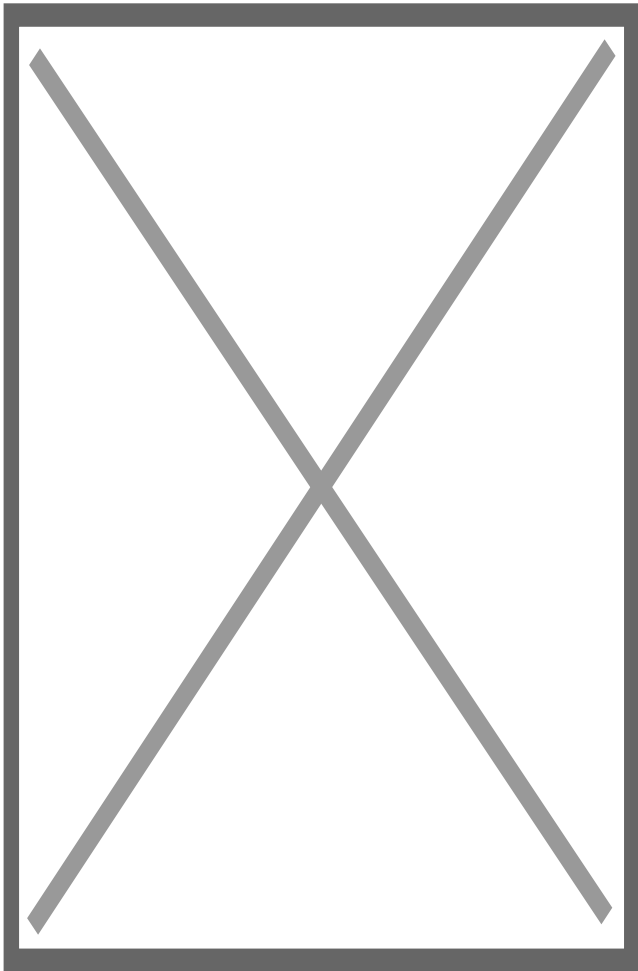


What is English Christianity?

Peter Ackroyd sees a special historical relationship between the development of a distinctively English sensibility and that of the English church.

by [Sam Gee](#) in the [October 2025](#) issue
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In Review



The English Soul

Faith of a Nation

By Peter Ackroyd
Reaktion Books

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Peter Ackroyd's newest book considers the impact Christianity has had on the character of English culture—and vice-versa. Ackroyd is a revered novelist, critic, biographer, and historian whose past work has often concerned itself with important figures in England's ecclesiastical history. His biography of St. Thomas More, for example, is particularly highly regarded. But this is the first time Ackroyd has turned his full attention to religion as such.

The English Soul is motivated by Ackroyd's conviction that "Christianity has been the anchoring and defining doctrine of England" and "has been the reflection, perhaps the embodiment, of the English soul." While he acknowledges the proliferation of other faiths (and secular worldviews) in the British Isles, nevertheless he believes that there has been a special relationship historically between the development of a distinctively English sensibility and a particularly English form of Christianity. To prove the point, he leads the reader across more than a millennium of history through capsule biographies of important Christian preachers, activists, and intellectuals (as well as, somewhat inexplicably given the omission of other faiths, a few influential atheists such as Richard Dawkins).

Ackroyd's protagonists, ranging from Bede and Julian of Norwich to Charles Spurgeon and C. S. Lewis, are almost without exception canonical figures. Moreover, almost every vessel of the English soul described in the book is a writer of some distinction, whose texts transmitted their ideas about God and humanity down through generations. There is little sense in Ackroyd's pages that the heart of English Christianity may be found in the illiterate or the undistinguished rather than the brilliant and the bold. Nevertheless, *The English Soul* succeeds in demonstrating the immense literary and spiritual riches of the Christian tradition in England as embodied in its leading artists and thinkers.

Despite the fact that Puritan religious fervor led to the lopping off of the king's head in 1649 and the imposition of a military dictatorship under Oliver Cromwell (who does not get a chapter in the book), Ackroyd's argument is that English Christianity is primarily defined by its practicality, moderation, and generally good-natured tolerance. Ackroyd articulates early on the "spiritual pragmatism" which is "the *via media* of English piety, with a sanity and discretion that instinctively avoid obsession or excess." Most of England's spiritual celebrities fit into this mold. Thomas Cranmer is identified by "his appetite for moderation and his capacity for compromise," Richard Hooker's work "was a thoroughly English call for practicality and compromise in ecclesiastical affairs," and even Cardinal Newman's doctrinally strict Catholicism "rested not on abstract truths or theoretical systems, but on the practical experience of the world."

And yet, Ackroyd is canny enough to undercut his own caricature. While he insists on seeing the good and noble in almost every religious manifestation he examines, the one sour note comes in chapter 16, "Religion as Established." Here, Ackroyd takes up the Victorian church and its failure of nerve. "In the early decades of the nineteenth century," he sighs, "religion was the air that the 'respectable' breathed." The established church, in Ackroyd's telling, became an instrument of power and social control as the rich bought the best pews and preached a stodgy middle-class morality while the working classes left the churches en masse. So when, in this chapter, Ackroyd writes of the church's "pragmatism," the mood is entirely different; the easygoing virtues have become a cloak for complacency and conservatism rather than a living spiritual inheritance. One is reminded of W. H. Auden's remark that "Anglican piety at its best . . . is the piety of a gentleman, which means, of course, that at its second best it becomes merely genteel."

Indeed, as Ackroyd's book unfolds, it becomes clear that the author's truest sympathies are not with state religion and social conformity but with England's working-class mystics, wild-eyed reformers, and inspired poets. He loves Julian, Richard Rolle, and William Blake. He even admires the founders of the Salvation Army, William and Catherine Booth, who led "a movement composed of working-class men and women" that elided "the orthodox distinction between sacred and secular . . . in the urgent desire to bring the gospel to the poor." Perhaps most surprisingly, Ackroyd writes movingly of contemporary Pentecostals and charismatic movements.

Of the latter, he observes that “in the repetition of words, and in the accumulation of phrases and prayers and songs, we hear a hint of the origins of all liturgy, see a glimpse of the rushing stream before it became frozen into sculpture.”

Best of all, however, are Ackroyd’s portraits of the prose masters of the English language, those whose piety twisted and shaped the vernacular to their need to express the divine. The preacher Lancelot Andrewes was one such genius, who, as Ackroyd brilliantly puts it, “finds truth, or the Word, within a word or in the syntax of a sentence. It might be described as the grammar of God.” In John Donne’s sermons, Ackroyd observes “feeling finding form,” locating “meaning in paradox and opposition.” In George Herbert, the melody of the King James Bible mingles with the purity of the poet’s form: “As at a service, the music is in the air, but you cannot tell from what soul it comes. This is in fact the music of Herbert’s being.”

It is a joy to survey the past with Ackroyd and to meet so many sensitive souls grappling with the most urgent questions of life and faith. One senses, despite the author’s occasional lapse into clichéd and simplistic notions of national character, that his deepest conviction is precisely that within the recesses of the English language, the Word may become word, and beauty and truth be joined. Ackroyd’s great achievement is that, at times, through the elegance and clarity of his own language, he makes us believe this to be true.