The Westminster Faith Debates
Seven Debates on the Place of Religion in our Public Life
Summarised by Linda Woodhead
Introduction

In the first half of 2012 a series of debates on religion in British public life were held in Westminster.

Organised by the Rt Hon Charles Clarke and Professor Linda Woodhead,1 these debates presented new research findings from the £12m national Religion and Society Programme funded by the AHRC and ESRC.2

Academics presented the findings, which were responded to by public figures, and discussed in open debate with a large audience which included politicians, members of religious and secular organisations, and the general public.

The aim of the series was to update understanding and raise the level of conversation about religion.

The debates attracted widespread media coverage and public debate.

This booklet offers brief summaries of the debates and the issues they raised. The debates can also be accessed in audio and visual form by following the links below or googling ‘Faith Debates’.

“This series has been extremely successful in raising the level of public debate about religion, on topics of great importance for our national life.”

The Rt Hon Dominic Grieve QC MP, Attorney General

1 Charles Clarke was Home Secretary 2004–2006 and is currently Visiting Professor in Politics and Faith at Lancaster University. Linda Woodhead is Professor in the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religious studies at Lancaster University, and Director of the Religion and Society Programme. They were assisted by Dr Rebecca Catto and Peta Ainsworth at Lancaster University, and by Elizabeth Hunter the Director of the think tank Theos.

2 The Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council. See www.religionandsociety.org.uk

“As a result of my time in office as Education Secretary and Home Secretary I became acutely aware of the importance of religion in our society and the need to think more clearly about what role it plays and how we could address things in a better way.”

Charles Clarke
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WHAT’S THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN PUBLIC LIFE?

In conversation

Tony Blair  Former Prime Minister
Charles Moore  Journalist, The Daily Telegraph
Rowan Williams  Archbishop of Canterbury

Questions for debate

Some of the speakers in previous debates – like Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali – believe that religion has been pushed out of public life, marginalised, even persecuted. Others, like Richard Dawkins, think it’s not been pushed out far enough and still has undue influence in government, schools and so on. How well does the UK ‘do’ religion in public life, and what improvements are needed?

Conclusions from the debate

Religion has always made an important contribution to public life, and continues to do so. Religious convictions can and should be brought into public debate and decision-making in a democracy. Few religious people in the UK want to impose their truth on others; most are happy to abide by the democratic process. The state and religious communities should work in partnership – to do so makes both more responsible.
Points of Debate and Disagreement

| Being religious involves believing that you have unique access to the truth and that ‘error has no rights.’ |
| Religion is primarily a matter of beliefs which are held to be true by their followers (and false by their critics). |
| Britain’s Christian heritage is under threat as never before, from human rights legislation above all. |
| Organised religion in the UK is too wary of the media and does not communicate well in public life. |
| Most religious people do not believe that they have a unique hold on truth, and think that ‘there are many ways to God.’ |
| Religion has as much, if not more, to do with values, with how one behaves, with relationships with God and other people. |
| Christianity still has access to the public sphere (e.g. schools, and in handling tragedy and celebration), and human rights have religious roots. |
| Public religion isn’t so much about column inches or a national voice, but action at the local level. |

Practical Suggestions

“...I think what we need is a combination of religion-friendly democracy and democracy-friendly religion... religion should have its proper place but in the end the processes of democracy must be supreme in the ultimate decision making.”
Tony Blair

State and religious communities should work in a close relationship, so that the former cannot ignore the latter and the latter cannot just opt out of public life and responsibility.

At a time when religious extremists often shout loudest and gain a disproportionate hearing, it is important to support democracy-friendly religion around the globe.

Rather than condemning religious people for irrational and false beliefs, those who attack religion should pay more attention to the values, ways of life, and relationships/communities which are what count for many religious people.
I see the extent to which people of faith feel victimised or marginalised, I'm not sure they always see it clearly... a few extremely hard cases have created a slightly highly-coloured view of where we are.”

Rowan Williams

“The more organised the religion is the less keen it seems to be on clear communication.”

Charles Moore

“I think the position of religion in public life is not just a matter of column inches or whatever, I think it’s very much about how it works on the ground in localities.”

Rowan Williams

How the Media Reported the Debate

“For what it lacked in controversy, a head-to-head between Tony Blair and Rowan Williams last night made up for in confession.”

Ruth Gledhill
The Times
25 July 2012

“On the question of women bishops, Dr Williams said that he had recently learned ‘just how difficult it is for women to hear an all-male body pronouncing on their future.’”

Madeleine Davies
Church Times
26 July 2012

“Moore deplored the way the press had condemned the very notion that Blair might have prayed with George Bush. ‘Did you pray with him, by the way?’ he demanded. Blair was unruffled. ‘It wouldn’t have been wrong,’ he said, ‘but it didn’t happen. And I’m sure that, as a journalist, you understand the distinction.’ ‘Touché!’ Moore cried.”

London Evening Standard
25 July 2012

Watch the debates and download the podcasts
www.religionandsociety.org.uk/faith_debates/public_life
Questions for debate

How do we live well together in an increasingly diverse society, and how does religion contribute for good or ill?

Conclusions from the debate

Since the 1970s the UK has been the most successful country in Europe at integrating an increasingly wide range of religious identities and allowing them agency in society. This achievement should be more widely recognised.

But the success means that religious identities are now so diverse that it is no longer as helpful to think of a small number of ‘world faiths’ which make people ‘Hindu’, ‘Muslim’, ‘Christian’ etc and which must relate to one another in a ‘multi-culture’. Many people are now religious ‘in their own way’, there are many varieties of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian, and religious identities are inflected by ethnicity, gender and so on. The concept of ‘superdiversity’ may now be more helpful than ‘multiculturalism’.

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN ‘SUPERDIVERSE’ SOCIETIES

Academics

Kim Knott  Lancaster University
Therese O’Toole  Bristol University

Public Figures

Trevor Phillips  Chair, Equality and Human Rights Commission
Dominic Grieve  Attorney General

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Research Findings

Britain leads in Europe in successful multi-faith work and integration of religious groups; many such groups are now significant agents in civil society; New Labour achieved a great deal in supporting multi-faith and inter-faith work; the Coalition government is continuing this work with more confidence but less cash.

Religious diversity is no longer a matter of homogenous religious communities (Christian, Muslim, Hindu etc.) living side by side and together. Earlier talk of ‘multiculture’ can be unhelpful if it perpetuates this idea.

The decline of organised forms of religion has been accompanied by a multiplication of religious groups, more individualised religious identities, and multiple forms of belonging.

People do not have singular identities, but mixed ones (religious, gendered, ethnic and so on). It depends on context which aspect comes to the fore – often people ‘mobilise’ one aspect of their identity only when it is under threat.

‘Superdiversity’ tries to capture the complex forms of multiple identity which result from migration, mobility, and expanded cultural and religious choice.

Points of Debate and Disagreement

“It’s about the vision we have of ourselves as a society and how we live well together…”
Linda Woodhead

‘Superdiversity’ is too vague to have policy relevance.

It is anachronistic in a multi-faith society to distribute funding for faith bodies via the Church of England, as the Coalition government’s Near Neighbours Scheme is doing.

It is appropriate to distribute funding for many faith bodies via the Church of England because it has a long history of dealing tolerantly with different beliefs.

David Cameron’s emphasis on Christian culture and ‘muscular liberalism’ threatens to undermine the gains made in the name of multiculturalism.

‘Superdiversity’ can be cashed out in policy terms. E.g. less attention should be given to so-called ‘faith communities’ and their leaders, and more to individuals – including the majority of believers in the UK who do not belong to an organised religion.

Cameron was talking about Britain’s distinctive culture, which is able to integrate many identities, without asking people to surrender who they are.
Practical Suggestions

The UK should be more positive about how much has been achieved in terms of integrating a huge range of different identities, including religious ones – the bad news stories tend to eclipse the good news. Emphasis should continue to shift away from the state giving a small number of religious group identities what they ‘need’, to supporting freedom of conscience or individuals (liberty and toleration, and making sure that the life-chances of people are not limited by their identities (fairness and equality).

Insofar as there is a ‘host culture’ it is, and should remain, one which is hospitable to religious difference and freedom of conscience. This is the majority position, and whilst more exclusivist minorities retain their normal rights, they do so within this broader framework.

With ever-increasing diversity there will be more challenges. In order to meet these there needs to be:

- understanding of the civic ‘rules of engagement’ which make it possible to live peacefully together and to reach agreement
- creative partnerships with the state, including financial support for religious and other initiatives which encourage integration
- awareness of how policies (e.g. on counter-terrorism) can foster the misleading idea that there are homogenous religious identities which wholly define people (e.g. ‘Muslim’)
- better mechanisms, especially at local level, for dealing with religious disputes and reaching agreement.

“Living together graciously… Let’s be upfront about this… This country is really good at managing the issues of difference.”

Trevor Phillips

“After 2005 we begin to see more of an emphasis on faith groups as possessing the ability to deliver social capital.”

Therese O’Toole

How the Media Reported the Debate

“How does Prof Knott square media contempt for religious figures and principles with her Pollyanna view of a harmoniously tolerant Britain?”

Christine Odone
The Telegraph
7 Feb 2012

“How should the State and the judiciary defend (religious) liberty, in a land whose people now have a thousand gods instead of one, and in which atheists demand to be heard? And what part can the beleaguered national church play?”

Cole Moreton
Sunday Telegraph
12 Feb 2012

“Christians who argue they should be exempt from equalities legislation are no different from Muslims who want to impose sharia law in Britain, a human rights chief has declared.”

Daniel Martin
Daily Mail
17 Feb 2012

Watch the debates and download the podcasts
www.religionandsociety.org.uk/faith_debates/Identity
WHAT’S THE PLACE OF FAITH IN SCHOOLS?

Academics

Bob Jackson  University of Warwick
Jim Conroy  University of Glasgow

Public Figures

Richard Dawkins  Author, *The God Delusion*
John Pritchard  Bishop of Oxford, Chair of the Church of England’s Board of Education

Questions for debate

What place – if any – should faith have in our state school system, and in our schools – in both the formal curriculum (what is taught in the classroom) and informal curriculum (wider ethos of the school, including assemblies)?

Conclusions from the debate

There was a new settlement between religion and state school education in Britain in 1944. Since then changes have been implemented in a piecemeal way, attempting to keep pace with the rapid changes in religion and society. This has led to a situation of crisis today which is evident in:

– Controversy over the existence of ‘faith schools’
– Inadequate teacher training to deal with faith
– Confusion about the requirement to hold acts of worship in all schools
– Patchy RE (Religious Education) teaching and degraded status of RE in the curriculum

There is an urgent need for joined-up thinking about the place of faith in schools and a new settlement as radical as that of 1944.
Faith schools should not be paid for from the public purse and state schools should be open to everyone.

Given that faith is important for so many British people, it is appropriate that the state should support the sorts of schools people want – and a mixed educational system overall.

Acts of worship are anachronistic and should not be compulsory.

To educate any child in a faith is a form of indoctrination; children should be presented with religious and secular beliefs and be allowed to make up their own minds about the truth.

Parents and society inevitably want children to be raised in the beliefs and values they believe to be true, and this does not curtail children’s liberty.

Faith schools should not be paid for from the public purse and state schools should be open to everyone.

Assemblies remain important, and schools should be guided and encouraged to use them in a way which caters for religious and non-religious as appropriate to the profile of the school.

Research Findings

Faith schools vary widely in nature – they cannot be categorised as a single group. Research shows many to be of high quality, with demand continuing to grow. Many are now taking Academy status. Faith schools’ admissions policies remain contentious.

The research uncovered serious problems with the way RE is taught in secondary schools. Although compulsory, RE is:

— under-resourced
— squeezed in the curriculum
— outside the Eng Bacc, and not always considered a serious subject
— subject to local variations in syllabus, and highly variable in quality
— no longer guided and resourced by Local Education Authorities, which are in crisis.

The research nevertheless finds examples of excellent practice in some schools, and student demand for RE has been growing strongly.

The statutory requirement to hold Acts of Worship ‘of a predominantly Christian character’ is widely ignored, and there is often fear of dealing with religion at all. There is widely varying practice across schools – from no collective gatherings, to banal notice-giving, to reflective spaces. Primary schools often deal better with Acts of Worship than secondary schools.

“What is happening to RE in our schools is a scandal for which we will have to pay a high price in years to come.”

James Conroy

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Practical Suggestions

There is widespread agreement that RE in Britain is in some disarray, despite the best efforts of many teachers and other educational professionals.

There is unwarranted nervousness at all levels about dealing with religion in schools.

The training of teachers in how to deal with faith is inadequate – not just for RE teachers, but all teachers.

The settlement reached in 1944 and added to piecemeal since then – in response to many developments including the changing nature of religion in Britain – is in urgent need of review. A new settlement is needed.

The situation is of concern for children and society as a whole. People who do not understand religion are simply not well educated. A religiously diverse society and world requires higher, not lower, standards of RE.

“There are many objections to faith schools. They are divisive, discriminatory, in some cases they actively teach scientific falsehoods (for example teaching literalistic Koranic creationism instead of scientific evolution). But for me, not the least objection to faith schools is that their very foundation and definition depends on the assumption that it is right to label a child with the faith of her parents.”

Richard Dawkins

How the Media Reported the Debate

“How the Media Reported the Debate

“I wish politicians would go back more to breadth in education, related to the whole human person, and not just contemporary utility.”

Robert Jackson

“State schools spend no more than £1 per pupil each year teaching religion, a Government-funded study found yesterday.”

Steve Doughty
The Daily Mail
22 Feb 2012

“These (religious schools) are schools which are funded by me and my partner as tax payers. However, they’re schools from which our children are excluded because I can’t profess to believe in a god that I don’t believe in.”

 Caller
You and Yours
BBC Radio 4
21 Feb 2012

“A Department for Education spokesman said: ‘RE remains a statutory part of the school curriculum for every student up to 16. It is rightly down to schools themselves to judge how it is taught, but the English Baccalaureate will not prevent any school from offering RE GCSEs.’”

BBC News
21 Feb 2012

Watch the debates and download the podcasts
www.religionandsociety.org.uk/faith_debates/faith_in_school
WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT RADICALISATION?

Academics

Mark Sedgwick  University of Aarhus, Denmark
Marat Shterin  King’s College London
Matthew Francis  Lancaster University

Public Figures

Mehdi Hasan  Political Director, The Huffington Post
Ed Husain  Author, The Islamist

Questions for debate

What is ‘radicalisation’ or ‘extremism’? Is it unique to Islam? Is it always religious? Is it a new and unique phenomenon, or just a new label for certain forms of terrorist violence? And what can research tell us about its causes and how to prevent it?

Conclusions from the debate

As currently used ‘radicalisation’ often includes too much and too little. Too little, because it focuses attention only on Islamic or religious forms of terrorism, and too much because radical ideas and ‘Islamism’ do not usually lead to violence and are too widespread for security initiatives to counter (attempts may be counter-productive.)

As for what causes recent incidences of extremist violence, there is a growing consensus that there are multiple causes including: a sense of grievance and isolation, belief that violence can remedy a perceived problem, and contact with networks and images that glorify the use of violence.
It is the move to violence which is the problem and should be the focus of security concern. Either religion is the major factor in radicalisation or, politics is the major factor in radicalisation. It is Islamism which is the earlier identifiable problem and a proper focus of security concern. It is often impossible to separate the religious and the political.

There are many pathways to violence, and the element of choice always remains, making it impossible to predict which individuals will act violently. Pathways to violence can be modelled and resort to violence predicted.

The importance of (individual) belief as a driver of action tends to be overestimated. Involvement in social networks is arguably more important. Also important and underestimated is access to images, aesthetics, cultures and practices of violence which are not exclusively Islamicist but can be harnessed to Islamist ideas – as well as to anti-Muslim ideas.

There is no evidence to support the reality of ‘brainwashing’, nor of de-programming or de-radicalisation where these are equated with quick processes which bypass normal modes of socialisation, cognition and volition.

The problem to be countered is not the ‘clash of civilisations’ narrative, nor Salafism, but the people who accept and promote the idea that violence is the proper response to the narrative... attempts to counter the narrative risk proving counter-productive.”

“By the time it gets to violence it is too late... There are five ideas that are theo-political that lead to the justification of suicide bombing...”

Mark Sedgwick

Counter-radicalisation policies like Prevent I cast the net too wide, and have caused more problems than they have solved. Islamist beliefs do not themselves lead to violence and it is counter-productive to ‘target’ and try to change them.

Islamist belief is itself dangerous, a necessary step on the pathway to violence, and should be countered.

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There are many pathways to violence, and the element of choice always remains, making it impossible to predict which individuals will act violently.

Either religion is the major factor in radicalisation or, politics is the major factor in radicalisation.

It is often impossible to separate the religious and the political.
The model of human behaviour which holds that beliefs are the ‘drivers’ of action is misleading; practices, emotions and relationships are just as important as beliefs.
WHAT ROLE FOR RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS IN AN ERA OF SHRINKING WELFARE?

Questions
Religion has always had a very public role in Britain providing welfare of various kinds, and has continued to do so even after the creation of the welfare state. Is it appropriate that it should continue to play this role in the 21st Century, and if so – what kinds of religion, in what ways, and in what relation to state and society? What difference does the current situation make – one in which the welfare state is under pressure and unable to deliver all the services demanded of it?

Conclusions
State-provided welfare and religion-provided welfare go hand in hand and shape one another. The early welfare state in Britain mirrored the church, and its model was ‘doing good to others’. Since the 1980s, however, the churches have shrunk and other forms of religion and spirituality have grown. We may have entered a new phase in which, as well as the old model of doing good to those in need, state and religion (of greater diversity) are more involved in empowering and supporting people to help themselves.
Recent studies show that faith-based organisations (FBOs) remain major providers of welfare across Europe, even where welfare systems are most extensive, as in northern Europe. The exact nature of the relationship depends on the historic relations between state, and the family, and religion and other voluntary organisations.

In the UK religious groups surrendered many ‘acute’ (intensive, short-term, interventionist) services (e.g. social work) to the state after 1945, but they remain majority providers in partnership with the state in, e.g., care for the homeless and social housing. They also deliver many ‘slow’, relationship-based, non-statutory services e.g. visiting the elderly, lifts to hospital, support for the unemployed, meals.

Since the 1980s there has been growth of new forms of welfare and ‘wellbeing’ provision by spiritual groups and individuals – most notably in ‘holistic’, ‘mind, body, spirit’ practices and CAM (complementary and alternative medicine). This is now a major part of the healthcare landscape. Other non-Christian forms of welfare provision have also grown, e.g. by Muslim groups.

The New Labour government acknowledged the importance of FBO provision, and entered into contractual relationships with those FBOs which could provide ‘universal’ services. This has led to the professionalisation of some large FBOs able to work with/for the state at local and national level, and to an internal secularization of provision – differences between faith-based and secular providers have diminished. Many non-commissioned, often smaller-scale, services remain outside this contractual relationship, and are able to be more explicit about their faith commitment.

Traditional faith-based providers, e.g. in homelessness care, are more likely to favour non-interventionist approaches (give care to all who ask for it), whilst secular provision often seeks greater intervention (require changes in the behavior of recipients of care, to help them care for themselves).

Under conditions of austerity the current Coalition government wishes to give more scope and autonomy to FBOs to deliver welfare, and hopes that cuts in funding will lead to more reliance on a self-funding ‘social enterprise’ model.

One of the most significant changes in the last 10 years has been the emergence of large Muslim organisations as major players in FBO provision. These, plus evangelical Christian groups and forms of alternative spirituality, are now as important as the historic churches in welfare and health/healing provision.

“I think that the state should shrink in relation to faith, but not disappear altogether. It must play an enabling role, providing a framework which helps distribute power, wealth and capacity round providers and service users of all faiths and none. This is essential for cohesion in local areas, and nationally.”

Adam Dinham

Research Findings

Points of Debate and Disagreement

- New Labour meddled too much with FB (faith-based) provision; the social enterprise model will allow FB provision to flourish on its own terms, without state interference.
- The social enterprise model can never provide services for the poorest and most needy; a more equal state-faith partnership is a better way forward.
- The distinctiveness of FB provision (the ‘F’ in FB) has been too severely curtailed by a secular ethos – the latter is not neutral.
- Public services cannot have a faith profile or proselytise; their services must be universal.
- There should be a mixed economy of welfare provision in a multicultural society.
- There should be universal services for all, ensuring the same standards of care.
- The ‘F’ factor makes a significant difference (e.g. to motivation, ethos, immersion in a community).
- There is in reality little difference between FB and secular providers.
- Commissioners have a bias against FB provision.
- In practice, FB provision is not disadvantaged.
Practical Suggestions

More research is needed on the relative quantity and quality of faith-based and secular provision in different welfare services and arenas.

The faith-based model of non-interventionist, unconditional care – doing good to others – is likely to come under increasing pressure.

Thinking and policy on faith and welfare needs to be updated to take account of post-1980s forms of religion. The role of the historic churches is increasingly being supplemented by that of other faiths, other types of Christianity, and alternative spiritualities. This involves a shift towards new models of care and self-help.

The historic churches maintain a high level of ‘coverage’ of the country, with buildings and staff in many deprived areas, and volunteers to give time to ‘slow’ and non-professionalised welfare activities. They also have a commitment to helping all in need and not only their own members. However, their capacity is shrinking.

The nature of the ‘partnership’ between state and faith in relation to welfare provision is also changing fast and requires fresh articulation.

There is a great deal of caution on the part of those who commission welfare on behalf of the state about ‘proselytisation’ and the distinctive contribution of faith made by faith-based provision. There needs to be more clarity about the principles for differentiating appropriate and non-appropriate expressions of faith in welfare provision, or there will be a retreat to a shallow ‘neutral’ norm which may not serve particular client groups well.

“Our research concluded that faith-based homelessness services are not as different from their secular equivalents as is usually assumed. Some observers may consider this a good thing; it allays fears about proselytism, for example. But it also presents a challenge to FBOs. For, if their aim is to provide a qualitatively different service experience, and for the influence of their faith to be evident within that, it seems that many homeless people are not noticing.”
Sarah Johnsen

How the Media Reported the Debate

“Preaching and teaching and distributing alms go together. They are bound to – because Christian morality derives from Christian doctrine. Or do the gloriously impartial utilitarian civil servants imagine that the virtues of charitable giving and public service arise, as it were, by accident out of a vacuum?”
Peter Mullen
The Telegraph
21 March 2012

“Religious charities may be trying to change their image and convince us that they will not use their involvement in social work to evangelise, but there is no guarantee that this state of affairs would hold once they take over a large section of social welfare provision. And we are not as convinced as Sarah Johnsen that everything is hunky-dory...”
Terry Sanderson
National Secular Society
21 March 2012

“There are around 54,000 places of worship in the UK and 80–90% do some welfare work, and there are 24,000 registered religious charities, which is 1 in 7 of all charities.”
Linda Woodhead

How the Media Reported the Debate

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“Preaching and teaching and distributing alms go together. They are bound to – because Christian morality derives from Christian doctrine. Or do the gloriously impartial utilitarian civil servants imagine that the virtues of charitable giving and public service arise, as it were, by accident out of a vacuum?”
Peter Mullen
The Telegraph
21 March 2012

“Religious charities may be trying to change their image and convince us that they will not use their involvement in social work to evangelise, but there is no guarantee that this state of affairs would hold once they take over a large section of social welfare provision. And we are not as convinced as Sarah Johnsen that everything is hunky-dory...”
Terry Sanderson
National Secular Society
21 March 2012
Questions for debate

On the one hand, how much freedom should religious people and groups have to express their convictions? On the other hand, how much freedom should there be for others to express convictions which may be hostile or insulting to religion and religious people? In both cases, where do we draw the line, who decides and how?

Conclusions from the debate

There is a majority democratic consensus, expressed in part through legislation, which sets limits on religious (and secular) freedoms. Where religious expressions do not cross this line (e.g. display of religious symbols) freedom should be unrestricted. Where they do (e.g. refusing to conduct civil partnerships for gay couples), negotiation amongst the parties involved may be able to reach an accommodation or compromise. Mechanisms for such negotiation may need to be strengthened. There may also be cases where religious people can refuse to act against the democratic consensus on grounds of conscience, but there may be a price to be paid (e.g. those who cannot work on Sundays make up time elsewhere; conscientious objectors in war contribute in other ways).

WHAT LIMITS TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?

Academics
Maleiha Malik  King’s College London
Peter Jones  Newcastle University

Public Figures
Lisa Appignanesi  President of English PEN
Michael Nazir-Ali  Bishop and Member of the House of Lords
Julia Neuberger  Senior Rabbi and Member of the House of Lords
Religious freedom is in danger; secularism is the threat

Freedom of expression is in danger; religion is the threat

That amounts to legal positivism; morality is a higher law and religious people must fight to change unjust legislation.

Equality legislation has already granted religion exemptions; the law is now settled and religious people must abide by it.

The law and society must make allowances for minority positions, even when they are unpalatable to the majority.

Minorities must bear at least part of the cost of the majority’s toleration of their differences.

Maleiha Malik

Research Findings

The issue has come to a head recently because of a number of controversial rulings under new equality legislation in which the duty of equal treatment (especially on grounds of sexuality) has clashed with the exercise of religious freedom (e.g. when a Christian registrar refused to marry gay or lesbian couples on grounds of conservative Christian conscience).

The focus of religious freedom debates has shifted in the last decade from controversy over the right of Muslim women to veil to controversy over the right of Christians to display religious symbols and act (or refuse to act) on the grounds of their faith.

Controversy is currently being stoked by two extreme minority groups: aggressively secular groups on the one hand; aggressively conservative Christian groups on the other. The majority population, both religious and secular, is more ready to reach compromises and accommodations.

There are three separable issues in this debate:

- the freedom of religious individuals
- the freedom of religious groups
- free expression which may involve insult to religion

Cases being brought under Equality Law have to do with §. Some exemptions from equality legislation have been granted to religious groups §§.

With regard to § the question is how far this freedom extends, and whether it ever gives grounds for not obeying a law, or flouting majority opinion and sensibility. What rights can be granted minority views, and who bears the cost of individuals or groups acting against a majority position on the grounds of conscience?

With regard to the freedom to insult religion §§, where insults do not amount to incitement to religious hatred, this can only be a matter of voluntary restraint rather than legislation. Recent cases of ‘censorship’ (e.g. closure of the play Besht) which insulted some Sikhs, or the Mayor of London’s refusal to allow Christian anti-gay advertising on buses) seem arbitrary (why not stop other things which insult e.g. ‘Jerry Springer the Opera’ which was insulting to Christians?) suggesting that the threat of public protest on the part of those who are ‘offended’ is more influential than consistently applied standards (e.g. respect for those whose deeply-held beliefs are being insulted).

Maleiha Malik

“It’s often argued there should be accommodation of the religious conscience... We’ve already allowed some of the widest exemptions throughout the European Union from equality law ... as a society we’ve reached an agreement about what the limits of that exemption should be, it’s represented by the Equality Act 2012.”

Maleiha Malik

Points of Debate and Disagreement

- Freedom of expression is in danger; religion is the threat
- Religious freedom is in danger; secularism is the threat
- Equality legislation has already granted religion exemptions; the law is now settled and religious people must abide by it.
- That amounts to legal positivism; morality is a higher law and religious people must fight to change unjust legislation.
- The law and society must make allowances for minority positions, even when they are unpalatable to the majority.
- Minorities must bear at least part of the cost of the majority’s toleration of their differences.
Practical Suggestions

The issue of freedom is in danger of being hijacked by religious and secular extremes, both of whom claim to be oppressed by the other, and whose mutual opposition ramps up the dispute. News media often amplify such voices. There is a danger that equality law is hijacked by these extremes to make their point, rather than for its proper purpose (creating a fairer society).

Recourse to the law tends to amplify disputes rather than resolve them. Non-legal approaches and solutions are more valuable in this area.

In the face of this amplification of minority positions, it is important to remember and represent the fact that most religious and secular people are content to abide by democratic consensus and the law. It is also important to note that most issues of religious freedom are resolved at local level without recourse to the law.

More research on how such negotiation and accommodation takes place in workplaces, schools, public spaces and so on would be valuable.

More guidance about how controversial forms of religious expression can be discussed and negotiated would be helpful, especially in the face of current nervousness about religion and religious claims.

Whilst freedom of expression is important to a democratic and free society, it is useful to distinguish between different purposes and contexts. Academic freedom to pursue the truth, for example, must be safeguarded even when its result may offend, whereas the freedom to create an offensive artwork may not be as absolute, especially if its main purpose is to shock.

Legal positivism can lead to totalitarianism and to a tyranny of the majority. It will not lead to that balancing of rights which we need today. Most conflicts in the last one hundred years have in fact been caused by totalitarian secular ideologies. In the past, including respect for conscience was part of law making, why is it not so now?”

Michael Nazir-Ali

How the Media Reported the Debate

“At least programme director Linda Woodhead speaks sense. Equality law and appeals to freedom are being hijacked by the aggressive fringes of religion and secularism to fight their ideological battles, she says.”

Jonathan Rayner
Law Society Gazette
20 April 2012

“He (Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali) held that religious and sexuality rights were not properly balanced and that the equality of persons should not be confused with equality of behaviour; that morality transcends the law…”

Graham Goldsmith
God and Politics in the UK
14 May 2012

“there are not two sets of people – Christians, or other people of faith, and those who are LGBT. There are LGBT Catholics, LGBT evangelicals, LGBT Muslims, LGBT Sikhs, LGBT Hindus, LGBT Jews, LGBT Buddhists, and more.”

Marie Exall
The Guardian
21 April 2012

Watch the debates and download the podcasts
www.religionandsociety.org.uk/faith_debates/religious_freedom
WHAT ARE THE MAIN TRENDS IN RELIGION AND VALUES IN BRITAIN?

Academics
Grace Davie Exeter University
Linda Woodhead Lancaster University

Public Figures
Aaqil Ahmed Commissioning Editor, Religion and Ethics, BBC
Cole Moreton Journalist, Sunday Telegraph

Questions for debate
How has religion in Britain changed since 1945? What are the main differences between the 1950s, the 1980s and the 2010s, and what are the continuities? How does all this relate to wider social trends?

Conclusions from the debate
There are significant continuities, including the fact that a half to two-thirds of the population still identify as Christian, and the churches continue to play an important role in society. However, the overall profile of religion in the UK – and of Christianity and the churches – has become far more diverse. Most importantly, the form of religion and the way in which people are religious has changed: there is much more individual choice and selection, less traditional ‘belonging’, and religion supports a much wider range of identities.
The myth of secular progress received a series of shocks from 1979 (Iranian revolution) through 1989 (fall of communism) to 2001 (twin towers attack) which revealed the limitations and blind spots of a perspective which held that religion would inevitably decline and that the rest of the world would follow where secular Europe had led.

The religious profile of the UK has changed significantly, and change has been most evident since the 1980s:
- the historic churches have suffered severe decline (attendance has more than halved since the 1980s)
- the overall profile of the Christian churches has changed: there are now more Baptist and independent church goers than there are Anglicans or Roman Catholics
- non-Christian faiths have grown in numbers and profile, with Islam being the largest. These are not merely ‘imports’, but take distinctive forms in the British context
- alternative spirituality has grown dramatically since the 1980s, and its wide influence is most evident in the world of holistic or alternative healthcare (‘mind, body and spirit’)
- numbers identifying as ‘non-religious’ have grown, though not all of these are secular (some also identify as ‘spiritual’). Atheists remain small in numbers, but are increasingly vocal in the media and public debate.

Overall, the religious and secular profile of the UK has become increasingly diverse since 1945. It is not merely that there are more ‘religions’, but there is much greater diversity of religious identity, even in relation to the same religion.

 Modes of belief, belonging, identity and ritual have all shifted since the 1970s – from church- and clergy-controlled forms of centralised, organised, hierarchical institution to more laicised, democratic, fluid, and self-chosen forms with much looser networks of association, often across national borders.

As well as shrinking in public influence (which nevertheless remains considerable), the churches have become more socially conservative since the 1970s, and it can be argued that they now represent a minority rather than a (liberal) majority viewpoint. This is reflected in disputes over issues like female leadership and gay marriage.

Christianity has lost its dominance, though not its influence, and the state has become increasingly interested in relating to all faiths. The status of the Church of England has been downgraded in the process.

Religion is increasingly affected by the logic of the ‘market’ and not just the state – for example in having to market and brand itself, and, in some cases, take payment for services. This provides new opportunities for a much wider range of religious ‘producers’ and ‘products’, as do new media like the internet.

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“41% of us now believe in angels, 53% in an afterlife and 70% in a soul – that’s much higher, often double, than when the records began.”

Linda Woodhead
Whether secularisation theory holds true or not, one thing is crystal clear. The established hierarchical, dogmatic Church is in terminal decline. This is why its demands for yet more power and privilege must be challenged.

Stephen Evans
National Secular Society
10 May 2012

Religion has returned to the core business of sustaining everyday life, supporting relations with the living and the dead, and managing misfortune.

Linda Woodhead
The Guardian
7 May 2012

“Everyday, lived religion – is thriving and evolving, whilst hierarchical, institutionalised, dogmatic forms of religion are marginalised.”

Linda Woodhead

Watch the debates and download the podcasts
www.religionandsociety.org.uk/faith_debates/trends

How the Media Reported the Debate

“Religion – and here I speak mainly about Christianity – has moved in the post-war period from something approximating a conscript army, with large numbers of people involved whether they liked it or not, to a professional army which people join voluntarily, sometimes for a short period and sometimes for a longer one. Broadly speaking I contend that the professionals are rather more committed than conscripts. Does that make us a more or less secular society that we were in the 1950s?”

Grace Davie

“Why is all this happening now? It’s common to date the current, fevered debate on the place of faith in modern Britain to the fallout from 9/11 or, beyond that, to the Rushdie affair of the late 1980s. But both those traumatic events are beginning to recede into history.”

Nelson Jones
New Statesman
2 May 2012

If religion is no longer ‘packaged’ in the churches or a small number of ‘world religions’, but is more diverse and individualised, more thought needs to be given to updating how religion is treated in research, law and policy, for example:

– the census question on religion
– the ways in which local and national government relate to religion, religious ‘leaders’ and ‘religious communities’
– how religion, religious symbols, and religious identity are defined in legal cases concerning, for example, freedom of religious expression and freedom to display religious symbols.

The status and authority of traditional religious ‘leaders’ should not be assumed to be what it once was, and their ability to speak in a representative capacity may be limited.

Inter-faith relations become a much more complex matter in relation to ‘superdiversity’ (see Debate 1) and may need to be radically rethought.

The role and status of the Church of England (and the Church of Scotland) needs to be clarified: can it still claim to be a truly national and inclusive body which speaks on behalf of all ‘souls’ and all religions in the UK?

Practical Suggestions

Linda Woodhead

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Practical Suggestions

Linda Woodhead
A Personal Postscript: Linda Woodhead

There was only one time when the Westminster Faith Debates nearly moved me to tears. It was at the very start of the series, as I listened to the first of the live phone-in radio shows which Iain Dale of LBC organised around each debate. I realised I was listening to something I had never heard on the radio: ordinary people speaking about their faith. They weren’t defending orthodoxies, or grinding axes – they were trying to explain, often hesitantly and with apology, what they believed. It didn’t fit the textbooks, it would upset some clerics and academics, but it was real.

On reflection, I think that a large part of the Debates’ success was not that they offered space to debate religion – there are plenty of conferences and lectures which already do that – but that they addressed questions people really ask about religion in public life. That’s not to say that they didn’t deal with complex issues, engage high-quality research, and criticise simplistic assumptions. They did. But they did so in a triangular conversation: between academic researchers, public figures, and a diverse and talkative audience. All three parties gained in the process.

I know my own thinking was affected. Even though I’ve studied religion in Britain for years, I’d absorbed the view that the UK is one of the least religiously interesting places in the world: go to Israel, or Egypt, or India if you want to see where the action is. The Debates made me think again. By virtue of its long and complex Christian heritage, its recent history of religious toleration, and its rapid and remarkably successful integration of an astonishing variety of new faiths, the UK is now at the forefront of a great experiment in religious – and secular – democracy. We are only just beginning to appreciate how significant this is, how much our religious landscape has changed since the 1980s, and how much our thinking and policy needs to catch up. The Debates helped us to see this more clearly, and to take some first steps along the road.

A Personal Postscript: Charles Clarke

I learned a great deal from the Westminster Faith Debates. Most important I learned that a large number of people in diverse and often influential positions in society wanted to discuss the place of religion in public life, felt that they had a real contribution to make to thinking about it, and had held suppressed feelings for a long time. The debates were a very much needed opportunity for them.

Second, this appetite expressed itself in very cogent and focused discussion of important contemporary questions. There was a real feeling that the issues around religion were unsettled, as well as being difficult to discuss in other settings, and that it was time for a new settlement which reflects the reality of religion in modern life.

And thirdly the new reality was far less about ‘slabs of belief’, e.g. Catholicism, Islam etc. It was about the fact that individuals are expressing their own religious beliefs and identities in a wide variety of different ways which deny some of the simplistic classifications which policy-makers and commentators have tended to use.

So my conclusion is that it is time to try and reach a new settlement of the place of religion in public life in the UK, and I think that the Westminster Faith Debates have helped move us in that direction.