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After Secularism: Inner-city Governance and the New Religious Discourse

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Abstract: *Secularization theory seeks to describe a tendency within modern societies whereby transcendence is squeezed out of the system, and relegated to the margins of private faith and practice, dying altogether, perhaps, in the not too distant future. This paper describes a piece of extended analysis of this theory, based on research into recent government documents concerning the administration of the inner cities, where religious minorities and others live. Evidence is revealed of a religious response by government to minority issues that indicates how 'voluntaristic' was the Church's adoption of secular attitudes and habits – a situation that changed during the 1990s and beyond, as a result of immigration, with tangible legal and welfare implications.*

Introduction

Throughout the 1970s and '80s ethnic or diaspora religious groups were winning social and legal concessions from the 'secular' British State. Paradoxically they were consolidating their settlement in the cities around religious sites and symbols just as England was reaching the apogée of its self-understanding as a secular nation. Well into the nineties, scholars like Simon Green were declaring: 'The state does not construct economic or even social policy with reference to ecclesiastical sentiment' (Green 1996:301) yet the presence of dense clusters of religious minorities was causing an unnoticed shift in government policy, rendering it arguably more religious (however defined) in order to deal with the new citizenry. For in 1991, the Minister of State for the Environment wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury suggesting a new joint church/state project to help find solutions to inner-city problems following a decade of riots and sharply spiraling deprivation and alienation that three decades of urban planning and 'community development' had done little to arrest. This new project was the Inner Cities Religious Council (ICRC), comprising leaders of the five major religious faiths in Britain, chaired by a government minister, and serviced by a new secretariat – the Faiths Branch – of the Government's then Department of the Environment.

My Ph.D. research (Taylor 2002) is the first full-length case study of this council and its effects. The research tries to determine, by means of primary sources – government minutes and associated reports as well as interviews of key informants – what significance this Council has, if any, for secularization theory. The research, spanning six years of activity from 1991 to 1997 discloses the genesis of a *new religious discourse* in that part of the British 'system' responsible for what the Oxford-based sociologist Bryan Wilson calls 'the co-ordination of activities' i.e. the government. This new religious discourse has social and legal outcomes. Both discourse and outcomes appear to displace the old discourse of modernity whose negative outlines in relation to transcendence Wilson sketches in 'Secularization and its Discontents' (Wilson 1982:148-179). This is the famous essay in which he defined secularization as that process by which religion ceases to be significant in the working of the social system (Wilson 1982:150).

The inner cities afforded the context for my research, which briefly scans the history of government and church social policy from the war up to the 1981 riots in Toxteth. These were described by the *Guardian* newspaper as ‘the most frightening civil disorder ever seen in England’ and showed how fruitless expenditure on the inner cities, backed up by a purely materialist analysis, had been. It had largely focused on the built environment and on race, and had largely ignored the actual and spiritual reality of people’s lives. The churches during this time had also become increasingly secularized and hence ineffectual, despite a significant track record of initiating social provision during the 19th century. The new post-1991 government approach to the inner cities utilised religious networks and plan to lever money closer to the people who inhabited the urban priority areas, and to afford a better way of learning what those people were actually like.

Discourse analysis reveals pressure for change

Discourse analysis – jargon for talk about talk or documents - was the method used to pin down what was really being said and done by the new Faiths Branch of the government as it set up and administered the Inner Cities Religious Council. The words actually used are cross-referenced to four of the generalizations of secularization. The four theoretical elements tested by use of keywords and phrases were summarised as

1. ‘State and society are differentiated’ i.e. religion is a private matter
2. ‘Officials (professionals) do not use religious language’
3. ‘Religious identity is not relevant to government’
4. ‘Religion no longer affects social and political outcomes’

No other scholar has applied discourse analysis to *government* documents to assess the impact of secularization theory, and it helps to counter the vagaries of what we mean by ‘secularization’. A *new religious discourse* is apparent – albeit one that often uses the ambivalent and fluid usages of the interfaith movement, while piggy-backing on more or less latent or extant church structures, church access to territory and plant, and Christian sacred language and implicit Christian categories. This discourse appears to run counter to the evolutionistic anti-religious tendency within discourse about modernity both identified and exemplified by Bryan Wilson.

Data was initially compiled from interviews with key informers, and was followed by analysis of an almost complete set of ICRC Minutes, conference reports, speeches and associated documents over its first six-year period from 1991. The 30-year access rule on government papers was waived.

Considerable evidence is found that contradicts the four theoretical shibboleths outlined above. Much of the data appears to be driven by the need to frame any kind of conversation with religious minorities at all: if the new migrants were to be governed, and adequately included in state provision and systems, the only language and concepts available by which to incorporate them was ‘sacred’, and specifically Christian [subtext: until they become secularized]. The words faith and faiths are used by almost everyone, clergy included, interchangeably, and faiths are generally all regarded as a good thing. For the first chairman of the ICRC Robin Squire, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment and MP for Hornchurch, faith is an attribute characterised by ‘hope’ and ‘vision’. ‘We believe fundamentally’ he says in Huddersfield in 1992, opening the first of a series of Multi-faith conferences, ‘that communities of faith are grounded in hope - not wishful thinking, but a real conviction that things can and should be different’.

There is evidence of interfaith groups being encouraged by the government expressly to target Single Regeneration Budget money. By 1998 the Government advocates the integration of faith communities into the processes of developing guidelines for SRB and other funding arrangements, and supports their inclusion in regeneration partnerships to form and manage bids and successful projects.

The Preliminary Conclusions document for an EC Seminar held in November 1998 in Strasbourg on ‘Religion and the Integration of Immigrants’ recommends that ‘the use of the term “secular”, referring to the relationship between the State and religion, should be re-examined and clarified on a pan-european level, with a view to reaching a common understanding. The presence of minority religious communities and the resulting religious pluralism makes it necessary to devise [sic] new State policies in this field’. And finally, in 2001, the first religion question on the Census was introduced, partly through the lobbying of Muslims on the ICRC.

A training manual for social workers called *Visions of Reality: Religion and Ethnicity in Social Work*, was published by the Central Council for Education and Training of Social Work launched by Paul Boateng in 1997 at a conference organised by the ICRC. (The book’s imprint appears alongside the logo ‘European Year against Racism’). The book includes an article by Hindu journalist Sunita Thakur

regretting that the caring profession has been 'wary of terms such as love, kindness and compassion because of their religious connotations' (1997:49) and calling for the potential of spiritual healing to be given its place in social work 'like psychotherapy or medicine'. Boateng's Foreword to the book recognizes that religion and faith are important to people. 'In our multi-cultural, multi-faith society, it is important to the strategic planning, care management and service delivery processes for social care managers and practitioners to appreciate the importance of religion and faith to people's lives and values.' The 'messages' contained in the book must be appreciated if social care is to be 'appropriate and non-discriminatory', he adds (1997: Foreword – 'A Message from the Minister', no page number).

Perhaps most significantly, the effects of the ICRC's work are said in the project *Review* published by the DETR after five years of work, to have 'permeat[ed] the culture of Government' and to have 'opened up Establishment in a new way' (1998: 1).

Christians, it emerges, had adapted well to secularization's constraints. An illustration of this is found in the Report of the third regional Multi-faith Conference held in the West Midlands on 21 June 1993. The Regional Director at the Department of the Environment makes an astonishing confession which should be repeated in full as it indicates a seismic cultural shift :

'It is a privilege to be addressing such a distinguished gathering. I have had a long standing interest in religion including 2 years studying Theology at university. Usually I keep quiet about that, but for the first time in my career I can declare it to a sympathetic audience! Quite frequently in Government - and no doubt in many other areas of life - if someone says something that is technical, complicated and of little obvious relevance, people accuse them of making a 'theological' point. I have grown tired of challenging this; however to this audience I can say that if someone makes a genuinely theological point, it might or might not be complicated, it should not be technical,

but it most certainly should be of the utmost importance' (p. 3).

The 'self-denying ordinance' revealed in this passage indicates that religious privatization among *Christians* had often been *voluntary*, which is not necessarily the same thing as inevitable. The change to a more public avowal and applicability of faith is wrought by individual Anglicans acting subversively within government, *against both government and church*. They intended to harness Christian activism for social welfare to the State machine for reasons of efficacy. Douglas Hollis was a civil servant appointed to run half the Inner City Task Forces in 1988. He was also, incidentally, an Anglican Non Stipendiary Minister. He says in interview: 'I knew . . . of the hesitations of my colleagues about this sort of religious connection, and it was delicate territory'. In another interview he describes being accused by churchmen of 'hypocrisy' for working at all with the Thatcher government. His overtures to Church House to facilitate and galvanise social work in the inner cities were, he says, 'rebuffed'. That the overtures came from Christians *in* government and were initially blocked by the institutional church, makes an interesting if inconclusive comment on the social effects of institutionalised religion.

Theorists' Christian bias has led many to believe that globalization would force a simple replication of patterns of urbanization, modernization and religious disenchantment on other religions and their cultures. What actually emerges is quite the opposite. Religions react together to encourage each others' responses which then affect government. All prove adept at mimetic devices when it suits them, depending on the requirements of context, and several quite different discourses, often disguised, are distinguished and analysed.

Implications

It would be too bold a statement to say that this case study suggests the demise of secularization theory. However, put together with other case studies such as Sophie Gilliat-Ray's 2000 survey into religion on campus which finds evidence of desecularization, this research suggests that the theory has for the time being proved unable to encompass, or, in its more ideological manifestations, to quell, the deeper spiritual motivations and discontents of religious people, especially migrants, in a *plural* modern society. Migration often consolidates religious affiliation and practice as numerous scholars, especially Callum Brown (1998), have observed. In the British case, it has to a noticeable degree galvanised the moribund religious system already here and it is too early to as-

sume that this is but a passing phenomenon.

The Church has played host to the religious aspirations of the newcomers and found opportunities and encouragement from them. The burden of this thesis is that secularization is a construct rather than simply an observation, and that Christians colluded with it while in a monocultural context. They operated a self-denying ordinance in professional and public life, to the detriment of the inner cities, and of society at large. This collusion no longer proved possible with the advent of vigorous and determined populations from overseas who reconstructed their lives around their mosques, gurdwaras and temples and sometimes succeeded in having their socio-religious needs met by the state. The secularized Church/State apparatus curiously permitted hospitality to religious minorities leading in turn to a more visible religious – or more accurately a more ‘interfaith’ - presence in the public domain as a whole. The Urban White Paper *Our Towns and Cities: The Future* published in November 2000, for the first time gave ‘faith communities’ a key role in urban regeneration. A conference called *Inter Faith Co-operation, Local Government and the Regions: Councils of Faiths as a Resource for the 21st Century* was held by the Interfaith Network for the UK in association with the ‘ICRC of the DETR’ and with support from The Active Community Unit of the Home Office at Austin Court, Birmingham on 12 June 2000. In a further development, the Greater London Authority Act (2000) gave a discretionary duty for the authority and the Assembly and Mayor to consult various constituencies in London. Among these were ‘religious groups’.

Religion, contrary to Wilson, *is* integral to the workings of the State today. The inner cities – and by inference religiously plural society - proved in the 1990s and beyond to be ungovernable without it. These facts should urge on the mission of the church in the public and social life of the nation.

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