
BRITISH POLITICS AND RELIGION: INTRODUCTION TO THIS SPECIAL EDITION

There is a long-standing adage in Britain which, albeit brief, nonetheless illuminates aspects of the nation's culture. It states that there are two subjects that should not be raised in polite company and are likely to alienate strangers and even estrange friends: the topics of politics and religion. For those unfamiliar with British culture, this may suggest a disinterest in both politics and religion or that the subjects are perceived as divisive. However, the picture is more complex than it appears at first glance and this is evident in a further, equally common maxim which further highlights the British cultural temperament: that politics and religion simply do not mix. In other words, religion should distance itself from the political realm and restrict itself to spiritual and pastoral matters. Conversely, that politics should not meddle in religious affairs largely because religion is deemed a matter of private conscience and conviction.

While these two axioms may be said to reflect the British way of thinking about politics and religion, summing up the nation's cultural heritage and political development, in many ways they still ring true, despite the fact that the country has undergone profound transformations in recent years in both political and religious terms. This special edition of the Politics and Religion will partially explore these changes alongside continuities but, even more so, the papers included here will provide commentaries on the contemporary, often strained relationship between politics and religion. True, British people are reluctant to discuss either, and tend to keep the two realms separate in as much as they do express opinions. Yet, the apparently increasing estrangement of the spheres of politics and religion belies the fact that they continue to interact in very significant, if less obvious ways.

How has Britain changed? What continuities can be observed? Firstly, despite its rapid loss of empire from the mid-twentieth century – built upon what was perceived by the British as exporting the joint colonial principles of Christianity and 'civilisation' – the nation state is still a leading world power economically, politically and, as involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan suggests, militarily as well. Britain's position as a leading world power may explain why, at least from the outside, the nation's people are frequently viewed as displaying an arrogant disposition or, at the very least, presenting an underlying reserved temperament. It might be argued that arrogance and quietude rests upon a feeling of confidence, a nation at ease with itself. This tendency towards a serene confidence in their political culture and the tolerance of the views of others, those of politics and religion included, may imply a both a stable culture and 'mature' political system.

This conjecture is only partly true. To be sure, the British people often reveal a sense of superiority and self-satisfaction with their own political system that is frequently said to have 'evolved' relatively peacefully as a liberal democracy and this is reflected in the fact that the nation has no written constitution in the sense that there is no one document that outlines the contours of the state's engagement with civil society and the rights and duties of its citizens (although various rights and obligations are all to be found scattered around in numerous documents, legislative enactments, and political

and legal precedents). The British political system also retains its strange idiosyncrasies including an unelected 'Upper Chamber' (the House of Lords) and a constitutional monarch that is both head of state and curiously, in fusing religion and politics, the head of the 'established church', the Church of England.

The disposition of self-contentment and a sense of being aloof from the rest of the world nonetheless obscure the truth that Britain has been through tumultuous and difficult times, especially since the 1960s, both politically and culturally. Domestically speaking the nation experienced what was tantamount to civil war in Northern Ireland until the peace accords since the 1990s brought a measure of peace between Protestant and Catholic communities, a religio-political antagonism unmatched anywhere else in the Kingdom and something of an anathema to the rest of the nation. Since the 1970s two other constituent parts of the United Kingdom, Scotland and Wales, clamored for more devolved powers if not total independence. In more recent times, dissatisfaction with the political system was evident in the scandal related to the expenses of elected members of the House of Commons which turned into a national outrage. This was felt in various indices of alienation. Disenchantment, for example, was very evident in the general parliamentary election of May, 2010, when approximately 45 percent of the population refused to register an electoral vote.

Disillusionment was arguably also reflected in the fact that no political party emerged as a total victor in the 2010 election. In short, the electorate felt that no one single party deserved to take the helm of government. This led to the first ever official coalition, involving two parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals, outside of wartime conditions. Both parties, albeit in different ways, pledged political reform of the first-past-the-post electoral system that had throughout the twentieth century delivered a two party dominance with the Labour and Conservative parties enjoying long periods in governmental office. Whatever the disadvantages of that voting system, it did have the tendency of producing strong and stable government. A preference for stability, alongside a sentiment conducive to letting government get on with governing, had long been viewed as part of the British political culture or what historically referred to as 'deference'. Into the twenty-first century that culture appeared to be undergoing a rapid transformation as political alienation seemingly replaced deference and pride in the political system.

Despite domestic problems, both political and economic, Britain, in an increasingly globalised world, with all of its political and economic uncertainties, has attempted to carve its place. With the decline of empire, the nation looked in two directions, east to Europe and west across the Atlantic. The British have long been reluctant Europeans. However, the nation's geographical location might suggest that it was only partially isolated from European events. The truth, however, is that for two thousand years British history has been bound up with European history including its religious wars. It has conducted war against every Western European nation except Portugal. Today, it is a key player in the European Union, but the British people remain sceptical (with voting at EU elections frequently being under 40 percent) of the adult population. However, it has another strong allegiance, that of the United States. Joined by historical and linguistic ties, it remains a staunch ally although the two nation's political systems are structurally very different, while their religious cultures vary significantly.

Britain's allegiance with the USA is an enduring one and marks one of the few

elements of political continuity in recent times. But it is not only attitudes towards politics which has changed for the British. There has proved to be profound transformations in cultural terms and this includes views of religion, by which is generally meant Christianity and the role played by the Christian churches. At the same time the two worlds of politics and religion, once intimately intertwined, have at least formally become increasingly separate spheres. Of course, this is not just true of Britain but most of Europe, especially with the increasing separation of Church and state – evidenced most recently in what are now nominally Catholic countries. Nonetheless, Britain is now a post-Christian society despite such anomalies as the 26 unelected Anglican bishops that sit in the House of Lords and the prayers offered before the opening of daily Parliamentary business.

Notwithstanding the increasing separation of religion and politics, the relationship between the two is worth briefly exploring in attempting to understand the demise of the former. In 1978 the renowned British sociologist of religion David Martin proposed his 'general theory of secularisation' which he expounded upon in an article in 1991. Martin saw the nature and extent of the decline of religion varying across the globe and denied that it was a result of one single process. Comparing Europe, North America and the Middle East he concluded that secularisation was largely a European phenomenon and he related this development to the struggle between the Christian churches and secular forces in Europe throughout the early modern era which discredited religion to an extent not experienced elsewhere in the world (Martin 1991). For many Europeans, not only the British, there remains the conviction that politics and religion simply should not fuse given that the involvement of one in the other had proved to be historically an explosive combination resulting in war and persecution on a grand scale. Earlier Martin had explored not only the role of the state in such affairs that had discredited religion, but also the significance of Protestant and Catholic communities in Western nations (1978). Those with Protestant majorities appeared to secularise, through the Protestant rationalising impulse, earlier than Catholic ones, a theme famously explored by Max Weber (1958) and later by Peter Berger (1973).

The fact that Britain has, for several centuries, contained a large Protestant majority and a small Catholic one rendered it, in Martin's terms, a 'mixed' variety. It secularised far quicker than the Catholic countries of Southern Europe but not as rapidly as those that were predominantly Protestant, most notably Scandinavian nations. The significance of these variables was brought out by the European Values survey in 2000. In his analysis of the EVS Lambert (2000) largely came to the same conclusion. However, by various indices Britain was catching up with the Scandinavian nations. The average British citizen (at least outside of the province of Northern Ireland) simple is not interested in religion and far more disinterested in religious matters than political issues.

The number of people in Britain who would describe themselves as atheists or agnostics has remained fairly constant at around 27 percent for several years (Brierley 2000). According to a survey by Davies (1997), nearly one-third of British people believed in an after-life, yet fewer than a third held beliefs of life after death that could be described as 'Christian'. Christian church membership has diminished appreciably. After World War II some 25 percent of the British people attended church. In 1990 14.6 percent of the population were members of a Christian church – a fall of 4 percent

over the previous five years. In 2000, the figure was closer to 7 percent with the projected figure for 2020 a mere 1 percent (Brierley 2000, 12). In England there were 428 per 1000 Christian infant baptisms in 1976 compared to 544 in 1960. The decline has continued, as has the number of marriages conducted in churches. In 1929, 56 percent of marriages in England and Wales were carried out in the Church of England compared with 37 percent in 1973. There are other, broader indications that Britain was a post-Christian society. Public opinion and legislative enactments reflect a changing moral climate that has moved from conventional Christian morality including liberal attitudes towards such matters as abortion, divorce and homosexuality.

Given the increasing disenchantment with British political processes and evident secularity, is the relationship of religion and politics worth discussing at all and does it justify a special journal edition on the relationship between both? I think so, and for some simple reasons. As suggested above, the nature of British politics is changing. The nation's religious landscape is also being transformed. Also changing is the relationship between both religion and politics at both the national and local level. Moreover, being a post-Christian society does not necessarily mean being a post-religious society in terms of religious pluralism. Britain is now a multi-ethnic and multi-faith society and this has implications for both religious life and political processes. Also, although religion is now increasingly reduced to the private sphere, state and public issues may impinge upon that sphere, thus drawing religion into the political arena. Then there are more 'hidden' forms of political activism indulged in by less conventional religious groups who function from the cultural margins and are 'political' in an equally unconventional way, operating outside of the official political channels. Finally, in a globalised world politics and religion are impacted by processes that can influence the trajectories of both.

All of these considerations point to profound changes in both the nature of politics and religion in Britain. This is reflected in the six papers that constitute this specially edited volume of the Politics and Religion. Each of these papers engage with divergent themes in the connectiveness between British politics and religion, exploring different dimensions of the same picture. In doing so, they cast light on both continuity and change. The papers clearly show that in Britain change is very much evident at the national, local and 'marginalised' levels, while indicating that the nation, in a globalised world, is impacted by external influences on both political and religious life. On the other hand, continuity is evident in the increasing estrangement of politics and religion; that they do not easily converge. Moreover, the papers indicate that the British people still find aspects of such convergence a difficult topic to engage and converse with and remaining, as ever, outside of the remit of polite conversation.

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