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978-0-521-57058-9 - Churchgoing and Christian Ethics  
Robin Gill  
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## CHURCHGOING AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Robin Gill argues that once moral communities take centre stage in ethics – as they do in virtue ethics – then there should be a greater interest in sociological evidence about these communities. This book examines recent evidence, gathered from social attitude surveys, about church communities, in particular their views on faith, moral order and love. It shows that churchgoers are distinctive in their attitudes and behaviour. Some of their attitudes change over time, and there are a number of obvious moral disagreements between different groups of churchgoers. Nonetheless, there are broad patterns of Christian beliefs, teleology and altruism which distinguish churchgoers as a whole from nonchurchgoers. However, the values, virtues, moral attitudes and behaviour of churchgoers are shared by many other people as well. The distinctiveness of church communities in the modern world is thus real but relative, and is crucial for the task of Christian ethics.

ROBIN GILL is Michael Ramsey Professor of Modern Theology, University of Kent at Canterbury. He has written many books on both Christian ethics and the sociology of religion, including *Christian Ethics in Secular Worlds* (1991), *Moral Communities* (1992), *The Myth of the Empty Church* (1993), *A Textbook of Christian Ethics* (revised 1995), *Moral Leadership in a Postmodern Age* (1997), and edited *Euthanasia and the Churches* (1998). In addition, Robin Gill is the series editor for *New Studies in Christian Ethics*.

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Christian ethics has increasingly assumed a central place within academic theology. At the same time the growing power and ambiguity of modern science and the rising dissatisfaction within the social sciences about claims to value-neutrality have prompted renewed interest in ethics within the secular academic world. There is, therefore, a need for studies in Christian ethics which, as well as being concerned with the relevance of Christian ethics to the present day secular debate, are well informed about parallel discussions in recent philosophy, science or social science. *New Studies in Christian Ethics* aims to provide books that do this at the highest intellectual level and demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance or in terms of underlying moral justifications.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
 São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
 Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521570589](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521570589)

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First published 1999

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Gill, Robin.

Churchgoing and Christian ethics / Robin Gill.

p. cm. – (New Studies in Christian Ethics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-57058-1 (hardback)

ISBN 0-521-57828-0 (paperback)

1. Christian ethics – Great Britain – Public opinion.  
 2. Christians – Great Britain – Attitudes. 3. Church attendance – Great Britain  
 4. Public opinion – Great Britain. I. Title II. Series.

BJ1275.G55 1999

241'.0941–dc21 98-53583 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-57058-9 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-57828-8 Paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2010

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To Jenny

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## *Preface*

This is the fifteenth book in the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. Originally its title was to be *Moral Communities and Christian Ethics*, but I worried that the term ‘moral communities’ was just too vague. For reasons to be explained shortly, I became increasingly critical of this vagueness in others. As *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics* the book is now distinctly more concrete. Whatever the title, it at last brings together my empirical research on churches and my theoretical research on Christian ethics.

For the last ten years I have been engaged in detailed empirical research on churchgoing, while continuing a rather separate interest in the role of Christian ethics in society at large. In *The Myth of the Empty Church* (1993) I mapped out churchgoing patterns in Britain from census data going back to the 1830s and suggested some physical reasons for an initial increase followed by a very lengthy decline in churchgoing. I was aware at the time of a limited amount of data from attitude sample surveys linking churchgoing with distinctive moral and theological beliefs. Yet I could not see how to study such data longitudinally or systematically. In that book attitudinal data formed little more than a partial observation about present day churchgoers. However, a visit by the American sociologists C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, armed with a well marked copy of *The Myth of the Empty Church*, convinced me that I was mistaken. There is a large amount of data from attitude surveys of religious and moral beliefs and behaviour in Britain over the last fifty years which, surprisingly, has never been systematically compared. Together we collected

data specifically about religious beliefs from well over one hundred surveys and finally published the results in the article for the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* which is reported in chapter three. I am most grateful to both of them for this stimulation.

As a result of this I then discovered the major new sources of data which I use in chapters four to seven. These new sources of British data form the backbone of this book. However they prompted me to gather large amounts of comparative data while travelling in different parts of the world – especially Australia, North America and elsewhere in Europe – which are also reported here. I had to learn how to process the new data myself as well as how to use the appropriate statistical tests in SPSS. Dr Mohammed Jabir did invaluable initial work processing and testing some of the earliest data and then showing me how to do the same. I am most grateful for his help. Dr Edwina Bell and Professor Leslie Francis both gave me vital help on the statistical tests and Leslie read through the entire empirical part of this book. Professor David Fergusson read chapter one, Bishop Peter Selby chapter nine, Richard Allen chapter eight, and Dr Michael Northcott chapters one to seven. All were immensely helpful. I also gave parts of the book as papers at Free Amsterdam, Edinburgh, Lancaster and Reading Universities, at a meeting of the Sociology of Religion Study Group of the British Sociological Association, and at a variety of Universities and Theological Colleges in Australia. Testing the material in this way, and then modifying and revising it, has been crucial.

Throughout the long process of researching and writing this book, while I have also been acting as general editor of the series, successive religious studies commissioning editors at Cambridge University Press – Alex Wright, Ruth Parr, and now Kevin Taylor – have all become friends and helpers. Academic theology and religious studies are deeply indebted to each of them.

Finally as ever to Jenny my love. Although I love statistics, I love her far more.

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## *Abbreviations*

ACC	Anglican Consultative Council
ANSS	Australian National Social Science Survey
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BHPS	British Household Panel Survey
BIPO	British Institute of Public Opinion (now Gallup Poll)
BSA	British Social Attitudes
CRA	Christian Research Association
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
EVSSG	European Value Systems Study Group
IBA	Independent Broadcasting Authority
ICM	Inter-church Movement
ITA	Independent Television Authority
ITC	Independent Television Commission
IV	International Version
MORI	Market and Opinion Research Institute
NCLS	National Church Life Survey
NEB	New English Bible
NISA	Northern Ireland Social Attitudes
NIV	New International Version
NOP	National Opinion Polls
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SCPR	Social and Community Planning Research
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Scientists
STV	Southern Television
URC	United Reformed Church