

BOOK REVIEW

REDUNDANT RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS

(Report of the Committee on Culture and Education, Doc 6032)
Council of Europe, Strasbourg 1989, v + 139pp¹

A review by David McClean, Professor of Law in the University of Sheffield

The publication in May 1990 of the Wilding Report on the Redundant Churches Fund has set in train a round of discussions as to the procedures and resources available in England for the care of redundant churches. It seems quite likely that some changes will be required in the relevant legislation. Almost exactly a year earlier, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe debated the whole question of redundant religious buildings, and this volume contains the text of the Assembly's resolution, a transcript of the debate, and the detailed report prepared by the Council's Committee on Culture and Education. It provides a fascinating and detailed picture of the position in 36 countries, from Greenland (where there are some ruins of mediaeval chapels abandoned when settlements were depopulated in the 14th century) to Turkey (where the persecution of the Armenians and the drastic fall in the Greek Orthodox population has led to the closure of many churches).

The survey, carried out by Angus Fowler an officer of a voluntary society, *Förderkreis Alte Kirchen*, in Hessen, is a useful reminder of the variety of problems which a phrase like 'redundant church' may conceal. In many parts of Europe there are ancient churches in rural areas which have never been used more than once a month or even once a year; they were 'chapels or ease' used for public worship perhaps only on the festival of the patron saint. Depopulation means that many churches in, for example, rural France are used only infrequently, and perhaps most often for funeral services. The fragmentation and then re-union of denominations may create a problem of redundancy, as in the Netherlands, Scotland and increasingly amongst the English Free Churches. As one Dutch member of the Assembly remarked in the debate, there is a special problem in his country, where Protestant churches are only open on Sundays and "Calvinist austerity will not allow sufficient heating".

There are some startling figures as to the Free Church position in England. The number of Methodist chapels has declined from 14,500 at the time of Methodist re-union in 1932 to 7,800 in 1985. The creation of the United Reform Church in 1972 was one factor which has led to the sale of over 200 of its buildings in the succeeding years. Although many of these churches will be small, and of no particular architectural interest, they are an important part of the religious and cultural history of England; sadly, they all too often disappear or are radically converted for commercial use.

Italy presents a very different problem. Particularly in towns and cities, there is serious over-provision of churches, but there has been an almost total failure to address the problem. Some buildings are used occasionally, some remain locked, many deteriorate badly. Some works of art are sold, without the protection of the faculty jurisdiction; some are allowed to gather dust and to decay. Funds have been set aside to address the issues, but bureaucratic delays and inactivity have meant that the bodies to administer the funds have never been established.

1. Obtainable from European Council for the Village and Small Town, c/o Peak National Park, Alden House, Baslow Road, Bakewell, Derbyshire DE4 1AE.

The legislative provision in England (so far, that is, as Anglican church buildings are concerned) seems to be as advanced as any, and no less significant is the existence of so many active trusts and societies dedicated to the care of under-used churches in particular areas of this country. This combination of official legislation and 'private sector' support can be found in a few places on the continent, but nowhere is it as well developed. Though it has also to be said that there are other countries, such as Sweden, where State financial support is such that no buildings have to be closed because of maintenance problems.

The Assembly called for surveys, in compatible computerised form, of redundant religious buildings (including 19th and 20th century buildings as well as the more ancient); effective protection for the original fabric and fittings; the use of buildings in ways which were imaginative but not incompatible with their original function; and the development of 'cultural tourism' as a source of funds. None of these ideas is new, or alien to what is now Part III of the Pastoral Measure 1983; but the document as a whole will provide valuable material for those who wish to extend and develop their effectiveness.

LAST CHANCE!

Bookings are rapidly filling the 100 residential places for the 1991 conference at Cardiff. Waste no time in sending your application form (with deposit) to the Executive Officer:

The Venerable D. Scott
4 Honing Drive
Southwell
Notts NG25 0LB

The programme promises to be the best yet – contrasts between the English (established) and Welsh (disestablished) experiences of church law, authority and the ecclesiastical courts. "Star" speakers will give the lead lectures, and our own working parties will make presentations on marriage discipline and visitations. The Society dinner will entertain distinguished guests. Sunday worship will be at one of Cardiff's loveliest churches, and the AGM will give opportunity to express hopes and intentions for the coming year.

12-14 April

BOOK NOW!

CARDIFF