Analyses of the state of religion in Britain, both historical and contemporary, have tended to be dominated by the so-called ‘secularization thesis’. This argues that with western modernity came the disintegration of what Peter Berger calls the ‘sacred canopy’ of Christendom. This lead to the disengagement of the Christian Church from public life and its displacement by secular agencies, the privatization of religion, differentiation and fragmentation of denominational forms and the rationalization of world-views, until religion became marginal and irrelevant to the functioning of modern society. Yet the adequacy of secularization as an outworking of the grand narratives of modernization, rationalization and individualism, has been challenged by the emergence of new forms of religious expression and their fervent and disturbing eruption into global politics, and by the need to reconfigure the nature of religious belief and affiliation in the light of religious pluralism and migration, especially since 1945.

Scholarship has tended to remain within the logic of secularization and to polarize between assertions and denials of its central claims, supported accordingly with a tendency to focus on institutional and statistical forms of evidence. Yet voices have been growing over the past decade – probably since the publication of Grace Davie’s Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging (1994) – which argue that religion, and Christianity in particular, persists in the life of the nation in heterodox and diffuse ways, and is not so much declining as mutating. As the editors of this valuable collection set out in their introduction, since then the search has been on for ways of gaining a greater empirical and theoretical grasp on the elusive and complex, often contradictory, manifestations of Christianity in all its guises. The essays collected in this volume reflect the particular disciplinary and institutional locations of its editors: mainly historians, with some theologians and sociologists of religion; mainly centred around Oxford, and reflecting a bias towards those trained in local and cultural histories of religion; and all to greater or lesser degree taking issue with Callum Brown’s magisterial Death of Christian Britain (2002). Yet despite its particular origins and its limitations (more of which later), this book represents a major new contribution to scholarship and deserves to become a standard text for many years to come.

This collection aims to reinvigorate the study of Christianity in Britain since 1945 by breaking free from the theoretical assumptions of secularization and methodological reliance on statistical data. To this end, the editors advance
three new concepts – ‘authenticity’, ‘generation’ and ‘virtue’ which, they argue, are more helpful indicators of the ‘changing aspects of practice, transmission and influence of Christianity since 1945’ (p. 2). Rather than ‘decline’, we should be thinking in terms of ‘transformation’, and these categories of analysis provide motifs around which a series of general overviews and specific case-studies cohere.

As stand-alone pieces, there is much to appreciate here in virtually all the essays. One particularly impressive feature is the ability of all contributors to present specialist fields of research in a way that is both accessible and suggestive of the depth and breadth of research behind it. This is probably due to the editors ensuring that the contributors do not wander off-message, although some papers are more successful in inter-weaving their nominated theme into their analysis than others. For example, some of the material on ‘authenticity’ seemed a little forced, with a tendency to assert rather than argue the theme. In the main, however, the case studies were notable for their ability to illuminate through specific examples and evidence, whether one agrees with the conclusions of the overviews and case-studies or not. Their chief value is their potential to be read in a variety of ways. I can see them performing a helpful introductory function for undergraduates studying sociology of religion or the cultural history of religion, whilst the quality of scholarship is such that each essay could also be productively read by a graduate student in more specialist areas as an object-lesson in producing a literature review that provides both a summary of the state of scholarship in a particular area and an indication of future research problems and agendas.

One of the highlights of these essays, and of particular interest to readers of this journal, may be Matthew Guest’s case-study on the turn to congregational studies over the past generation, and the churches’ fostering of diverse forms of ecclesiology and expressions of congregational organization. This is characterized by a concomitant concern to balance the duties of ‘commitment to a bounded community’ (p. 63) with more market-driven forms of loose affiliation better suited to a mobile and consumer-minded constituency. That concern, of maintaining a balance between tradition and context, continuity and novelty, magisterial and vernacular, runs through many other chapters, such as Alana Harris’ on liturgical reform, Ian Jones’ and Peter Webster’s on church music, Mark Chapman on the progressive secular theologies of the 1960s and William Whyte on church architecture.

Certainly, then, it is profitable to read each contribution as a stand-alone feature. But the success of this volume is also to be judged by its claim to have advanced new heuristic paradigms for the study of religion. Has it done that?