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6 February 2013: Alistair McConville, Steep Church

Social Glue

Whilst I've long since forgotten what I got for Christmas, I am still benefitting from the psychological afterglow of the communal activities which took place in Steep. Carols and bell ringing outside the village hall - with mulled wine and a mince pie, of course - the school nativity play and carol service, the parents' sing-along, not to mention the beautiful advent and Christmas services in Steep Church; all were a chance to meet new people and bond more deeply with those we know already.

These events were centred around the familiar music, stories, liturgy, symbols and rituals with which so many of us are familiar, and which have such positive associations. The famous sociologist, Emile Durkheim, saw religion as a sort of social glue, which holds the fabric of society together. The collective repetition of creeds, the singing of hymns, the shared rituals and symbolism of communion all serve to emphasise consciously and unconsciously what we have in common with our neighbours - our mortality, our existential hopes - causing us to empathise more fully with one another.

This is much to be desired when so much in the world serves to highlight our differences and reinforce divisions. I argued amicably with a friend over the holidays, who describes himself as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious', as so many people do, teasing him about his solitary spiritual seekings outside of any particular tradition. Suggestively, to me, empirical studies show that people who describe themselves as spiritual rather than religious do not enjoy any of the benefits which data suggests 'religious' people do: longer life, lower divorce rates, better mental health. Of course, this is not remotely 'proof' of the truth of religion, but it does suggest to me that we're more attuned by nature to communal religious activities than vague home-brewed notions of spirituality.