendance; internal factors; external factors.

Introduction

In the Christian doctrine, the Church refers to the Christian nation or any group of Christian believers. The Greek word, *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), in ancient Greece referred to an official gathering of citizens. In the Greek translation of Septuagint in the Old Testament (second and third centuries BC), the term was used about the public congregation of the Jewish nation, particularly their religious congregations, say, for hearing the Torah (Ward 1958).

In the New Testament, the term is used about Christians throughout the world (Matthew 16:18) as well as Christians in a particular region (Acts of Apostles 5:11), congregation of people in a house for purposes of worship and supplication (Romans 16:5). Moreover, the Church is called the

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Christ's "bride" (Revelation 21:9; Ephesians 5:21-32) and his "body" (Colossians 1:18).

Since the beginning of Jesus, the Christ's mission, some of his followers were commanded to go around and preach for those who had just converted to Christianity (Mark 3:13-14; John 20:21).

When Christians were persecuted and banished by Jews, they formed congregations similar to Jewish synagogues, which then began to assume the form of churches as institutions supervised by bishops. Notwithstanding all sorts of controversies and conflicts within Christianity in the "age of sectarian conflicts" as a consequence of the Pauline idea of Jesus's divinity as against the human conception of Jesus, which led to diverse Christian sects and denominations such as Gnostics (Miller 1930, 90), Marcionists (Noss and Noss 1984; Miller 930, 90), and Church Fathers (Kelly 2018). This jeopardized the unity of the church followers, but the unity was preserved for several centuries (McGrath 2012, 143-44). However, in 1054 the church was divided into eastern and western branches, followed by a second division after the "Protestant" Reformation in the sixteenth century. The followers of each of these sects saw themselves as the only true church or at least part of the true church.

Catholicity or generality is one of the four marks of the church (along with oneness, holiness, and apostolicity) as specified in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. A catholic church was originally in contrast with local congregations, but the term was gradually used only for the Roman Church (Towfighi 2006, 197), and apostolicity means that the church was historically linked to Jesus's apostles and his life on the earth. In the long run, the term "church" came to be used figuratively about specific buildings for ceremonies (Safra and Aguilar-Cauz 2006, 239).

Religious developments have always been significant for all believers, and for obvious reasons. Despite all their internal differences, religions share many moral and innate elements, prescribing the same principle for physical and spiritual developments of people. A case in point is the development of Christian history, which has left a remarkable impact on how today's Christians think. We can go so far as to say that Christian religious scholars and philosophers of religion are concerned today with the human crisis; that is, the crisis of spirituality, which is partly exemplified in church attendance.

Of course, it is not only Christianity that faces a reduction of attendance and participation in public religious rituals in its exclusive religious

centers, but here we focus on the factors that have led to a widespread Christian disinterest in Church attendance. As attested by history, small-scale events could sometimes culminate in deep, crucial developments in the human history such that the course of history changes, leaving impacts on other fields as well. An example of such a major development in the Christian history is the German priest Martin Luther's movement (Dixon 1999, 1-32).

In this research, I draw on the existing Christian written works as well as evidence from sociology of development and emergence of evangelical branches of Christianity, which led to the spread of Christianity all over the world, to address the factors that have led to such a low church attendance despite all the propagations.

In general, we can draw a *prima facie* distinction between internal and external factors leading to the low church attendance in the present age and time. External factors are those that directly or indirectly affect church attendance from outside, such as economic conditions or wars. Internal factors, on the other hand, are those that arise from inside the church and affect the attraction of believers to churches, such as internal conflicts and moral corruptions of clergies and religious preachers (priests or cardinals). In what follows, we account for some of these factors.

After a long period of nearly one thousand years (385-1375), the Church could undergo a proud life of religious and political power and affect science, philosophy, ethics, politics, and literature. As Walls points out, the Church was the main foundation of literature, pedagogy, and literary styles among essentially uncultivated people (Walls 1998). Notwithstanding its political and other sorts of power, the Catholic Church eventually lost its strength, since it experienced internal and external crises in the thirteenth century, which ultimately led to its decline in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Weaver 1997, 127).

The presence decrease in church attendance seems to be largely affected by various cultural, political, and social crises throughout centuries of the Christian history (Hull 1959, 54; Asimov 1987; Barbour 1966). I outline these crises in what follows.

1. Intellectual crises: There is a wide variety of such crises; that is, intellectual conflicts with the Church have contributed to the decline of its intellectual authority in a number of respects:

1.1. The belief in irrational doctrines: Some Christian scholars maintain that much of the Bible concerning the human place and his

original sin is an irrational doctrine, and some others such as transubstantiation in the Eucharist is arational. Another example is the eternal punishment and rejection of man, which played a role in the decline of the intellectual authority of the Church, as noted by Peterson and his colleagues (Peterson et al. 2008, 368-369).

1.2. The Church's attitude to man and the world: The Roman Catholic Church divided people into "temporal" (earthly) and "spiritual" (heavenly). On this doctrine, most people belonged to the former as they were not committed to the rituals of the Church, while the latter were those who could literally transform the bread and wine during the Eucharist into the Christ's flesh and blood (transubstantiation). The latter were mediators between God and people, and secured the forgiveness of sinful, earthly human beings. As a consequence of this distinction, the right to interpret the Bible and form councils was exclusive to the so-called heavenly people. Accordingly, the Pope was distinguished from laypeople, which led to the gradual decline of churches (Bustani 1876, 5, 380; Lynn 2010).

1.3. Ignorance of original Christian and Biblical notions: A major problem for the Medieval Catholic Church was its approach to the Bible as a result of the fact that the Bible was available only in its original language, which was inaccessible to laypeople and even the Church. The accessible version of the Bible was its Vulgate Latin translation, which later turned out to be full of errors (McGrath 2002, 36). This led to the abandonment of the Bible and its original notions, which resulted in a crisis for the Church.

1.4. Excessive attention to religious rituals and manners: When the Bible partly lost the center stage, there was room for superstitious and fake rituals. In fact, the church that began with propagating David's Psalms, supplications, moral preaching, and the notions of the Old and New Testaments ended up promoting superstitions, dreams, and proving miracles for springs, water wells, stones, and trees. Another extremism in religious rituals was the rise of Marianism, and indeed the rise of a gospel under "Gospel of Mary," where such irrational stories were partly made by people and as a result the Church and its teachings were ignored (Miller 1930; Fromm 2001).

1.5. Misuse of laypeople's beliefs: A teaching of the Roman Catholic Church was the power given by the Christ to his apostle Peter and other priests, and it was by virtue of this power that priests could specify a redress for expiation of sins and thus save them from the Hell. At first, confession

and repentance were enough for forgiveness, but later God-wary people had to pay large amounts of money for their sins to be forgiven (Walls 1998).

1.6. Class differences between clergies and laypeople: There were priests who were not only unaware of authentic Christian notions, but misused their religious positions to acquire wealth and acquire a luxurious life. Their kingly extravagance defamed their characters such that the term "priest" came to be used as a curse. This was a major cause of crises in the Church, which led to its marginalization. Moreover, there was massive financial and moral corruption in the Church. The Church ruled people without moral discipline, since every bishop acted arbitrarily. Some priests had sexual relations with multiple women, and moral vices began to lose their viciousness in the Church (Palmer et al., 2007).

In his *Storia d'Italia* (1561), Francesco Guicciardini, an Italian historian, says that when popes found a global power, they ignored divine commands and the salvation of their souls. They no longer aimed to conduct a pure holy life, to propagate Christianity, and to be kind to their neighbors. They gathered armies, acquired wealth, made heresies, and created new ways of gaining money (Corrick 1998, 64).

1.7. Crisis of religious authority: A major issue in the Churches was the religious authority of the Church (McGrath 2002). The question was: who is the ultimate arbiter when there is controversy over religious issues? On the one hand, each single passage of the Bible should be assessed in terms of the validity of its sources, and on the other hand, the understanding of the Bible was exclusive to priests and the Church, and other interpretations of the Bible were deemed invalid. Accordingly, neither the Bible could be viewed as the ultimate authority because of disputes over its interpretation, nor the Pope could be considered the final arbiter. This dissuaded people from trusting the Church and the Pope (Firoozi 2007, 98).

1.8. Violent manners of the Church and censorship: The Catholic Church violently treated its opponents, and through accusations of heresy against its opponents, harsh punishments were imposed on those who adopted beliefs contrary to the Church, such as imprisonment, confiscation of property, torture, and above all, death by burning (McGrath 2002). On historical accounts, the Spanish tribunal of inquisition alone accused one hundred thousand people of paganism, and punished them in the worst possible way (Tawil 1947, 75).

2. Political Crises

2.1. Defeat in the Crusades: The Crusades (1096-1270) were series of wars waged by Christians against Muslims (Asbridge 2012, 40). With all of their casualties, these wars ended up in the defeat of Christians and the victory of Muslims. The pretext for the war was to reclaim Jerusalem from Muslims (see Durant 2011). These wars turned out to be in the interest of Western Christians, since they paved the path for their introduction to the East and awakened them from their millennial sleep (Nicholson 2004, 96). The West's familiarity with Islamic notions gave rise to doubts among the public over the supernatural origin of the Church. In fact, it raised the question why the God of the Christ let Muslims defeat Christians?

2.2. Disclosure of the falsity of the Donation of Constantine: The Roman Catholic Church claimed that Constantine, the first Christian emperor, delegated his rule over the entire Europe to Pope Sylvester I, but in 1440 a brave scholar called Valla published an essay in which he demonstrated that the donation was a forgery, and thus it turned out that the worldly sovereignty of the Popes throughout one thousand years was illegitimate (Oberman 1990, 42).

2.3. The rule of local and secular governors: Local and national powers began to take over. In fact, secular rulers grew mainly because of priests' mistreatments and increasing dissatisfaction with the Church and priests (McGrath 2002, 53).

2.4. Move of the Papal Capital from Rome to France (the Great Schism): The Popes left Rome for sixty-eight years (1309-1377) and resided in the vicinity of France, and thus they became tools in the hands of French kings. This undermined the glory of the Roman Papal capital, and hence they had to increase taxes and local churches to compensate for their income decrease. This played a crucial role in the economic depression of the Church and Papal crises (see Durant 2011).

2.5. Social crises: The late medieval period is referred to by historians as a period of suffering and hardship for the Christian world, a period rife with the plague, starvation, the Anglo-French wars, the great schism among the Popes, and financial poverty. All these led to the collapse of the European society, and hence the decline of the Church (McGrath 2002, 53).

The above remarks were concerned with the causes of the Church's decline and crisis in the Middle Ages, but in the present age and time the decline and the crisis have increased even more. In what follows, we point out some of these causes:

1. Improved technology: The development of technology might have led to a decline in the population growth of the Church in one way or another. On the one hand, we know that local churches are located in rural areas, and on the other hand, we know that improved technology gives country people reasons of various kinds to leave their residences and move to cities to secure their needed goods and facilities. Accordingly, emigration of country people to cities has culminated in the dwindling of the church population in rural areas.

Moreover, contemporary differences in jobs and works also have a role to play. For instance, construction of industrial factories and the rise of commercial agriculture, and hence the increase in work hours, have made it much more difficult for workers and farmers to visit churches. In addition, improved technology has given rise to contradictions in people's minds, such that people no longer feel that they should consult God and religion for their material and spiritual needs. Instead, they can rely on modern technologies and industrial developments to meet their needs. Otherwise put, today people live in a technology-centered world, which has led to contradictions between religion and science, and this has lasted for nearly three centuries now (Walls 1998).

For example, not all people consult the Church and priests to cure their physical and spiritual pains; rather they set their hopes in modern technology. It no longer makes sense for people to visit the church and perform certain rituals on specific days in order to go to the Heaven. Instead, every place might count as a church, everyone can be his or her own priest, and accordingly they can do righteous actions everywhere. With proper conduct and human actions, and with the aid from modern science and technology, this world can turn into an ideal heaven, which serves as preparatory for the other-worldly heaven (Lynn 2010).

2. Absence of a resident priest pastor: A measure taken for solving the problem of rural churches was to send resident priest pastors who permanently lived in such churches. In this way, the decline of the members and resources of rural churches was controlled. This is because when people had urgent needs for churches and priests, and when there was no priest present in the church, this led them to find alternative ways to solve their problems, and as a result, they lost their interest in churches and priests.[1]

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1. For more on the decline and shortage of priests throughout the world, see "Shortage finds Catholic Church importing priests from Asia, Africa," Catholic Online, June 4, 2015, and "Frequently

3. Economic and financial problems: Another reason for the decline and crises of the churches is their financial problem, since when it is impossible to provide for the expenses of church maintenance and the salaries of priests, the church cannot be expected to thrive and carry on, which leads to crises in the church. As a result of financial problems, churches have to employ trained people for economic enterprises, which in turn leads people to turn away from churches and their leaders, since they see religious leaders as spiritual role-models, rather than economic agents (Hien 2014, iii).

4. Conflicts within the Church: In cities with different churches associated with diverse sects and denominations, each church tries to prove its rightfulness and to repudiate its rivals. Such conflicts within the Church lead to conflicts among people, and then results in the decline of churches (Robertson 1984).

5. Improper ways of deploying priests for churches: If priests are appointed to churches without taking note of their tastes and competence, then conflicts will arise among churchgoers in a community, since churches are located in different areas of a city, and this requires the appointment of priests by considering the area, culture, and community, so that people are attracted to the churches (Dever 1999, 52).

6. Inaccessibility of educated priests: Another major factor for the decline of churches is lack of access to educated priests, since when churchgoers cannot hear the right answers from the priests for their religious and social questions, they begin to stop going to churches (McCracken 2016).

7. Modern theological movements: The diversity of theological movements makes sense in the static terms of the Church. Andrew Walls refers to such twentieth-century theologies, which often arise from social movements, as the riot of thoughts and movements, illustrated by liberation theology. In his view, the Gospel of Christianity is indeed a good tiding for the poor, but theology and the church organization is actually far from this goal. The idea was apparently supported even by the leaders of the Catholic Church, but in recent years, official church statements have cautiously avoided entirely heretic theologies or provocative social movements (Walls 1998).

Requested Church Statistics," cara.georgetown.edu. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

Conclusion

In Christianity, the church is a holy place for worship, supplication, performance of the seven sacraments of Christianity, and in general, the relation between man and God. The role is largely played by the Pope, a cardinal, a priest, or other agents of the Church. In the present age, along with the improvement of network communications, there is a decline in some churches. Causes of such a decline can be categorized as internal and external.

a) Internal factors include intellectual crises such as the belief in certain arational or irrational doctrines, an improper view of man and the world, distinctions between ecclesial and ordinary positions, ignorance of the original ideas of the Bible, the crisis of religious authority, and improper, irrational manners of censorship.

b) External factors include the sovereignty of church rulers, economic and financial problems, conflicts within the Church, improper ways of appointing priests in churches, lack of proper education and training by some priests, and unfamiliarity of some priests with modern technology and their lack of up-to-date knowledge to reply to questions.

On the whole, these factors have led to the decline of some churches, but if they are taken into consideration, perhaps church can see a growth in its visitors.

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