

Faith and Policy

Where Next for Religion in the Public Sphere?

AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme with
the Faiths and Civil Society Unit, Goldsmith's

Held at the British Library Conference Centre, London, UK 1st July 2010

The programme for the day is at the end of this document.

Platform participants:

- Adam Dinham (Director, Faiths & Civil Society Unit, Goldsmiths)
- Andrew Brown (Editor of 'Comment is Free, Belief', The Guardian)
- Arun Kundnani (Author of Spooked: How Not to Prevent Violent Extremism)
- Bhikhu Parekh (House of Lords)
- Doreen Finneron (Executive Director of the Faith-based Regeneration Network)
- Francis Davis (Co-Author Moral, But No Compass)
- Grace Davie (Professor Emeritus, Sociology of Religion, Exeter University)
- Haleh Afshar (Professor of Middle Eastern Politics, & House of Lords)
- John Devine (Churches' Officer for the North West)
- Linda Woodhead (Professor of Sociology of Religion, Lancaster University)
- Luke Bretherton (Senior Lecturer in Theology & Politics, King's College, London)
- Margaret Harris (Emeritus Professor of Voluntary Sector Organisation, Aston)
- Paul Eedle (Middle East Journalist)
- Philip Lewis (Honorary Visiting Lecturer, Dept of Peace Studies, Bradford University)
- Richard Farnell (Professor of Neighbourhood Regeneration, Coventry University)
- Vivien Lowndes (Professor of Local Government Studies, De Montfort University)

Summary Report

In May 2010 the UK General Election brought in a change of government. The country faced a period of serious economic and consequent social challenges. What part might religion play in public life in this period? Religion's place in public life has altered rapidly in the last quarter of a century. The religious mix and patterns of adherence have changed. Local and national government have developed new forms of partnership with religious and other bodies in the voluntary sector.

"This was one of the best conferences of its kind which I have attended."

Academics and practitioners met for a day conference timed to coincide with what turned out to be the advent of a new kind of coalition government, bringing together Conservative and Liberal Democrat visions of the future, and with talk of the "Big Society". Platform speakers and participants engaged over six sessions with themes embracing the participation of religious and faith-based bodies in community and social action, security issues surrounding the connection of religion with violent extremism, and wider policy debates.

Introduction - The new face of faith?

A review of the last 25 years considered how religion's role in UK society has changed. Adam Dinham [Director of the Faiths and Civil Society Unit, Goldsmiths], listen [here](#), and Linda Woodhead [Director of the Religion and Society Programme], listen [here](#), presented continuities and changes and identified key topics for the day's discussion. They hoped that academics would engage today with practitioners in a fruitful consideration of the part faith organisations can and should play in society.

Was the Church of England's report "Faith in the City" 25 years ago, asked Linda Woodhead, the end of an era – an era in which the established Church could intervene critically in political life and claim to be the moral conscience of the nation? The following decade, the 1990s, saw a lull in the prominence of religion, but world religions were achieving new settlements, Christianity was changing internally, and new forms of alternative and charismatic spirituality were on the rise. Riots, Tony Blair's coming out on faith, and world events including the 9/11 attacks propelled religion back into the news after 2001.

"It was interesting to see how religion sits with policy, outside of the Higher Education environment."

Under New Labour this last decade had seen government turning to the faith communities as depositories of resources, said Adam Dinham. This was not without its problems. This development helped set the day's agenda. Does government understand religion, and on what terms can religion be a partner to government? Has the power balance shifted irrevocably, with religion now being seen as a useful tool for reaching areas the welfare state cannot reach?

Session 1 - What's new? [Read and hear more ...](#)

Partnership looks different, depending which partner is doing the looking, argued Vivien Lowndes (Professor of Local Government Studies, De Montfort University). She had come from political science to an interest in how religion could be a partner to government. While civil servants and their local counterparts might see religions as top-down pyramids, with faith leaders able to mobilise followers and release resources, the religions themselves would see themselves as webs of goals and relationships, among which some but not all would be directed the end of public good. A third model, derived from the idea of a Stakeholder Democracy as seen by New Labour, saw faith as a sector in the voluntary sector, more like a segment of an orange.

"You were able to bring together an impressive group of presenters and attendees."

Grace Davie (Professor Emeritus, Sociology of Religion, Exeter University) asked the conference to consider *who* was discomfited by Faith in the City in 1985? Then it was the free market Conservatives, who today are at ease with religion. Now, in contrast, it is secular liberals who are disturbed by religion, and the conservative religious who find their beliefs under threat. Change has not only come to the UK. All the defining events of the late C20 had religious dynamics: the Iranian Revolution [1979], the collapse of the Soviet Empire [1989] and the 9/11 attacks, and none were predicted by social scientists. Europe with its secularity should now acknowledge that it is exceptional, and not a norm which the rest of the world will follow. She found herself dismayed by the quality of public debate on religion. Are academic disciplines yet able to do justice to the subject?

"I found the historical contextualisation and contemporary comment insightful in many instances."

From the floor, Maqsood Ahmed [Department of Communities and Local Government] drew attention to the Government's recognition of the importance of faith communities in capacity building, to which Vivien Lowndes responded with a quotation from Rob Furbey that "Faith communities can be troublesome as well as cuddlesome". Jim Robertson [Churches' Regional Commission in the North East] said the Church had in the 1990s recognised changes in the world of work which had proved to be prophetic, anticipating the collapse of the banks. Grace Davie concluded by observing an example of how the present situation is contradictory: while mental health practice now gives room to the spiritual, a nurse can be brought to court for wearing a religious symbol.

Session 2 - Community Cohesion and Social Capital [Read and hear more ...](#)

Do presuppositions based on religion pull us together or push us apart? asked Richard Farnell (Professor of Neighbourhood Regeneration, Coventry University). 'Community cohesion' was a policy brand invented by New Labour, and its counterpart in the free market world was the notion of 'Social Capital'. These brandings followed disturbances in cities with large and poor Muslim populations. Richard Farnell presented evidence that religion in general does advance social well-being, but asked some searching questions about the terms on which religion with its own complexity can engage with government's aims for society.

"The conference will enable us to consider the way we go about our work [in community cohesion and voluntary and community sector], and whether this could be done in a better way."

There is a schizophrenia about religion. It can be seen as a resource when it comes to social capital, or as a problem when it comes to extremism. Francis Davis [Young Foundation, and Adviser to the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG)], speaking at short notice, made clear he was speaking as an academic observer and a practitioner, not within his DCLG brief. He raised various issues for discussion about the ways in which religion can be problematic, while at the same time saying that religion can bring positive qualities of its own to its contribution to society. Census data had shown that how people identify their faith made no difference to their actions as citizens. Francis Davis observed that it is observance, or belonging, that matters rather than mere belief, and that does make a difference.

“imaginative, thought provoking with an excellent mix of panel contributors and audience...”

From the chair, Adam Dinham raised some of the points voiced against religion, particularly that it can be divisive. He also spoke of the way in which the notion of social capital narrows the perception of what faith can offer. Greg Smith [William Temple Foundation] talked about the ethos of faith-based volunteering, and a distinction which can be made between spiritual capital and social capital. Brian Pearce [The Interfaith Network] spoke of the dynamic nature of religious bodies and the confusion surrounding definitions of secularism which complicate the picture. Jon Davies [University of Newcastle] enlivened the discussion with a description of the state becoming a dispenser of lollipops, with the faiths keen to receive sweets from this amiable Father Christmas! Others joined the debate to ask if the government was a threat to some religious organisations, and to talk about where they saw secularism needing to erect or dismantle barriers around religion.

Session 3 - The Active Citizen [Read and hear more ...](#)

A loosely-twisted bundle of 3 multi-coloured strands, each made up of threads of different hues which come to the fore at different times, was the image conjured up by Doreen Finneron (Executive Director of the Faith-based Regeneration Network). The colours derive from the faiths' own values such as care for others, the ideas that have shaped social action like the work of Paolo Freire on education and liberation, and the government's own set of goals for social policy, like regeneration, security, and cohesion. Those who participate in society from a religious standpoint need to engage urgently if they are to help shape the nature of any partnership with government, and have already become more savvy about how they can do that.

“The day has given me an invaluable overview of the bonding of Religion and Society in Britain.”

Luke Bretherton (Senior Lecturer in Theology & Politics, King's College, London) said the Big Society idea was the latest in a long line of calls for active citizenship. The State was re-casting itself as partner, not as provider.

Religion had a part to play in the re-defining of the citizen, but on its own terms. He developed the idea of the citizen as Voter, Volunteer or Vow-Keeper. Vow-keeping was, he said, essential to public life, and was about long-term fidelity, an idea which religions understood. Faithfulness offers stability, and flies in the face of the voluntary contractual relationships favoured by economic markets. Covenanted, vow-based, relationships were key to understanding the past [he instanced Methodism, or temperance movements], and could find foundations in the present [by way of kinship, neighbourhood, profession and creed].

Patrick Shine [Shaftesbury Partnership] welcomed the mention of trust and reciprocity, since he believed Big Society thinking to be based on associative behaviour. Clair Dwyer [University College, London] spoke of the cooperation achieved already at grassroots by London Citizens in working with non-religious partners. Elaine Graham [University of Chester] asked if the government would be ready to learn from the expertise already gathered by faith communities. Greg Smith [William Temple Foundation] voiced fears that even if the ideas were good, there is a lot of failure around at present in membership organisations, whether politics, churches and pubs. John Devine [Churches Officer for the North West] asked if the work already done by the regions was in danger of being air-brushed out by the new coalition government. Luke Bretherton, responding from the platform, said there were two distinct strands of thinking even within the Cabinet Office and it would be interesting for academics to observe how any conflicts played out.

Session 4 - Prevention of Violent Extremism [Read and hear more ...](#)

After a morning considering partnership, the afternoon resumed with policies on religious 'extremism' as its focus. Government strategies for combating 'radicalisation', primarily among young Muslims, came under scrutiny. Was it effective, was it well-informed, and did it alienate the very people it was supposed to win over?

A recent House of Commons report published earlier this year, said Philip Lewis (Department of Peace Studies, Bradford University), had asked questions about the Government's Prevent strategy. [Prevent is part of the Government's Counter-Terrorism Strategy, or CONTEST, and is implemented at local government level.] Had theological drivers behind terrorism been over-emphasised? It rightly challenged the government's ideas of "good" and "bad" Muslims [cuddly Sufi, politicized Islamist]. He believed the committee showed an impressive level of understanding, and had gathered evidence well, but he was surprised that no mention was made of pioneering work by the Muslim Contact Unit [MCU] set up by the Special Branch in London which had contacted around 200 mosques, developing excellent local knowledge, fostering trust, and recognising the need to engage Muslims in challenging violence.

"It was good to hear opinions on areas that are clearly contested."

Arun Kundnani introduced himself as an atheist who tried to think about religion. He challenged Prevent's strategy as attempting to divide Muslims into moderates and extremists, using a strategy of mapping, propaganda and surveillance. He had written "Spooked; How Not to Prevent Violent Extremism" while at the Institute of Race Relations [available from www.irr.org.uk], in which he had faulted Prevent for constructing Muslims as a "suspect community", fostering social divisions, violating norms of privacy and confidentiality, and discouraging local democracy. It had failed, he believed, even on its own terms.

Discussion from the floor echoed and developed some of these concerns. In particular Maleia Malik [King's College London] said the law was being used across Europe and in Britain in a classic process of labelling those who are different and are among us, and that this was even now happening to Christianity in terms of its distinctive values. John Wolffe [Open University] suggested that Prevent echoed notions of "good" and "bad" Catholics in the 19th century.

Session 5 - Faith going "Mainstream" [Read and hear more ...](#)

Following on from the discussion of extremism, Margaret Harris (Emeritus Professor of Voluntary Sector Organisation, Aston) began with a light-bulb joke: 'How many Californians does it take to change a light bulb?' 'Any number is cool but the light bulb really has to WANT to change'. Does faith WANT to be mainstreamed? Just because political leaders like George W Bush and Gordon Brown had believed in the extra value faith-based organisations might bring to the solution of public problems does not mean faith can always expect such understanding or welcome. Might not policy-makers in general be looking to faith purely to be an instrument in fighting social ills from terrorism to poverty? Her research suggested that some faith organisations are pleased to be engaged on these terms, while others find their ideals compromised or overwhelmed when dealing with a governmentally-driven agenda. More than that, the recent experience of Catholic adoption agencies [with regard to gay parents] and of Jewish faith schools [with regard to defining who is Jewish] showed the legal system encroaching on territory which religions felt was their own.

"[The] conference has confirmed my view of the importance of faith groups in working policy makers and in delivery. I will continue to try and raise awareness across Government Offices..."

Francis Davis [Young Foundation, and adviser to the DCLG] gave the conference an account of what he considered key developments in post-war history from 1945. The Welfare State, a very top-down solution to social ills, had repeated the very inequalities it was meant to combat. It resulted in the dilemma that direct action by citizens to work for social well-being could be seen as "doing the State's job". It was now time for social enterprise, and he illustrated this from his own experience in Southampton where local initiatives had cut through bureaucracy and found ways round problems of provision which had become inherent in the government's own systems. The ideas of the Big Society would move us on, he claimed, as it amounted to a re-shaping of society, offering opportunities for new solutions, unlocking talent, and looking to religion to do what it does well, asking good questions. It would revive a model going back to the original pioneers of welfare reform, with less in the way of targets and forms, and more creative grasping of new opportunities.

Jeremy Carrette [University of Kent] reminded the conference of Roland Robinson's concept of "Glocalisation". Much of the talk today had been about the local; it had a counterpart in how faith organisations could harmonise their mission objectives in partnerships globally with the United

Nations. Pauline Kollontai [York St John University] wanted to make sure faith communicated to government that it could offer more than just a sticking plaster, and it needed to retain the right to challenge policy. Fleur Bragaglia [Salvation Army] said her organisation had a long history of being innovators, engaged with government yet also being robust. They could be true to their principles, and were also good at knowing when to shut down one area of operation and move on to meeting another need.

Session 6 - Faith – friend or foe? [Read and hear more ...](#)

During the Thatcher years of the 1980s the Church of England was both the Established Church and, when it came to war or urban poverty, one of the government's most robust critics. Andrew Brown (Editor of 'Comment is Free, Belief', *The Guardian*) chaired the final session and recounted a personal encounter at that time with the behind-the-scenes old-boy network of Government, Press and Church. Within ten years that kind of gathering had become rare. He believed part of the rage of atheist protest today derives from the breakdown of a privileged and donnish consensus. "Faith in the City" was a last gasp cry of social disgust: "You can't do that!". If there is a new shared moral sense it revolves around political correctness, and this accompanies a shift in the labeling of what is alien. A generation back it was race; now it is religion, starting with Muslims, but growing to include Christians.

The platform was taken by two members of the House of Lords. Haleh Afshar [University of York, House of Lords] spoke passionately about the ascribed identity forced on Muslim women. She and other Muslim women found their voices rejected because what they truly wanted to express did not fit wider expectations. They were told they could not be feminists if they were Muslims. As someone with multiple and fluid identities – Iranian, French-educated, feminist, mother, teacher, shopper – she challenged those who sought to impose a stereotype on her, but also realised how hard it was to break through.

"So many speakers, yet consistent themes, brilliant!"

Bhikhu Parekh [political theorist, House of Lords] posed the question "What is the role of religion in public life?" He believed it was time to unsettle the settlement of the 18th and 19th centuries. Christians had begun to attack a secularism which seemed biased against Christianity, in which Christianity had been lowered to a place of equality with other religions, and in which other human rights trumped religious rights. Recent pronouncements by Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali and by Lord Carey had even raised the possibility of civil disobedience by Christians. Without suggesting clear answers, he posed some questions that needed to be asked. In the name of equality can one religion be privileged, and how much does history need to be taken into account? Is the state right to co-operate with religious bodies in the delivery of services? Can the state continue to fund religious schools?

Mazin Zeki [National Secular Society] said the state needed to be neutral, and that privileging one religion in the public sphere leads to conflicts. He said that what the conference had been hearing all day was faith now being used to embrace victimhood, and as a basis for demanding resources. Jim Beckford [University of Warwick] asked if the panel agreed with the way charity law was now redefining religion as an activity which had to be of public benefit. Robert Morris [University College, London] challenged the panel to be clear on whether the present establishment can or should survive. Lord Parekh said change was needed but not purely on grounds of equality; Baroness Afshar reminded the conference that Prince Charles had already signalled in talking of the monarch being "Defender of Faith" that he would want a change.

Summary

The conference was successful in drawing 128 participants from academic life, governmental and religious bodies, and the voluntary sector. Both religious and non-religious voices were heard.

There was agreement from platform and floor that faith-based and religious organisations will continue to be significant partners to government in public life, and that the economic crisis, combined with coalition commitment to the "Big Society" would ensure this. Some expressed optimism about what this would entail; others were more cautious and wondered what would happen in practice, and whether power would really be transferred from the centre.

The conference underlined the need for further research and reflection upon the relationship of religion to government. Many agreed that care for and engagement in wider society was a central part of religious life, and greater acknowledgement and empowerment of this was to be welcomed. But what exactly does faith add? Is religion merely another actor in the voluntary sector, and must it leave its

distinctive commitments at the door? Is religion only acceptable when it is a useful tool to ameliorate social ills?

It was widely acknowledged that political understanding of the complexity of religion is weak, and that there is a tendency to reduce faith to a narrow congregational model. Both academic disciplines and politicians could be naïve about religion and history. An area in which many felt this had been demonstrated was the government's approach to tackling 'radicalisation' and understanding religious diversity and discontent.

These deliberations took place at a challenging time, with a new government introducing massive public spending cuts. Many present spoke with first-hand knowledge of the experience of the poorest in society, and hoped to continue to see religion's ability to reach those areas recognised and supported. The social innovation and changes in civil life envisaged by the talk of the Big Society could not yet be spelt out in detail, but it was evident that religion would be an important contributor and would continue to occupy a significant place in the public sphere. How significant, and how autonomous, remained to be seen.

Report compiled by Norman Winter, assisted by Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto. The boxed quotations are taken from conference feedback. Hear further conversations with Bhikhu Parekh [here](#) and Andrew Brown [here](#) recorded at the conference.

Read journalist Mark Vernon's write up of the event in *The Guardian* [here](#).

Programme

- 9.30 Registration
- 10.00 Introduction: Adam Dinham (Director, Faiths & Civil Society Unit, Goldsmiths) Linda Woodhead (Professor of Sociology of Religion, Lancaster University)
- 10.15 **What's New about Public Religion in the UK?**
 Vivien Lowndes (Professor of Local Government Studies, De Montfort University)
 Grace Davie (Professor Emeritus, Sociology of Religion, Exeter University)
 Chair: Linda Woodhead (Professor of Sociology of Religion, Lancaster University)
- 11.00 **Community Cohesion and Social Capital**
 Richard Farnell (Professor of Neighbourhood Regeneration, Coventry University)
 A.C.Grayling (Professor of Philosophy, Birkbeck College)
 Chair: Francis Davis (Co-Author *Moral, But No Compass*)
- 12.00 **Faith, Community and the Active Citizen**
 Doreen Finneron (Executive Director of the Faith-based Regeneration Network)
 Luke Bretherton (Senior Lecturer in Theology & Politics, King's College, London)
 Chair: Adam Dinham (Director, Faiths & Civil Society Unit, Goldsmiths)
- 1.00 LUNCH
- 1.45 **Prevention of Violent Extremism**
 Philip Lewis (Honorary Visiting Lecturer, Dept of Peace Studies, Bradford University)
 Arun Kundnani (Author of *Spooked: How Not to Prevent Violent Extremism*)
 Chair: Paul Eedle (Middle East Journalist)
- 2.45 **Social Enterprise, the Voluntary Sector and 'Mainstreaming' Faith**
 Francis Davis (Co-Author *Moral, But No Compass*)
 Margaret Harris (Emeritus Professor of Voluntary Sector Organisation, Aston)
 Chair: John Devine (Churches' Officer for the North West)
- 3.45 COFFEE
- 4.00 **Changing conceptions of public faith – faith as critical or as instrumental?**
 Haleh Afshar (Professor of Middle Eastern Politics, & House of Lords)

Bhikhu Parekh (House of Lords)

Chair: Andrew Brown (Editor of 'Comment is Free, Belief', *The Guardian*)

5.00

END