



The Myth of Secularisation

By Jenny Taylor

Policy makers are rethinking the function of “faith” in Britain. Religion is back – because religion is black. Cool Britannia is full of faith – but the culture is still run by ageing white civil servants who bought into the secularisation thesis in the 60s. Jenny Taylor asks whether this particular myth has now had its day.

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British governments have paid “religion” scant regard on the mainland. But lawyers, social workers – and Brussels – are demanding a review.

The incorporation of the Convention on Human Rights is bringing law and religion together for the first time in decades. A secular conference in January 1999 called “Taking Religious Convictions Seriously” attracted lawyers, sociologists and students of religion in an unholy mix. A recent government symposium attended by two ministers under the auspices of the £33 million-a-year Social Work Training Council announced that “social work and social services must recognise the significance of religious belief in training and service delivery.”

Yet religion is still listed with gambling in the latest Social Trends under "Leisure and Lifestyle" – just a short step to extinction along with witch-burning and totem poles.

As a PR girl at Whitbread's the brewers' innocently said: "Religion is a bit of a buzz word at the moment. It must be the Dome."

Secularisation – or the "end-of-religion" theory – has dominated public policy-making for decades. You left your faith at home when you went to work – and only cult victims and vicars admitted in public that they "believed".

Ignited by Max Weber and propelled in the 60s and 70s by the gurus of secularisation theory like Bryan Wilson at Oxford and Peter Berger in Boston, the juggernaut of unbelief is now skidding on the crash pads. Religion is making its breathtaking come-back to the public agenda because of migration, requiring an urgent review of the whole social and political system.

Tariq Modood, Professor of Sociology at Bristol University, writes of Britain's "new citizenry", and the "pluralising of the state-religion link". In *Critical Review of International, Social and Political Philosophy*, he writes "As the fundamental interpretative horizons of the citizenry 'expands' through the immigration of religious peoples, so too the political identity of the regime is inevitably altered".

The government humoured minorities on the basis of race – until Rushdie. Meanwhile those minorities had been exploiting race funding for religious ends for years. "Race" initially had little meaning for migrants who defined themselves by kinship and faith.

Modood, formerly a Programme Director at the Policy Studies Institute, writing with reference particularly to a Muslim activism says:

"Regardless of its own distinctive religious centre of gravity, it has used any of the weapons of the broader politics of group pride and ethnic assertiveness that come to hand in its bid to find a true home in Britain".

And sociologist Philip Lewis, the Bishop of Bradford's

advisor on interfaith relations, has noted in his book *Islamic Britain* how the categories "race" and "religion" became interchangeable in the struggle to secure a place in society. "Working within the categories of 'black and multiculturalism' the Bangladeshi activists were ... able to win resources for community languages and Qu'ran schools, as desired by their Sylheti constituents."

Meanwhile, the government has until now largely ignored the function of faith in the mainstream of social life.

Key developments

There are at least three key developments that indicate the huge pressure building up for change in the public recognition of up-to-now "private" religion.

Social work is one. Social work *doesn't* work without an understanding of how religion affects lifestyle which affects, among other things, health.

Paul Boateng, Under-Secretary of State for Health launched the Social Work Training Council's book *Visions of Reality Religion and Ethnicity in Social Work*. He commended the council's "bravery": "It has not always been fashionable to give recognition to the world and life of the spirit ... in our multi-cultural, multi-faith society, it is important to strategic planning for social care managers to appreciate the importance of religion ..."

Another agent for change has been the Inner Cities Religious Council, somewhat bizarrely located at and part-funded by John Prescott's Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions. They were joint-publishers of the book and its small but vigorous presence in the heart of government, under the leadership of Anglican cleric David Randolph-Horn ensures a voice for "faiths" in key areas such as discrimination and inner-city regeneration.

A council of Europe Seminar in November in Strasbourg, at which he was a presenter, concluded: "Contacts between the Council of Europe and the religions should be put on an institutional footing at the

European level" and "the term 'secular' referring to the relationship between the State and religion, should be re-examined ... on a pan-European level ... The presence of minority religious communities and the resulting religious pluralism makes it necessary to devise new State policies in this field."

A third development is that the first Census question for 150 years to determine Britain's religious make-up could also be on the cards. The last was run in 1851.

A question was trialed in the census tests carried out last April by the Office for National Statistics on 90,000 households in eight local authority areas. The Census White Paper due to be published in October will announce its results and recommend a decision on a religion question.

Inevitable change

Ministers resisted a question in the last two. But change – and of a radical, even revolutionary kind – is inevitable. Lamin Sanneh, Professor of History at Yale explains: "The secularised West has regarded religion as a function of material forces.

"The secular liberal view is that it is not important what one believes so long as one is free to believe it, but is this adequate to the claims for fundamental religious truth?"

A religion question on the Census would address some of the practical anomalies, argues Leslie Francis, based at the University of Wales, who chairs the religion question sub-group for the Office for National Statistics. "Religion affects the willingness to take up medical resources, for instance. Some faith traditions may well show anxiety receiving medical care in a context in which they do not expect their belief systems to be valued. That means certain provisions need to be more securely in place in certain health areas and not in others."

Sound planning means sound finance. Baptists cost the state less because they tend not to smoke or drink. Old people who belong to a church are less of a drain on state resources. "Currently the users of census

data in such areas of planning have no opportunity to assess the added contribution of the religious variable to their planning models, since such data are not available," Francis has written.

Robin Gill, Professor at the University of Kent, has also demonstrated a tie-up between religion and social attitudes. "In at least ten different moral areas ... churchgoing is a very good predictor of behaviour" he has shown.

Gill thinks a religion question based on observance, would be inconclusive. Jews came in great numbers at the beginning of this century and built many synagogues. Now they have the lowest attendance record of any faith in Britain – disproportionate to their influence as a race which is census-monitored. The Board of Deputies of British Jews were the first to be involved in discussions with the Office for National Statistics.

Phrasing the Census question is therefore crucial. "Religion" comprises denomination, practice and belief but only one category – denomination – could be realistically "operationalised", says Professor Francis.

Commerce is keen on a religion question: Whitbread have made enthusiastic representations. It would help them avoid building pubs in religiously "dry" – or Muslim – catchment areas.

Professor Francis believes the ideological pull against asking the "R" question at all is weakening. "The power of the secularisation thesis still remains strong among people educated in the 60s and 70s when the thesis was taken as common sense. But the enormous amount of work in the study of religion in the last 30 years has simply destroyed that thesis, though it is not yet received wisdom in the eyes of the generation that makes the major decisions."

Indarjit Singh – a regular visitor to *Thought for the Day* who edits the quarterly *Sikh Messenger* – agrees. "It was once assumed there were whites and blacks and if you had a black community centre that would take care of them. 'Them' meant those from Africa and

Asia with little in common. But what's important to people is not the country their grandparents came from, which changes. It's your culture and religion which don't change, and which are very definitely important."

Ten years ago he met the Registrar General. "I suggested a religious affiliation question then, and I was given short shrift. Religion is very personal, and we don't like that sort of thing, I was told."

Britain has been traditionally reticent about its faith, banning the subject from gentlemen's clubs and polite dinner-table conversation, along with sex and politics.

Canada has a question, as does Australia which continues to surprise pundits with a high 70% of respondents identifying as Christian in 1996.

Muslims are happiest at the prospect. The Muslim magazine *Q News* reported: "It would represent a monumental step in the campaign to be recognised as a religious group." They do not qualify as a racial group like Jews and Sikhs which leaves them weak as a lobby, they believe.

Peter Riddell, Australian Director of the Guthrie Centre for Islamic Studies at London Bible College says: "Just asking the question means that the government is saying that religion is significant. While it's important that minorities have a sound statistical basis from which to lobby, the government will find itself having to take into account the Judeo-Christian majority in its legislation, as often happens in Australia."

"I am totally confident there will be a religious question in the Census," concludes Leslie Francis, "but it will not be agreed with the Office for National Statistics without a fight, because it belongs to the world that believes that secularisation is true." ■