

Modern pilgrims

Organised religion may be in decline, but the credit crunch has prompted a renewed spiritual hunger.

By Peter Stanford

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Holywell is remarkably low-key. It has been a public place of healing for the past thousand years yet, unlike the great Catholic shrines of Europe, there are no ministering attendants to greet visitors, no great basilica, and no triumphant display of discarded crutches and abandoned wheelchairs. There is just a slightly incongruous sign on the outskirts of this modest Flintshire town that announces it as the **Lourdes of Wales**

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/727672/Wales-A-revitalising-dip-at-the-Lourdes-of-Wales.html>) .

The estimated 30,000 pilgrims a year who come here are left to their own devices to make what they will of a

well which, legend has it, sprang up miraculously on the spot where a seventh-century saint, Winefride, was restored to life by divine intervention after being beheaded after resisting a rapist. You can see the join on the neck of the various statues of her that are dotted around the sanctuary.



A centre of faith: Canterbury Cathedral Photo: PAUL GROVER

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A small notice does, however, request that the custodian be informed if pilgrims are planning to immerse themselves in the startlingly clear, slightly bubbling waters. These are housed in an ancient open-air chamber of delicate, honey-coloured pillars, its crumbling walls darkened by the smoke of candles.

As I arrive on a chilly winter's morning, with dark clouds lined up like great bruises across the sky, a middle-aged woman in a modest one-piece swimsuit is emerging up the steps of the star-shaped well, pulling a threadbare towel around herself and quickly disappearing into one of the changing huts. Another pilgrim shivers in his trunks and prepares

to take her place. "They say it's warm once you're in," he says, almost to convince himself. I smile encouragingly, but part of me thinks he must be mad.

Such public acts of faith are rare in secular, sceptical Britain, even during high points in the liturgical year such as Lent, which started this week. And when they do take place in the public gaze – a regular flow of traffic passes by within feet of the sanctuary on its way to the local Aldi – they are usually dismissed as a kind of medieval masochism brought on by religion, just the sort of behaviour that led Tony Blair to keep quiet about his faith while at 10 Downing Street in case he be judged, as he put it bluntly, a "nutter". Healing, after all, is properly the domain of doctors and shrinks, not saints who rose, Lazarus-like, from the dead. Richard Dawkins, in *The God Delusion*, captures the popular prejudice well. "Alleged miracles violate the principles of science. I imagine the whole business is an embarrassment to more sophisticated circles within the Church. Why any circles worthy of the name sophisticated remain within the Church is a mystery."

Dawkins's book was a best-seller, a conclusive sign, many said, of the final ebbing of the sea of faith from our shores. Survey after survey in recent times has confirmed the loosening of the hold that Christianity once had. The percentage of those calling themselves Christian dropped from 66 per cent in 1983 to 50 per cent today, according to the National Centre for Social Research, while those who describe themselves as having "no religion" climbed from 31 to 43 per cent. Church attendances are down over the same period (from 1.2 million on the average Sunday to 978,000).

These hardy souls in the water at Holywell may be continuing a tradition of bathing in Winefride's Well that stretches unbroken through the disruptions of the post-Reformation period right back to 1093 when the shrine is first mentioned in recorded history, but they are also the last of the line. However, there is another way of looking at what goes on at Holywell.

The credit crunch and continuing bleak economic outlook have been widely rumoured to have prompted a renewed spiritual hunger in what sociologists call the "fuzzy faithful" – those who don't practise any faith, but haven't quite written off religion in the manner of Dawkins.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols, leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, spoke recently in the pages of this newspaper of a "hidden religious pulse" that is currently beating more strongly. His observation is, at first glance, borne out by a poll by Christian Research at the end of last year which showed that, as a result of the global downturn, three quarters of the British population have been prompted to think again about their core values.

But the survey then goes on to question whether this reassessment is benefiting organised religion. Only 3 per cent of this new wave of what the pollsters call "non-religious seekers" had contemplated going to a church post credit crunch. And only 1 per cent had actually given it a try. None of them was planning to repeat the experience.

Another nail in the coffin of organised religion? Well, church attendance is only one indicator of the national spiritual temperature. Archbishop Nichols offered alternatives such as the much larger than expected crowds – 300,000 plus – who queued up to see the reliquary containing the bones of the 19th-century French saint Thérèse of Lisieux when it toured England and Wales in the autumn. It managed to draw not just believers, but also legions of "fuzzy faithful", not to mention the plain curious.

Then there are the increasing numbers reported to be attending retreat centres or "taster" weekends at monasteries. Parkminster, for example, run by the austere, silent Carthusians in West Sussex, generated so little interest in its ascetic way of life that it was facing closure a few years ago. Now its courses are booking for months in advance and its silent lifestyle has a particular appeal in Lent.

And there is, undeniably, a renewed sense of importance and energy around Remembrance Sunday. The immediate cause may be the escalating loss of young British lives in Afghanistan and public confusion as to what the war is all about. But there is also a franker acknowledgement than heard in recent years that, for all the claims of science and progress, the injustice of suffering and death continues to puzzle us as much as it ever did, and that religion still offers, if not an Answer with a capital "A", then some form of consolation.

So where to find these spiritually hungry individuals? That was the question I found myself inadvertently answering in *The Extra Mile*, a book chronicling my travels around the ancient sacred sites of Britain. It had begun as something else, an attempt to untangle and understand the dramatic stories, which often lie buried under layers of neglect, the

rubble of bygone wars of religion and the distracting supernatural claims of present-day visitors. As the book developed, though, this quest became much more than a simple search for historical detail and colour about an overlooked part of our shared past.

At Holywell, as at each of the seven other locations I visited, from Iona off the west coast of Scotland to Stonehenge in Wiltshire and Lindisfarne in Northumberland, I stumbled across the "non-religious seekers" that Christian Research had identified. Some were in their swimming trunks, others were carrying crosses, but most were just looking and thinking.

They may not be going to churches, but here they were, they told me, in search of a simpler, more essential type of spirituality than denomination and religious doctrine. It had been concentrated in these sites in ages past, they knew, and so these modern-day pilgrims were exploring whether traces of it remained in the stones, the soil or, in the case of Winefride's Well, the water.

At Lindisfarne, in its eighth-century heyday as much a centre of faith as Canterbury, I walked with two young women along the ancient Pilgrims' Way crossing the mud flats that separate the Holy Island from the mainland. Franckie, a meteorologist in her twenties, told me: "I don't generally go to church week by week. I just don't, but I get a top-up here."

Cheedam, a fellow pilgrim, was a young secular Muslim woman from Turkey. "I have been living in Britain for two years, studying and working, and the thing that has puzzled me most about you is that I just don't see faith here when I am going about my life." Until, that is, she made the walk to Lindisfarne and stumbled across something often hidden, and even when spotted, overlooked or misconstrued.

For the pilgrims I came across, their search was an emotional and intuitive endeavour. "It's the energy that rises up from the layers of history, one piled on top of the other," Angela, a middle-aged wages clerk from Staffordshire, told me when we both took part in a Beltane (coming-of-spring) ritual at the foot of Glastonbury Tor. "The Spirit is here," a fellow visitor assured me on a procession at the Marian shrine of Walsingham, "and I haven't experienced that anywhere else."

Many were honest enough to accept the two-way nature of what they were doing. Just as the places they were exploring projected their sacred past onto visitors, so too did the visitors project their own spiritual longings onto ruined abbeys, stone circles and isolated islands.

Holy places, by tradition, carry with them the potential for stepping out of time and even out of character. They stand apart, sometimes geographically, always in their slightly other-worldly feel, so to visit them is different from tourism. There is an extra dimension, some kind of interplay between the material and the spiritual. A pilgrimage is seeking the spiritual through something material, whether it is the act of walking in the footsteps of those believers who have passed along the same road before, or the immersion in water that previous bathers have experienced as holy and healing.

Moreover, the very act of going on pilgrimage might be seen as making the body do what the soul desires, channelling those "fuzzy" spiritual yearnings into something practical. It therefore runs counter to the powerful idea, found in most mainstream religions, that the spiritual is located within us, and therefore utterly immaterial. This is precisely the sort of theological abstraction that puts people off. In a secular society, we have lost the tools to understand such talk. With pilgrimage, however, there are no liturgical niceties to negotiate, no doctrine to absorb, no club to join. All that is required is openness.

Quite how open am I prepared to be at Holywell? I struggle with conflicting emotions as I wait my turn outside the windowless arches that enclose the well-chamber. I'm standing by a second, larger pool, also filled by the same spring. Am I ready for the potentially life-altering experience of climbing down into the well itself?

Just under the surface of the pool I can see the rock where St Beuno, Winefride's uncle and the one who brought her back to life, reportedly used to pray for hours on end, standing half-immersed as was the habit of those tough, self-flagellating monks of the Celtic Church. It feels like a challenge.

As an icy wind blows in off the Dee Estuary, gathering up leaves and then depositing them in the greenish water of the pool, I decide that St Beuno's example fits better with an earlier age of muscular faith rather than this present era, when the religious pulse beats quietly beneath the skin of a secular society. Indeed, it is precisely by wearing its

reputation as a place of healing and spirituality so lightly and unobtrusively that Holywell is now drawing in the modern seeker.

Thus satisfied, I plunge my hands into the pool and wash my face with its waters.

WHERE TO FIND SILENCE IN OUR SECULAR AGE

- Silence in the City is a rolling programme of talks on silent prayer and contemplative life while living in a busy world. It is organised in London by the World Community for Christian Meditation and Contemplative Outreach. Past speakers have included Archbishop Vincent Nichols and Cynthia Bourgeault, a Canadian Anglican priest and hermit. Details of the 2010 programme at silenceinthecity.org.uk (<http://silenceinthecity.org.uk>)
- The Self-Realization Centre at Queen Camel in Somerset offers a range of silent weekend retreats, loosely based on Buddhist principles, to help participants "listen for the wisdom inside". See [selfrealizationcentres.org](http://www.selfrealizationcentres.org) (<http://www.selfrealizationcentres.org>)
- St Hugh's Charterhouse, home to the Carthusian monks at Parkminster in Sussex, has what is believed to be the largest cloister in the world. The monks use bikes to go around it. Those interested in ways to discover more about its life of silence and prayer should visit its website, [parkminster.org.uk](http://www.parkminster.org.uk) (<http://www.parkminster.org.uk>), where they can contact novice master Father Cyril.
- Award-winning novelist Sara Maitland's 2008 best-seller, *A Book of Silence*, describing her decision to live as a silent hermit, is now out in paperback (Granta Books, £8.99).

Britain boasts several ancient [pilgrim trails](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/countryside/5126285/Easter-2009-top-five-pilgrim-routes-in-Britain.html) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/countryside/5126285/Easter-2009-top-five-pilgrim-routes-in-Britain.html>) including:

- **The Canterbury Pilgrims' Way.** Immortalised by Chaucer, it had two branches, a southern route, from Winchester to Canterbury (129 miles), and a northern route (79 miles), from Westminster to Canterbury. A substantial section is open to walkers along the North Downs' Way. Find routes at nationaltrail.co.uk/NorthDowns (<http://nationaltrail.co.uk/NorthDowns>)
- **The North Wales Pilgrims' Path.** A time-honoured route that contains many of the treasures of the Celtic Church, stretching from Chester to Bardsey Island, and including Holywell (127 miles). Various itineraries are listed at pilgrimsprogress.org.uk (<http://pilgrimsprogress.org.uk>)
- **Whithorn.** St Ninian is believed to have founded the first Christian community in the North in the fifth century, before Columba came to Iona. The ancient pilgrim route through Dumfries and Galloway to the shoreline cave at Whithorn that was his home is currently being restored. Contact the Whithorn Trust ([whithorn.com](http://www.whithorn.com)) (<http://www.whithorn.com>)

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