Reimagining Religion and Belief in the Public Sphere

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Many have noticed that religion and belief are prominent again across the West, despite the assumptions of its disappearance to a vanishing point, which dominated much of the 20th century and which continues to hang over in contemporary public policy and professional practice. It is striking that recent news items have included the persecution of Christians, anti-semitism in the Labour Party, Islamophobia in the Conservative Party, same-sex marriage and abortion in Northern Ireland, and, in Brexit, the Irish backstop, guaranteeing the Good Friday Agreement. There is this twin context of a widespread, ill-defined secular-mindedness and a common negativity about religion as a problem. This suggests that there needs to be a reimagining across the public square. How can the public square be helped as it struggles to cope with a growing diversity as well as visibility of religion and belief in every sector and setting, and how has this struggle come about?

A combination of old binaries and powerful paradigms is critical to the explanation. They reside in academic disciplines and are reflected in policy and social norms which seem likely to have run out of road. The conundrum is that they no longer equip us for the challenges that are faced – of super-diversity, extremism and the continuing role of faith groups in the provision of increasingly critical social services.

Of course, the dominance of the secular paradigm means this is the foremost framing, and is arguably sociology's greatest success. It is at the root of Western difficulty with talking about religion. There appears to be a wide-spread and deep-rooted assumption at large that religion and belief are essentially in decline and likely to disappear. Nuanced and contested though the notion really is, this 'vanishing point' perspective of secularity informs much of what schools and universities teach, and how professions and leaderships practice.

Yet as critics have noted, simple decline is too simple a tale. People are 'believing without belonging' (Davie, 1994), as well as 'belonging without believing' (Hervieu-Leger, 2000). A de-formalisation is observed which detaches people from institutions and reveals religion and belief as subject to the same consumerist and marketised behaviours and choices as are exercised in other walks of life (Woodhead, 2012). At the same time we are told that most (84 percent) of the global population reports a religion or belief (Pew Research Center, 2012). Europe's apparent secular decline is the exception not the rule (Davie, 2015).

So secular assumptions – whether procedural or programmatic (Williams, 2014) – how we behave or what ideological commitments we make – look increasingly like a dead end. Globalisation and migration put everyone in to daily encounter with a diversity of religion, belief and non-belief, whether they like it or not, in every public sphere. An insistence on private, not public religion looks shaky. More religious diversity does not seem well met by more secularity.

Yet this is the other great binary which persists. Habermas' (2006) earlier proposal of the privacy of religion and his requirement that it appear in the public sphere only in the language of 'public reasons' is problematic in societies which find themselves needing to name the widest range of religions and beliefs so that we can engage with them, as well as hold them to account. How can we both talk and not talk about religion and belief at the same time?

The neutrality implied by 'public reasons' is itself in question anyway, since the non-religiousness of shared space is full instead of other normativities, beliefs and world views, revolving around liberal and neo-liberal commitments. It appears that we have given ourselves permission to talk about certain permitted proxies – spirituality and mindfulness, for example - but on religion there is much more squeamishness.

All this takes place in the context of another major shift which is the general recognition that the 21st century has generated a new form of modernity that is profoundly

different to that devised and envisaged in the 19th and 20th centuries. There are several elements to this. The first is the acceleration of globalised capitalism that combines neo-liberalism and deregulation with innovations in communication technology and travel to allow maximum fluidity and movement over geographic and cultural domains. This has created more intense flows of migration of people, ideologies and beliefs that can be experienced as challenging to existing forms of local identity or community – hence there are push backs, as Brexit suggests. This connectivity all comes with new levels of risk. The financial crash of 2008 was a global event that epitomizes it. What went wrong somewhere went wrong everywhere. The negative impacts include growing social and economic inequality, and a heightened sense of anxiety and fragmentation at the apparent loss of any political party or strategy that will restore a sense of control and order. Trump is apparently one response. More optimistically, Macron is another. In this, religion and belief are once again brought to the fore, sometimes as a source of personal consolation in times of fear and anxiety, sometimes as an ideological prop to a 'pure nation/culture' narrative, or as a diffuse but powerful presence in new alternative movements of participation, resistance and democracy.

In these contexts, the blurring of hitherto rigidly-imagined intellectual boundaries has given way to real-world blurring. How complex, diverse, increasingly crowded and also privatised public spaces are being contested and shared in the real world presents constant challenges to both established policy and academic ideas. At the same time, student and employer expectations that graduates be 'work ready' increasingly includes the capacity to effectively work with individuals and communities with diverse religious beliefs and practices. There is a changing culture in the academy towards matters associated with religion and belief in broader society. Consequently, academic expertise once considered marginal and of little consequence to society is increasingly recognised as making an essential contribution.

A critical question for religion and belief in this context is whether old forms of thinking (in the academy and wider) result in old forms of policy and practice which misalign the real religion and belief landscape and what we do about them. Thinking as a secular polis in which religion is the traditions (the five, or maybe nine, world religions), is private,

and is also declining is likely to determine policy and practice which reflects this, and thereby misconceives the opportunities and risks. Such a public sphere can quickly find itsself wrestling with a muddle of highly plural religion and belief on the one hand and a clutch of mid 20th-century policy framings on the other.

The insistence on religion as private also impedes public conversation, and probably accounts for a lot of the focus on religion and belief as oppressive, sexist, homophobic and violent, as reflected in prominent policy solutions in equality law and the prevention of violent extremism. Each implicitly emphasises the risk side of the equation. Thus in policy, religion and belief is most commonly engaged as a problem to be solved - by banning Burkhas (in France), restricting the travel of Muslims (in the US), and allowing employers to forbid the wearing of religious symbols (in the EU). So we are challenged to imagine a public sphere which can come to terms with new ways of thinking - which engage with a world which is religious *and* secular, Christian *and* multifaith, private *and* public.

This is obviously a challenge for the public square at large. But it is also a challenge for the Church of England (and all the churches). How does *it* imagine religion and belief, and its own role in the public square? This chapter looks at both these challenges – to the public square, and to the Church of England.

The Challenge to the Public Sphere

Starting with the public square, the focus is on four spheres of faith and public policy which present in Britain: security and cohesion; welfare; equality and human rights; and education.

On security and cohesion, on the one hand is the suite of 'Prevent' policies, which emphasise the idea of religion as somehow risky. More or less from the start this was criticised for othering Islam and Kundnani's analysis in Spooked (Kundnani 2009) revealed a direct relationship between the top twenty most Muslim populated areas in Britain and the top twenty largest funding allocations from Prevent. He concluded that this revealed far too blunt an approach which simply assumes that where there are Muslims there are terrorists.

Alienation was so immediate that many Muslim communities would not apply for the funding which was available. The approach has been reformed three times in ten years, each time with the goal of addressing this problem of othering. But it continues to work at the level of preventing risky individuals in risky communities, whereas alternative critiques might engage instead with the spaces for extremism created in international relations, diplomacy and conflict.

Much of this of course has also got caught up with migration policy and practice, as we've been experiencing in Britain with Brexit and the 'hostile environment', and in the US with the Mexican wall and the attempts at a Muslim travel ban. While security policy and practice is criticised for mis-imagining Islam, it also intersects confusingly with cohesion policy which celebrates the bonding, bridging and linking it thinks is inherent in having a faith. This is confusing because the two policy strands live out in many of the same people and communities. They are constructed as both heroes and villains. So workplaces and schools must monitor the immigration status of staff and have a duty to report anything they think of as suspicious behaviours, but they also want the monitored to engage in relaxed, happy relationships of trust.

The second public sphere concerns welfare and here the story is of enormous amounts of faith-based service provision, both contracted and voluntary, all across Britain, Europe and the West. It is built in to neo-liberalism as faith groups are leant on to plug gaps in welfare as state provision withdraws. The problem of imagination here is different to the one with security and cohesion. There are two issues.

One, in the welfare sphere faith groups are romanticised as repositories of resources – buildings, staff, volunteers, networks, money – which may or may not be there. In England in particular the Church of England is regarded by the current government as well placed to plug all sorts of gaps. But Abby Day's research suggests that many churches are poorly attended by elderly and declining congregations, share vicars and other staff, and struggle with expensive maintenance of ancient buildings (Day 2017). While I disagree with her conclusion that this means we are looking at 'the last active Anglicans', and I think a lot goes on outside of the worshipping community on Sundays, I do recognise the general point –

that the army of volunteers, on the one hand, and the stockpile of resources on the other, may not be as big imagined, or in the places imagined.

Service provision also comes with an increasing apparatus of scrutiny and evaluation. State involvement has moved from provision to monitoring of provision such that faith groups – many of which are really small and operating on shoestring budgets – have to complete complex paperwork, which might in any case be measuring the wrong things and missing the right ones. It is likely too that much of this is designed as though all the religions and beliefs look a bit like the Church of England – structured, with leaders, clergy etc, whereas the reality is of a much more varied range of set-ups, including really informal networks without leaders and buildings though contributing really important things.

The third area is equality and human rights. In 2010 an overhaul of equality law produced a refreshed 'Single Equalities Framework' expressed in the new Equality Act 2010. This bought together and clarified existing measures. It also added a new Public Sector Equality Duty, supported by specific requirements including to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act, advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not and foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not. The Act explains that having due regard for advancing equality involves removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics, taking steps to meet the needs of people from protected groups where these are different from the needs of other people, and encouraging people from protected groups to participate in public life or in other activities where their participation is disproportionately low.

The Church of England is not public sector but it does occupy a uniquely public role. Perhaps it is salutary for them to ask themselves whether the values reflected here might properly apply to them, and if so, what might this mean for their practice? Regardless, these are fiendishly difficult standards to meet in relation to religion and belief as complex test cases have shown.

That said, the Act's defining of religion or belief is itself very stretchy, to include non-religious beliefs and non-traditional ones too. This perhaps comes closest in public policy to imagining religion and belief as they really exist in everyday life. The challenge then is to translate this well-imagined policy in to practice. This has been presenting employers, providers and judges with some really interesting dilemmas.

The final public sphere is schools. RE in schools all over Europe is perhaps the most influential of spaces in which we learn to think about religion or belief. An urgent conversation is underway in England about the future of learning about religion and belief in schools, following growing criticisms of the policy muddle which frames it. Under the 1944 Education Act, RE is required in schools, but when the national curriculum was introduced in the 1988 Education Reform Act, it was not included. A third of state education in England is provided in partnership with churches in church schools – mostly Anglican but also some Catholic – which deliver education in an ethos described as of 'Christian character'. In 1988 the stated purpose of RE shifted from 'teaching religion' to 'teaching about religion', and indoctrinatory teaching was prohibited. 'Religious Education' replaced 'Religious Instruction' and multi-faith Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs) replaced the Christian Syllabus Conferences. Agreed Syllabuses are now required to "reflect the fact that religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain" (UK Parliament 1988, Section.8.3) – a view which is at least debatable. In 1994 non-statutory model syllabuses were published which included six 'main' religions, raising the question of what counts as 'main', and who decides? In 2004 a non-statutory national framework was introduced and the range of religions to be studied was further widened, including the study of 'secular philosophies such as humanism'. Which ones to include? Many schools deliver RE through tutor periods, or occasional 'RE days' rather than as a discrete regular subject on the timetable. RE was not included in the government's review of the National Curriculum carried out in 2013. A former Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, has said that RE has been an 'unintended casualty' of reforms (REC, 2013).

The 1944 settlement is now more than 70 years old, and has been repeatedly amended, in piecemeal ways, usually in the direction of trying to keep up with a changing

religion and belief landscape. But changes in the real religious landscape have far outpaced changes in education about it. We have a mid-20th century settlement for an early 21st century reality. It is hard to watch other faiths try to find a space for themselves in this domain, as faith schools are repeatedly subject to all sorts of critiques. But it doesn't seem surprising that other faiths see church schools all over the country and they want a place of their own.

The Challenge to the Church of England

A 2013 *Respublica* report singles out the Church of England as a body "delivering a greater level of care than the state and the market were ever able to do" (Respublica 2013). It thinks the Church of England has the 'resources, experience, intention and will', and urges the Archbishop of Canterbury to 'universalise Christian social action' as the main ambition of his primacy. This has perhaps seemed seductive of course. But it poses difficult questions for the Church of England's social action in a context where the landscape of religion and belief is not what it was last time it called itself the national church.

Through the New Labour years, policy envisaged the re-population of the now mixed economy of welfare, not with the well-meaning Anglicans of pre-1948 Britain, but with providers from the full plurality of religious traditions. From that vantage point, faith-based social action could look much more like the nation it serves than the Church of England tends to on an average Sunday morning. The Conservative-Liberal and Conservative governments after 2010 have had a far more anachronistic streak when it comes to religion. They observe in the Church of England's parish system a presence in every neighbourhood from which to reach across the whole range of traditions. Government wants the Church of England to facilitate faith-based social action *by* all, *for* all. *Near Neighbours* is a key part of the church's response - delivered through the Church Urban Fund. While it may look like a timely stream of funding from a well-established body, it also reflects a retrenchment from that multifaith paradigm to a Church of England lead. The programme valorizes the Anglican parishes as a primary source and focus, claiming that: "Near Neighbours taps into the unique Church of England parish system, which has presence in all neighbourhoods and an ethos as the national Church with a responsibility towards all in the parish."

(www.cuf.org.uk/near-neighbours accessed 1 March 2011). It says that "People of any faith will be able to bid for funding through the local parish church". But the challenge for a multi-faith Britain is that it depends upon the parish system, not only of a single faith but a single denomination within that faith.

Conclusion

The combination of a public sphere which struggles to talk about religion and belief, and a Church of England which thinks itself as a 'national church' is problematic. The risk is that a religiously diverse and non-religious public sees this as a shift from a multi-faith, plural, inclusive public sphere to one in which public Christianity is reaffirmed and the Church of England gate-keeps for everyone, perhaps even perceived as valorized at the expense of minorities. Even if Abby Day's old ladies could live for ever, and the money and structures were really there to 'universalize Christian social action', as *Respublica* hopes, a diverse multi-faith society is unlikely to welcome it. A response to equality and plurality lies in the Church of England helping to hold open a space, and participating alongside everyone else as their equals. This conceives of a Church of England which serves best as a church for the nation, not as the national church. It requires both a church and a public sphere which can grasp the contemporary religion and belief landscape as pervasive, fluid, plural, Christian and secular, all at once.

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