

What are the main Trends in Religion and Values in Britain?

I will use my ten minutes as follows: there will be seven chronological minutes and three thematic minutes. I will be drawing throughout on my observations of and reflections about religion in British society over several decades.

In the chronological section, I will try to capture the essence of each post-war decade, concentrating on a key date; the aim is to contextualize the current debate and to emphasize continuity as well as change. A sub-theme concerns the limitations of social-science when confronted with religion.

Capturing decades

The 1950s were a conservative decade largely concerned with restoration and rebuilding; the key date is 1953 (the Coronation)

- an important question follows from this. Did the Coronation reflect a consensus, or was it an attempt to create one? The same might be asked of the Diamond Jubilee.

The 1960s brought about radical change in *both* society *and* the church; the key date is 1969 (when the Americans land on the moon – it represents the height of *secular* confidence; man [sic] can do anything)

- note also that this is the decade in which the social sciences come of age, underpinned by a markedly secular philosophy of science. This has important consequence for our readings of later religious trends: social science expects the secular.

In the 1970s, the mood changes, reflecting growing uncertainty – both economic (associated with the oil crisis) and cultural (are we in fact masters of our fate?); the key date is 1979 (Mrs Thatcher, but more importantly the Iranian revolution)

- with reference to Iran, note both the re-assertion of religious certainty (often equated with fundamentalism) and the failure of social science (or indeed anyone else) to anticipate this shift. No one expected a revolution underpinned by conservative readings of Islam.

The 1980s epitomised neo-liberalism and the rolling back of the state; here there are two rather different key dates: 1985 (*Faith in the City* – the Church of England's challenge to neo-liberalism) and 1989 (the fall of the Berlin wall)

- regarding the latter, communism (a *secular* narrative) collapses – once again this is contrary to expectation. The politics of ideology mutate into the politics of identity in which religion finds a new significance. Note the role of John Paul II in this narrative.

The 1990s follow 1989 – they become the decade in which a new world order is configured, including the building of Europe; the key date is 1992 (the Treaty on European Union is signed at Maastricht)

- are we or are we not part of Europe? In terms of religious trends we most certainly are. The whole of Europe is experiencing a similar combination of factors: the renewed significance of our Christian heritage (why?); the decline of the Christendom/parish model (the public utility); the shift from obligation to consumption (the growth of a market with gainers and losers – who are they?); the advent of new arrivals (Christian and other) mostly from the global South; the re-emergence of religion in the public sphere; and the (frequently sharp) secular reactions.
- Europe, however, is an exceptional case; it is not a global prototype. The importance of the following question: is Europe secular because it is modern or is Europe secular because it is European? Appreciating the latter point leads to a more apposite set of question about our own situation.

The 2000s mark a new millennium in which hopes are dashed very quickly; the key date has to be 2001 (9/11)

- we all remember where we were on that fateful day; and we all knew that the world would never be the same again. Some of us are beginning by this stage to appreciate that it might be wise to pay greater attention to the place of religion in the lives of individuals, communities and societies.
- an additional date if there is time – 2005 (the death of John-Paul II). Who went to the funeral? The whole world (*four* American presidents), including from Britain: Prince Charles, the PM and the Archbishop. This was unprecedented in British society.

Hence the current debate: Is God back? Or did God never go away? Both are true. The world is most certainly a very different place, but the ‘revolution’ regarding religion lies as much in the perception of public commentators as it does in the realities of the modern world, including Britain – a statement which takes me to my three *thematic* minutes.

The present situation

It is crucial to appreciate that several rather different things are happening at once in Britain.

At one and the same time:

- the process of secularization continues (at times remorselessly) leading amongst other things to low levels of religious literacy – this is a very worrying trend;
- religion returns to the public agenda – for the reasons outlined above.

The outcome of this paradox (it is one) is all too often is a debate about religion which is both ill-mannered and ill-informed. At precisely the moment that we need them most, we are losing the vocabulary, concepts and narratives that are necessary to talk intelligently about religion. What can be done? The crucial importance of good RE – echoing the Archbishop’s Easter sermon and an earlier debate.

To conclude

There is, it is clear, both continuity and change: from a Coronation to a Diamond Jubilee. I will leave you with an analogy which may or may not be helpful and like all analogies must not be pushed too far.

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?