

East meets West – a reflective faith journey from China to London



Jenny Clarke was born and raised in China. She came to UK aged 18 to pursue higher education and became a Christian during her university study in Leicester, UK. She is currently a Lecturer in Westminster University and a Licensed Lay Minister in Christ Church, Isle of Dogs, London.

I was brought up as an atheist. I remember that at the age of 10, I made a vow to devote my life to communism, and I received a red scarf, which signifies my status as a member of the Young Pioneers of China. In a way, this ceremony is very similar to a standard confirmation service in my church. We had 12 children from the local parish school confirmed on 12th May 2024, but I hardly saw them afterwards in the church on Sundays. This is not a criticism. Turning up to Sunday mass week by week requires sacrifice. Those youngsters will have had to miss football clubs, Sunday TV, weekends away or other fun. Sometimes, I struggle to go to mass, so I shouldn't offer to take the speck out of others' eyes before taking out the beams of my own.

In China, the majority of Christians are converts and they have made an active decision not to follow the standard education system. Generally, Chinese Christians are more passionate or even militant about the new belief. Speaking from my own experience as an atheistic Young Pioneer of China, I have never felt strongly about atheism. People who were converted to atheism are different. A few years ago, some atheists paid £140,000 to advertise that "there is probably no God"ⁱ. I would not have understood why someone would spend money in order to promote their view about whether God exists had I not been a convert myself. I had never seen a bus in China or any advertisement in China that promotes atheism, although the majority of people are atheists.

My personal experience perceives that converts seem more committed than those brought up with a particular tradition. However Barker and Currie (1985)ⁱⁱ carried out a study using a sample drawn from born-again Christians and concluded that the level of commitment varies not between groups of converts and alternators (i.e. people brought up with a tradition). They argued that commitment is sustained by interaction with other believers after recruitment to the religious group has taken place although more research in this area is needed to reach a definitive conclusion. We also need to acknowledge each individual is different and that God leads each of us differently. I don't resent my atheist upbringing. I was a lukewarm atheist, and I would probably be a lukewarm Christian if I were brought up in church school.

The first time I experienced Christianity was through an Alpha course when I was invited by a university classmate. In fact, he didn't even mention the Alpha course. He asked whether I wanted to go to a free dinner with him. As a student who had never lived independently and could hardly cook, I enjoyed the free dinners and looked forward to these meetings expectantly.

I currently consider myself an Anglo-Catholic. Many high and/or liberal Anglicans criticise the Alpha course, but I have been grateful for the opportunity to participate in it. I prayed and worshipped with Christians even though I wasn't convinced that God existed. If you ask me why, I can only say that God's Holy Spirit works mysteriously.

I have found that one of the strengths of Anglicanism is that it allows a broad spectrum of expression of the Christian faith. I like the zeal of the Evangelicals to proclaim God's kingdom and their eagerness to share their faith in Christ, as well as the deep meanings of God's grace channelled through the sacraments, which is often felt in an Anglo-Catholic setting.

I decided to become a Christian in a free Pentecostal church. A classmate invited me to her church. At first, I didn't know she was a Christian. One day, we sat next to each other in the computer suite. I asked her what she was working on. She said she was preparing for Sunday School. At that time, "Sunday School" was a new concept for me. I thought she had got a part-time job to give extra English and Maths tuition to children on Sundays. She had to explain that it was a role in her church.

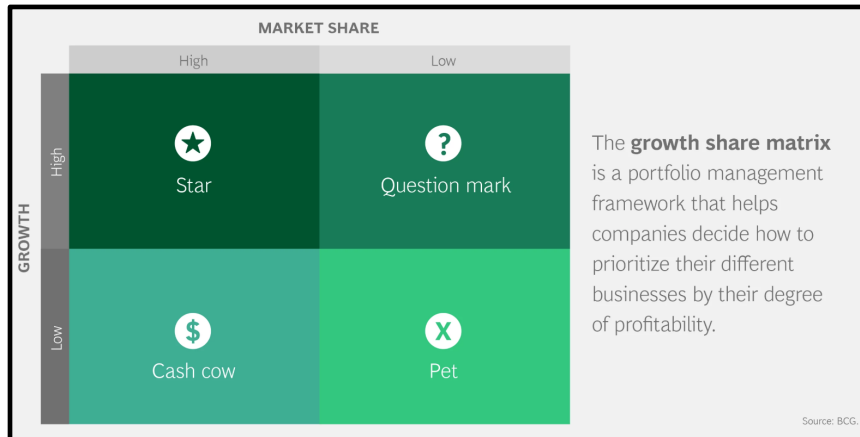
I went with her to her church almost every Sunday because she really wanted me to go with her. On one occasion, when the pastor talked about how Jesus asked the Father to forgive the soldiers who crucified him, I felt very touched. I sensed that Christianity requires higher moral standards than atheism. I had heard of many communist heroes in China who have given up their lives for their comrades and country, but none of them have died for their enemies. I tried to pray for an enemy of mine, and afterwards, I felt enormous peace within myself. At that moment, I felt God did exist.

I have never been accustomed to the Pentecostal worship style. In fact, some people were so emotional that I didn't understand what was happening. I was only in that church because my friend really wanted me to be there. People in my current church often debate how we could be more attractive, using hymns or worship songs, organ or piano, longer or shorter service. From my personal perspective, I believe that people come to church because of Christ. Only if we constantly strive to be Christlike will people around us be able to see how our faith makes a difference in our daily lives and will be attracted to worship our God. Hymns, songs, drums or incense are really just the icing on the cake.

In China, church activities are only limited to prayer meetings, bible study groups, retreats, and pilgrimages. In the UK, Church buildings are used for all sorts of activities, from Karate classes to silent discos. Church of England ministers are more pressured to keep local people entertained and engaged, and they need to lead all kinds of activities and have a wide range of knowledge. I think many C of E clergy are better at chatting than cab drivers. It's impressive!

As a certified accountant by profession, I would like to look at the phenomenon by analysing the market using the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) matrix.ⁱⁱⁱ

The BCG matrix is a product portfolio framework that categorises products into four groups based on market growth and market share. By placing each business unit into one of these categories, executives can determine where to allocate resources and capital for maximum value and identify areas where they may need to cut losses.



(Boston Consulting Group, 2024)

In England and Wales, the population identifying themselves as Christians dropped by 17% from 33.3 million in 2011 to 27.5 million in 2021. (Office of National Statistics 2021) ^{iv} The Church of England's average Sunday attendance dropped 41% from 858,000 in 2011 to 509,000 in 2021. (Eames & Church of England Data Service Team 2021) ^v

Unfortunately, statistics reveal that Anglican Sunday Service attendance is in the low growth and low share category. By using the BCG model, divesting into other leisure activities is a solution to maintain the overall growth. It's unsurprising to see that church buildings in the UK are often used for karate classes, yoga sessions, concerts, and silent discos. Christianity is growing rapidly in China, and there's less need to divest or reposition.

I personally feel uneasy when church buildings are not available for prayer because they need to be used for leisure activities. While I was a pastoral assistant, a parishioner said to me, "Last week, my grandma died, so I want to say a prayer in the church. I went to Church A, it was closed during the week, and then I went to Church B, but it required me to pay for an admission ticket, then I went to Church C, it was closed for a concert." It was very sad. However, we can acknowledge God's grace is enough for us.

In conclusion, I have personally found that the Anglican Church is great in many ways in terms of its diversity, engagement activities, and willingness to try different methods to reach out to people. However, it is also important to be mindful that all these extra activities do not take our focus away from Christ himself. After all Jesus himself said 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.' *Luke 10:41-42*

Jenny Clarke, September 2024

ⁱRiazat Butt, (2009) *Atheist bus campaign spreads the word of no God nationwide* Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jan/06/atheist-bus-campaign-nationwide> Accessed on 9th Sep 2024

ⁱⁱ Barker, I. R., & Currie, R. F. (1985). Do Converts Always Make the Most Committed Christians? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 24(3), 305–313. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1385819>

ⁱⁱⁱ Boston Consulting Group, 2024 What Is the Growth Share Matrix? <https://www.bcg.com/about/overview/our-history/growth-share-matrix> Accessed on 30 Aug 2024

^{iv} Office of National Statistics 2021 Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021 The religion of usual residents and household religious composition in England and Wales, Census 2021 data. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021> Accessed on 9 Sep 2024

^v Dr Ken Eames, Church of England Data Services team Statistics for Mission 2021 <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/2021-statistics-for-mission.pdf> accessed on 9 Sep 2024