

Temple Tracts: Issue 1, Volume 2

21st Century Religion: Violent Extremism to Civil Society?

Chris Baker and John Reader



William Temple
Foundation

21st Century Religion: Violent Extremism to Civil Society?

Chris Baker and John Reader

Temple Tracts: Issue 1, Volume 2

Shelf Reference: Book 7

Sign-up for our free e-newsletter at williamtemplefoundation.org.uk

© William Temple Foundation 2016
Edited by Charlotte Dando

SAMPLE COPY: DO NOT PRINT OR DISTRIBUTE

Chris Baker is Director of Research for the William Temple Foundation and William Temple Professor of Religion and Public Life at the University of Chester. He has researched and published extensively on the role and impact of religion in the public sphere, but also how it is in turn shaped by the public sphere. His work crosses boundaries between theology and religious studies, and public policy, sociology, critical human geography and political philosophy. His book *Postsecular Cities – Spaces Theory and Practice* (Continuum, 2011) has been extensively cited, and his next volume entitled *Postsecular Geographies – Re-envisioning politics, subjectivity and ethics*, co-written with Paul Cloke and Andrew Williams will be published in 2016. Follow Chris on Twitter [@DrChrisRBaker](https://twitter.com/DrChrisRBaker).

John Reader is an Associate Research Fellow of the William Temple Foundation, Honorary Senior Lecturer with the Institute of Education at the University of Worcester, and Rector of the Ironstone Benefice in the Diocese of Oxford. His most recent publications include 'A Philosophy of Christian Materialism' co-written with Chris Baker and Tom James and a chapter in 'Religious Experience and New Materialism' co-written with Clayton Crockett. Follow John on Twitter [@DrJohnReader](https://twitter.com/DrJohnReader).

Contents

Introduction	4
The Nexus Between Religion and Violence: the return of a troubling phenomenon.....	5
Religion and the Secular	7
What Prospects for a Cosmopolitan Religion in a Postsecular Public Square?	8
Religion as Entangled Fidelities.....	10
Progressive Localism: Entangled Fidelities and Cosmopolitan Religion in Practice	11
Case Studies of Progressive Localism and Curating the New Politics	13
Conclusion.....	15
Reflection	16
Bibliography	18
Further Reading	18

Introduction

In this first *Temple Tract* of 2016, we survey the current state of the world. This year seems to have ushered in an increasingly bleak scenario with regard to human and non-human suffering in the context of violence, threats of violence, global climate change, risky mass migrations, poverty and continuing financial risk. It is the threat of violence and the actual acting out of acts of random violence and terrorism that seem to be the hallmark of our current era of 'modernity': continuing gun rampages in the US, bombing of civilians in Syria and Iraq, knife assassinations and reprisals in Israel and Palestine, global terror outrages on the streets of Ankara and Istanbul, Karachi and Kabul, heightened military tensions along Europe's Eastern border and continuing violations on testing long-range nuclear ballistic missiles by North Korea. Harvard academic [Stephen Pinker has statistically proven](#) the sharp decline in global violence (as measured by numbers of people murdered by the state or ethnically-different neighbours) since the middle to end of the 20th century.

This analysis attempts to introduce a less-pessimistic narrative into future human progress; Pinker is properly critical of selectively regional and ideologically-driven media portrayals of violence that distort wider, global trends. However, we argue, the very real fear of violence stems from wider systemic drivers that are exacerbating inequality and risk which then places huge stress on individual well-being and sources of solidarity. These drivers squeeze out a sense of hope in the future and introduce a predominant tone of cynicism, anger and/or apathy into which totalitarian ideologies can insert themselves to pernicious and damaging effect.

In this *Temple Tract* we focus particularly on the re-emergence of the nexus between religion and violence, and its potential to perpetuate stark divisions and legitimated violence and oppression in the public sphere. Within a European context the dark shadow of *Charlie Hebdo* and the subsequent massacre of 130 people in Paris in 2015 by Islamist terrorists casts its dark, ominous and disturbing shadow into 2016. There is an ongoing State of Emergency in France, in tandem with the clear growth of far-right and racist ideologies leading to acts of violence and intimidation aimed at religious and ethnic minorities.

We enquire into these new connections that have re-emerged under the conditions of globalisation since the end of the 20th and the start of the 21st century, focussing in particular on the work of Girard and Juergensmeyer. We then explore the possibilities of creating a more civil 'civil society' under these conditions of heightened threats of violence and social bifurcation through ideas of the postsecular and cosmopolitanism to be found in the work of thinkers such as Beck and Habermas.

In the third section, and in line with Temple's concern for a pragmatic policy approach derived from Christian and other beliefs, in which citizens of all worldviews could exercise 'responsible citizenship', we 'break-down' these theoretical arguments into political realities. How do we seek to construct a viable and sustainable civil society in the context of intense globalisation and growing plurality? How do we create bridges of action and understanding across boundaries and identities that are increasingly porous, but also often increasingly hardening? In this context we discuss ideas such as progressive localism and entangled fidelities, building on research and work published by the Foundation, and deploy various case studies to substantiate our case.

We propose that churches and other faith communities become agents of genuine and progressive politics by exercising imaginative and non-hubristic local leadership, deploying their resources, skills and know-how to 'curate' and pioneer new spaces of ethical citizenship and politics on behalf of the wider community. This narrative we suggest, is a radically new one that will help move to more

optimistic and grounded accounts of the possibility of civility and progressive 'spaces of convergence' (Cloke, Sutherland and Williams: forthcoming, 2016) in the public sphere.

The Nexus Between Religion and Violence: the return of a troubling phenomenon

'Islamic State is actively focusing its attention on conducting large-scale attacks in Europe similar to those last year in Paris, the head of the EU's law enforcement agency has said. Rob Wainwright, the head of Europol, the Hague-based organization that coordinates EU policing efforts over terrorism and organized crime, said Isis had "developed a new combat-style capability to carry out a campaign of large-scale terrorist attacks on a global stage, with a particular focus in Europe". His comments, at a meeting of interior ministers in Amsterdam, came as France's interior minister said Islamist terrorists had planned to attack another concert in Paris and carry out a mass killing in the streets of the capital. Bernard Cazeneuve was defending the government's decision to maintain a state of emergency imposed after the shootings and bombings across Paris on 13 November, which left 130 people dead, including 89 at the Bataclan concert hall. Isis claimed responsibility'.

The quote above is from a story in The Guardian newspaper published on January 25th this year and is typical of the reports relating religion to violence now appearing in the media. When I (JR) preached on this subject at one of my Remembrance Day services the previous November, it elicited a number of interesting responses. One was from a lorry driver who commented as he left the church, that many of his colleagues would watch the news in their rest periods between shifts, and that whenever one of these such stories was shown, their response was "if that is religion, you can keep it!" I suspect that such comments are representative of many from those who are outside the fold of religious institutions, and who see religion as a source of conflict and therefore best avoided. The bland words of politicians who claim that extremists don't represent "the true faith"- whichever one that might be - fail to address the deeper concerns that many hold, and which won't be adequately challenged until the actual relationships between religion and violence are owned up to and fully articulated. Religious differences within faiths, let alone between them, have indeed been a source of violence over many centuries, and a simple denial of this, or attempts to argue that we have now moved on and don't behave like this any longer, don't carry enough credibility to convince all but the now peace-loving faithful.

That the relationships between religion(s) and violence is long-standing, complex and multi-faceted is well documented by historians. So, for instance, in his recent history of Europe from 1517-1648, Greengrass says this:

'Calling the later sixteenth century the era of the wars of religion underestimates the polymorphy of religious dissent and the degree to which religion became the prism through which questions of power and identity were viewed. It excludes the equally significant experience of religious pluralism. Religious dissent did not necessarily lead to conflict. Contemporaries appreciated that religion was a superficial rallying cry for people's loyalties, a smokescreen behind which people could pursue their individual interests.' (2015: 390)

A question we might pose now is how the supposedly religious conflicts of the early decades of the 21st century will be viewed by subsequent generations. Will they too be seen in retrospect as concealing a host of non-religious motives and movements, or will they be interpreted as displaying an inherent internal link between religion and violence?

Suspicious that the latter is the case might be supported by the arguments of the recently departed Rene Girard, known mostly within theological circles for his work on the notion of the scapegoat, but whose early book *Violence and the Sacred* is worthy of further examination. Taking an anthropological perspective and delving back into antiquity, he states that ‘...the sole purpose of religion is to prevent the recurrence of reciprocal violence’ (Girard, 2013: 60). At the heart of his argument is the suggestion that all religious rituals spring from the surrogate victim, and all the great institutions of humanity, both secular and religious, spring from ritual.

This seems a large claim to make, but he does present evidence to support this view that the violence displayed in religious rituals towards the surrogate victims, or scapegoats, is indeed a way of deflecting or diffusing the further violence that would ensue had such rituals not been developed. At a later stage in his work, Girard proposes that Christianity is the one religion that overturns this human propensity to violence, as Christ becomes the figure who challenges this. Even if one accepts this argument however, it does nothing to dispel the view that there is an intrinsic connection between religion and violence.

Is this something we want to believe, or do we in fact hope instead that such instances represent a particular stage of human development that has been left behind? A further area for consideration becomes that of the Enlightenment, itself a response to the religious conflicts documented by Greengrass, and an attempt to abandon and move away from those forms of violence. Following the attacks of 9/11, the philosophers Habermas and Derrida (previously opposed in their views) collaborated in a book reflecting upon the significance of those events. Borradori in her introductory commentary on the exchanges sets the scene:

‘The explicit ideology of the terrorists who attacked the twin towers and the Pentagon on 9/11 is a rejection of the kind of modernity and secularization that in the philosophical tradition is associated with the Enlightenment... Rather than a coherent set of beliefs, the Enlightenment marks a break with the past, which becomes available only on the basis of the individual’s independence in the face of authority.’ (2003: 14)

What Habermas and Derrida go on to argue in their different ways, is that the tasks begun by that movement remain as yet incomplete. That the religiously inflected violence we are now encountering, requires a renewal and revival of the values of the Enlightenment moving beyond a superficial search for tolerance and into the realms of a radical hospitality. And indeed, the development of forms of reason and democracy that recognize and address the threats posed by what might be seen as regressive forms of religion. The problem with this is to know whether it is anything more than yet another exercise of cultural imperialism which consigns religions to a narrow interpretation, and fails to acknowledge genuine differences. Just how far will such arguments take us?

Religion and the Secular

Recent research carried out with the support of the Luce project and published in *God in the Tumult of the Global Square* (Juergensmeyer et al, 2015) throws another light on this apparent resurgence in religious-inspired violence. It reveals that activists in new religious movements across the globe perceive themselves to be fragile, vulnerable and under siege from a hostile secular world. They have lost faith in secular nationalism as the secular state does not have the social strength to nurture them.

The loss of faith in secular nationalism is not necessarily a religious problem as such, but religion has become the ideology of protest - the place where it all comes to the surface. So the problem is the construction of the idea of a secular social order that marginalizes religious values, practices and identities, and these then become a scapegoat for social and cultural frustrations. Religious ideas, however, both support a resurgent nationalism, and are windows onto a wider world and more peaceful relationships. Our question is whether there can be a global civil religion which takes the wider view?

The argument presented by Juergensmeyer and his colleagues is that secularism replaced religion as the basis for moral community after the Enlightenment, but that now the pendulum has swung back the other way. The concepts of 'Religion' and 'the secular' however, are **both** Post-Enlightenment inventions. Social morality and community cohesion tasks have passed from religion to secular society, but in the later 20th and early 21st Century there has been a loss of faith in secular nationalisms as they fail to combat greed and corruption. This in addition to the forces of globalization has weakened the sense of national identity and local forms of control. There are many different forms of "nationalism", of course.

So the religion that currently enters public life in response is not that of the Pre-Enlightenment, but is narrower, fractured and more confused. It is the 'narrowing', the closing down of options and possibilities that is the most worrying aspect of contemporary 'religions', as this sharpens the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' on the basis of beliefs and practices that are determined as being 'correct' or the only option. I'm right and everyone else is wrong. There is also evidence that access to sources of faiths through technology contributes to this process, as it allows these pre-emptive conclusions to be reached without access to wider traditions and history. We make up our minds too quickly on the basis of insufficient encounters, even within our own traditions.

There are three critical issues in this global picture: identity; accountability; security. Religious ideas and communities provide possible solutions to each of these (Juergensmeyer, 2015: 15). Isis, for instance, has magnified religious identities as national identities are weakened, but religious identities combined with those weakened national identities are powerful: they provide an alternative locus of identity, one which sharpens, narrows and marginalizes (for instance, when Christian equals Western Agent). In the face of this crisis of identity some groups want a new age and increased freedoms, whereas others want stability and to be able to trust authority. So religion is seen as both the cause of global insecurity and its antidote; as both a frightening and a calming influence. It can be for some a harbour in the storm created by globalization as it is perceived as a trusted institution.

But, the problem that has to be faced in these arguments is that 'religion' is not one thing, and is also not consistent, as religions themselves are impacted by global change. There is no one way in

which religions encounter and interact with political and cultural developments. So, is it possible that there can be shared religious values across traditions, or is this to claim too much? Candidates for these shared values could be justice, reverence for nature, or spiritual development. Are these possible grounds for a global civil religion? Can we learn to live together despite our differences? Can we communicate across cultural and religious boundaries? Another challenge is to accept the limitations of, and truth claims of individual faiths, in order to operate together in the global square.

What Prospects for a Cosmopolitan Religion in a Postsecular Public Square?

In order to answer the challenge raised by these questions, we now bring into the debate the notion of the postsecular public square and the idea of cosmopolitan vs. universalist religion. These ideas emerge from two influential German social theorists both influenced by the methodologies and assumptions of the Frankfurt school of social theory (i.e. Marxist and post-Marxist). This makes what they say about religion and its place in the public sphere even more interesting. Jürgen Habermas (whose work has already been cited) coined the concept of the postsecular public square back in the early 2000s in response to both historical and ideological shifts. For many decades he, like the US philosopher John Rawls, had attempted to construct basic principles for a progressive and fair politics, and the mechanisms for resolving disputes in an increasingly diverse and pluralistic society – what he called the theory of communicative action. These involved intricate rules for recognizing the truth claims of statements from the perspectives of normativity (i.e. ethics), description (i.e. empirical accuracy) and authenticity (i.e. integrity of beliefs and worldviews). So his criteria were that statements had to be true, truthful, normatively correct and comprehensible. Habermas wanted to move beyond simply scientific (or empirical-descriptive) claims of truth, but within his 20th century mindset religion, due to modernisation, was no longer a credible source of universal moral knowledge. Truth itself depended upon consensus as that which was acceptable to the majority in free and open debate.

However, with his game changing turn to the idea of the *postsecular* public sphere Habermas recognizes two things. First is the empirical resurgence of religion in the West, especially in societies like the United States. Second, however, is his concern for the distorting effects of neo-liberal capitalism, in which what he calls the values of the systems of the world of business and commerce have unduly invaded those of the lifeworlds of civil society. Habermas worries at the lack of moral basis for the liberal democratic state and its ability to command the legitimation and support of its citizens. Religion, he acknowledges, becomes an equally if not more compelling source of mobilization and loyalty, and the deeper ethical traditions from which it is able to draw, have a positive impact upon the motivation of its citizens in terms of ideas of solidarity, community and the public good. He labels the wisdom traditions of religion ‘pre-political;’ i.e. resistant to the shaping and manipulation of modern ideologies such as neo-liberal capitalism (Habermas, 2006: 18).

For these reasons, Habermas suggests, we need to move from a secular imagination of the public square in which religious beliefs and forms of knowledge are held to be irrational and thus relegated from the public into the private sphere, to a postsecular imagination, ‘...in which the vigorous continuation of religion in a continually secularizing environment must be reckoned with’ (2005:26). There is thus no blueprint as to how to manage this space, but simply an acknowledgment that we have entered a new type of public space in which these different worldviews will be contested.

The point of the postsecular category for our deliberations is that it opens up the public sphere to new sets of imaginations, discourses and actions in which both religious and non-religious sources and social actors have a co-responsibility for maintaining.

Meanwhile, Ulrich Beck questions the secular/religious divide in arguments that are similar to those of Habermas, but which take them forward in a more radical and potentially progressive way. The main challenge he identifies to a civil and flourishing civil space is the notion of risk. Towards the end of the last century, he suggests, a new type of modernity emerged. It was built on the increased interconnectedness and intense processes of globalization created by a neo-liberal capitalism constantly seeking new markets and commodities for financial exchange. An Enlightenment modernity that had been predicated on scientific models of cause and effect and therefore predictability (what he is calls Modernity 1), has now been replaced by a modernity predicated on risk and uncertainty (Modernity 2). The impact of Modernity 2 is described in the following terms:

‘It refers to the erosion of clear boundaries separating the markets, states, civilisations, cultures, and the lifeworlds of different peoples and religions, as well as the resulting worldwide situation of an involuntary confrontation with alien others’. (Beck, 2011: 74)

Under the conditions of Modernity 2, Beck says, systems are now so interconnected, but equally so unaccountable (i.e. they have not been strategically planned or legitimated), that their complexity now outruns our ability to control them. There are so many unplanned and unforeseen feedback loops in the ‘system’, that even well-intended and progressive actions will often be sidetracked and instead produce a new set of unintended consequences, which then simply multiply. Examples of multiple and entangled problems which now threaten global as well as individual risk include climate change and the financialisation of everyday life (what he calls the distribution of financial ‘bads’ rather than goods). We have now created a situation, says Beck, where because we can no longer control the forces that have been unleashed, we are at a loss to understand how we might resolve them (if indeed we can).

The old levers of change and control are no longer fit for purpose, or at best seem largely impotent. For example, the grand project that emerged from Modernity 1 (i.e. the Enlightenment) was the nation state. The nation state was intended to be the new object of loyalty, fervor and power in the world, replacing religion. However, the globalized nature and complexity of interconnections that now shape our world are beyond the territorial and intellectual reach of any single nation state to resolve. The very future of our planet he says, in his posthumous book (2016), will rely on new coalitions and new relationships between global and local actors, in ways that transcend the old binaries and static categories bequeathed by the Western Enlightenment.

The main binary that the Western Enlightenment promulgated, namely the idea that modernity and religion were incompatible, is the main ‘tenet’ now causing the most amount of head scratching. As the 21st century has evolved, and religion has re-emerged as a global actor, it is patently clear that religion thrives within, and indeed shapes, multiple modernities. The Western secular version is just one of many modernities in existence, and is itself, undergoing intense reflexivity and change. Thus the only possible solution for Beck in relation to global catastrophe is not only to create and forge new alliances and partnerships that play to the benefits of greater proximity and interconnection. It is also to create a new moral imagination in which the wisdom, insights and knowledges of both religious and other beliefs are brought into close proximity and shared, rather than being artificially hived off.

Beck is in no doubt that religion now has a major role to play in the forging of both a new global and moral imagination, but also in the way it adapts itself to political and civic realities on the ground. Indeed, Beck goes even further (and certainly further than Habermas) when he says the project of a new and sustainable modernity relies on religion playing a decisive role, such is its global power.

‘It is hardly possible to overestimate the potential of religions as cosmopolitan actors – not just because of their ability to mobilise billions of people across barriers of nation and class, but because they exercise a powerful influence on the way people see themselves in relationship to the world. Above all they represent a resource of legitimation in the battle for the dignity of human beings in a civilisation at risk of destroying itself.’ (Beck, 2011: 198)

The sobering question that remains, is to ask if it is possible for religion to play this role at both local and global levels. Has it also got the necessary moral imagination and sophisticated courage? In theory it has, but what about in practice.

There are other ways we can analyze the nature of the threat facing us as a human species, but also the new opportunities for new creative partnerships and forms of moral and ethical imagining that emerge from new spaces of convergence and proximity that Modernity 2 is creating. One such way we suggest, is to explore the idea of religion as “entangled fidelities”.

Religion as Entangled Fidelities

In many ways the conclusion of the Juergensmeyer book to which we referred earlier, seems to us to be the starting point for this idea. The authors suggest that: ‘The God that rises in the tumult of today’s global square may be a nameless deity, a symbol of ultimate meaning, of an unidentified spirituality that knits humanity together in a common and spiritual bond’ (2015: 118).

This leads back to recent work in which we have both been engaged, and which makes its own proposals for a reconfiguration of Christian doctrine and practice (Baker, James and Reader, 2015). This explores new forms in which religion is now taking shape, as well as offering suggestions for different ways of understanding the nature of the divine which are consistent with that conclusion.

So concepts gleaned from Deleuze, Latour and Badiou, can address some of the practical situations encountered in the material religious practices of contemporary faith communities, particularly responses to globalization which are seen to be factors in the current violence. In addition to the fact that we can no longer assume the existence of settled groups which have been the basis for much church life and practice, we draw attention to the different attitudes towards authority prevalent and the blurring of boundaries both geographical and intellectual:

‘What is now to be encountered across a range of religious practices and beliefs is a much greater fluidity, freedom and willingness to both select and subsequently abandon whatever appears to be helpful and credible at a particular time. There is a fluidity, a process of change and flow and a much greater propensity to make up one’s own mind irrespective of what any faith establishment may teach or promote’ (Baker, James and Reader, 2015: 23).

Thus the discourses of networks (Latour), rhizomes (Deleuze) and then the challenge of what fidelity means in this changed context (Badiou), each have something to contribute to our self-understanding. One of the main ideas we take is from Latour, that of truth as circulating references. He prefers to talk about matters of concern rather than matters of fact, so where values are always already embedded in social and political discourse.

At the theological heart of the book are two chapters which address the key Christian doctrines of God; Creation; Humanity and Redemption. Drawing on the philosophers mentioned, these chapters present a reconfiguration which, while relating clearly to the tradition, also move beyond it into more controversial territory. The following offers an example:

‘[I]n this book we have determined to take a different path, thinking of God not as an actual being, but as in some way virtual: as a power or powers that are somehow hidden within the actual, along the same plane of immanence with them but not among them as one actuality among others. We have taken this path to preserve something about the idea of God that makes it recognisable as the God of classical western theism: a kind of non-identity if not transcendence, a capacity to play a causal role in the world that is unique if not unilateral. Simply put, a God who is submerged within the play of objects is not what the tradition has meant by “God.” Much better to think of God as the play itself: this is what the notion of God as virtual effects’. (Baker, James and Reader, 2015: 92)

Could such an approach lead towards that concept of a nameless deity and an unidentified spirituality proposed by Juergensmeyer and colleagues? Is this the open space within which people from different traditions can explore and expand their understandings without differences leading to conflict and violence? After all, as we saw from Greengrass, religious dissidence doesn’t necessarily lead to conflict. Perhaps in conversation with new and developing forms of an Enlightenment perspective that doesn’t deny validity for faith, but acknowledges its continuing role in human social and moral formation, there may be a synergy between religious and secular that forges new possibilities for a global civil society.

This is where the ideas of Latour are of particular significance. When he talks about truth as circulating references, he means the process of keeping ideas and conversations going, and resisting the temptation of the premature foreclosure of discussion. It is surely when individuals or groups decide to bring that circulation to a halt because they believe that they have identified a truth which then has to be imposed upon others, that the differences can lead so easily to conflict. Whilst we can keep talking to each other there is at least a chance that greater understanding and deeper relationships might be achieved.

Entangled Fidelities and Cosmopolitan Religion in Practice

We now move on from the rather abstract debate we have been conducting, and start to explore where these concepts and ideas can be cashed out in the public square. Because if this isn’t possible, then although we may be keeping the references circulating, we are not making the sort of transformative impact that reflects new forms and subjectivities of ethical citizenship.

In order to locate the case studies that we will offer, we will briefly explain the ideas of progressive localism and spiritual capital. The idea of progressive localism has emerged in the last five years or so, from within the discipline of political geography. It attempts to rescue the idea of localism, which has highlighted the steady policy shift over the last 30 years of all UK governments towards the de-centralisation of the role of state in favour of local civil society and the market. Instead of austerity localism, which according to its authors, represents the active disciplining of local communities in the art of risk management and market entrepreneurship, progressive localism is proposed as the way forward to a genuinely empowered and flourishing civil society.

Progressive in this context does not mean liberal or elitist, but simply means outward looking. The concept identifies both a new willingness, and also the strategic importance of being open to working alongside others who share a similar ethical drive, in order to transform things for the better. It also entails a willingness to collaborate (albeit on an adhoc and pragmatic basis) in order to create change. Progressive localism is,

‘outward looking and creates positive affinities between places and social groups negotiating global processes’. These processes are expansive in their geographical reach, and productive of new relations between places and social groups, and can ... ‘reconfigure existing communities around emergent agendas for social justice, participation and tolerance’. (Featherstone et al., 2012: 180)

The new twist in progressive localism is that you may find yourself working alongside a partner or collaborator from a totally different ideological mindset or worldview. But whereas under the old secularist imagination of the public sphere this might have been seen as a problem, within the new postsecularly-imagined public square this is less of a stumbling block. Progressive localism means you won’t always have to agree with your partners. You will choose not to waste valuable time and energy haggling over issues to do with same sex marriage or abortion, for instance, because you will have made the strategic decision and ethical (as opposed to moral) choice that you will choose to give greater weight to what unites you; especially what unites you for action that transcends narrow self-interest.

And notice that the word ‘affinities’ doesn’t just mean the crossing of ideological divides, it also means finding new local assemblages and economies of spatial scale that are tailor-made to fit the required task, and which do not rely on unwieldy, broken and artificially imposed cartographies of bureaucratic authority. The language of affinities suggests a more entangled and organic type of politics.

However, key to making progressive localism work on the ground, is the notion of spiritual capital, and its creative and resilient outworking in so many complex, intractable and nitty-gritty situations.

In our work over many years at the William Temple Foundation, we have found that [spiritual capital](#) was an indispensable driver of social capital. Starting with faith-based social actors, who are often delivering goods and services to the most marginalised sections of the community in ways that are far more resilient and cost-effective than other providers, we found these goods and services, (the ‘what’), were energised and created by the ‘why’, which we call spiritual capital. Spiritual capital ‘energises’ religious capital (the what) ‘by providing a theological identity and worshipping tradition, but also a value system, moral vision and a basis for faith...’ is often embedded locally within faith groups, but also expressed in the lives of individuals’ (Baker and Skinner, 2006: 7). It is a virtuous cycle of capital production where the moral energy of values and beliefs gets channelled into practical engagement in civil society, the positive experience of which reinforces the integrity of that moral drive.

But here is the interesting way that spiritual capital can be developed. If it is the motivating energy of our beliefs, values and worldviews, that orientates us in a certain way in the public sphere, and influences the way we contribute to social capital, then spiritual capital is not the sole preserve of people who label themselves religious or belong to religious communities. Secular or non-religious beliefs and worldviews (i.e. secular spiritual capital) are also significant, potentially generative, sources of social capital that are actively seeking new spaces and affinities of progressive engagement by which it can be deployed in authentic and fulfilling ways.

So, we believe, there is a very clear link between progressive localism and spiritual capital. It's about crossing both geographical, bureaucratic boundaries, and also, because of the depth of diversity that now confronts us, it is increasingly about crossing ideological and epistemological barriers as well. The challenge, but also the opportunity and invitation within the postsecular public square, is to experiment and occupy new intellectual and political spaces, offering both intellectual and emotional hospitality to others, but from within the wells of our own values and beliefs. This wellspring of values and beliefs we have identified as spiritual capital. In all scenarios of cosmopolitan ethics we invest our spiritual capital with and alongside others for the sake of making an intervention for change, but also so that our own wells can be replenished.

But these spaces and affinities of progressive civic subjectivity are fragile and quite ephemeral, they need consciously tending, and also propagating, and it is here that we move onto our final idea: that of religion, deploying and displaying its cosmopolitan tendencies, not in an hubristic way, but an enabling way – as curating a new politics.

The basis of what we propose is 'that demand meets supply'. In other words, what Cloke et al (2016) refer to as 'new spaces of convergence' are emerging, as people seek to reconnect what has been disconnected. These new spaces of convergence recreate a sense of place, solidarity and community. Faith groups are inherently well placed to curate these new spaces of convergence; by which we mean two things. First we deploy the term 'curate' in the secular sense – as in to curate an exhibition for example which involves organising a space so that it makes sense of a collection of artefacts within it and tells a coherent narrative.

But we are also using curate in the religious sense of the word. Here it means something more holistic – entrusted with the care and healing (or cure) of souls. As the Foundation's and others' research shows, at their cosmopolitan best, religious groups hold the cure of souls and the cure and transformation of social and material structures in a unique and creative tension.

Case Studies of Progressive Localism and Curating the New Politics

We now offer some local examples which perhaps offer signs of these dynamics being enacted in practice. Following group discussions about the future of the rural benefice in which I (JR) serve, and particular concerns about communication, it was decided that we needed to learn more about other faiths. As a result, we have now invited and learnt from speakers from Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. It is interesting that each of these church-based activities has attracted people who are not churchgoers, but who share concerns about the relationships between different faiths. It is often the case that these sessions raise more questions than answers, and there have been points of tension, such as over attitudes towards women. But this feels like a small step in the right direction. The key thing is to be in relationship, and to build the contacts which help us to understand our differences in such a way that we can see beyond them to common concerns and ideas. One common challenge which emerged from our meeting with the Imam was that of how to attract younger people to our respective faith traditions in the face of growing secular influences.

Another example is that of one of our small church primary schools which draws in parents from the local town, a number of whom are Muslim and who want their children to attend a faith school rather than a non-faith school. The encouraging aspect is that none of these parents asks to have their children withdrawn from the weekly assembly taken by the vicar, nor do they keep their children away from the half termly school services held in the church. This seems like a sensible and

natural way to progress, and will hopefully build the trust and knowledge which creates a sound base for future adult relationships. In both cases it would seem that it has been possible to construct safe spaces within which ideas can continue to be expressed and explored.

A further example we have covered in our research is the work of a newly-formed Muslim-led food bank and community kitchen in West London, called *Sufra*: a word which has connotations of hospitality and dining in many different languages. 90% of the people who access their services are non-Muslim. It sees its project as an entry point to accessing other life opportunities, for example, a food academy programme offering accredited training for 16-25 year olds; a vegetable box scheme providing fresh produce at wholesale prices; and a food growing project. *Sufra* represents a new space for new generations of British Muslims whereby they volunteer more, and become engaged politically and practically to meet the needs of the local community of which they are part, rather than the more traditional route of giving charity to global Muslim projects. 50% of *Sufra*'s funding and resources comes from other faith groups, including the local Catholic church and Jewish community, as well as a multifaith workforce with people from non-religious backgrounds. Founding Director [Mohammed Mamdani noted](#) the changing relationship between the public and the voluntary sector, suggesting a blurring of lines. *Sufra* volunteers have been trained by staff from the council's housing department, something 'never seen before' in Brent, and a 'radical' change. *Sufra* was a venue for pre-election hustings, suggesting that faith-based spaces of welfare are also becoming spaces of political debate and conscientisation.

Another study of religiously-curated progressive localism would be the launch, by Anglican priest Chris Sunderland, of the Bristol Pound: a local currency initiative designed, in [Chris's words](#), 'to give people a taste of a different form of money, that was embedded in the local economy and could produce a new values-led community of exchange'. The initiative had grown from several years of developing community allotments and environmental campaigns in Bristol aimed at addressing climate change issues. The Pound was launched in 2012 and is currently used by several hundred business and individuals. It has been formally recognised as an official currency by the Bank of England.

The next challenge is to get the Bristol pound used more widely in poorer areas of the city as a spur to setting up new co-operatives, social enterprises and pop-up markets. Overall the aim of Chris and his fellow trustees (across faith traditions and none) is to '... bring people in touch with local producers, and encourage the uptake of fresh food through using buying groups that will order food through a bespoke webtool'.

Conclusion

By way of bringing the arguments of this *Temple Tract* towards a conclusion, it is perhaps useful to recap our arguments. We have observed that the trope of religion and violence is one that has been emerging in the last few years, and one that has been consolidated within the European imagination in particular since the twin Paris attacks by Isis terrorists in 2015.

One of the reasons for the upsurge in religious violence, we suggested, was that it was perceived as the antidote to the fluidity and intense changes associated with global capitalism. Into the void created by the weakening of the nation state, religion has emerged as an alternative system of identity and authority, feeding directly off the hopelessness, alienation and despair felt by many who have 'lost faith' in the modernist narrative. But religion has also allied itself powerfully with ethnic and nationalist identities, thus creating sharp divisions based on notions of civilisation and ethnicity (for example, a Muslim East vs. a Christian West).

But we have also suggested that the proximity and hyper-diversity associated with intense globalisation has created boundaries and barriers that are far more porous, and thus new spaces of convergence have emerged in which creative partnerships, affinities and progressive alliances can take place. These often redefine geographic and bureaucratic boundaries, but also add value in terms of both pragmatic know-how (useful for problem-solving), but also wisdom and insight from multiple sources and worldviews. Stepping into these spaces is not to reduce everything to a lowest common denominator or bland greyness, but to have one's own ideology or worldview both partially de-constructed and also re-assembled in new, fresh and compelling ways. Thus we have explored how concepts such as spiritual capital, progressive localism, cosmopolitanism, entangled fidelities, and curating new spaces of performative ethical citizenship and politics have tried to express this perhaps more hopeful *zeitgeist*. We are calling this *zeitgeist* the desire for a new civility: the desire for a more civil form of civil society, and for political engagement that represents a large but inchoate middle space, rejecting pessimistic and regressive fundamentalisms, be they religious or secular in origin.

With the profound disarray of the nation state and the re-emergence of religion globally and locally, religious actors are increasingly looked to, despite the violent overtones to which it is now succumbing, to be not only the guardians (which would be Habermas' view), but also the pro-active agents of what one might call a proper understanding of a liberal democratic public sphere. In this scenario, liberal would have to mean 'genuinely inclusive' and democratic would have to mean 'participatory'. These values are what we believe religious groups at their progressive best are enacting and curating for the sake of the wider community. In this way they not only 'safeguard' the best of their own progressive traditions, but also those of non-religious traditions as well.

We would venture to say this safeguarding becomes a necessity if the hopelessness and despair we increasingly see in our common life, and the constant threat of both real and potential violence that it generates, is in any way to be counterbalanced with a politics of hope and pragmatic solidarity.

Reflection

Does it feel to you as though we are living in a postsecular public sphere? How useful a concept do you find it for understanding the relationship between the religious and the secular?

How might we create a more 'civil' civil society?

Where do you see 'new spaces of convergence' where religious and non-religious citizens are coming together in progressive and innovative ways for the sake of the wider community?

Do you think churches and faith groups have the necessary confidence and creativity to be 'curators' of new spaces of civic and political participation? If not, what would need to change?

What does it mean to be 'secular' these days?

Thank you for reading.

If you enjoyed this e-book please write a review.

Please tell your friends and colleagues about this book.

Temple Tracts (Volume 2) is a series of seven e-books. Find out more and download the other books in the series at williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/temple-tracts

Coming Soon

Religion, Government and the Public Good
by Craig Calhoun

Ethical Consumerism
by Eve Poole

What is Religion?
by Greg Smith

Religion and Sexual Diversity
by Shanon Shah

Religion, Social Policy and the Body
by Tina Hearn

Watch What Christians Do, Not What They Say
by John Atherton

OUT NOW: Temple Tracts Volume 1

[Download the 6 book series now](#)

Bibliography

- Baker, Chris, & Skinner, Hannah, 2006. *Faith In Action; the Dynamic Connection between Religious and Spiritual Capital*. Manchester: William Temple Foundation. Available online at: <http://williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Faith-In-Action-William-Temple-Foundation-2014.pdf>.
- Baker, Chris, James, Tom & Reader, John, 2015. *A Philosophy of Christian Materialism: Entangled Fidelities and the Public Good*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Beck, Ulrich, 2011. *A God of One's Own*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck, Ulrich, 2016, *The Metamorphosis of the World*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Borradori, Giovanna, 2003. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Cloke, Paul, Sutherland, Callum & Williams, Andrew (2016). 'Postsecularity, Political Resistance and Protest in the Occupy Movement', *Antipode* pps.1-27.
- Featherstone David, Ince Anthony, Mackinnon Danny, Strauss Kendra, Cumbers Andrew. 2012. 'Progressive localism and the construction of political alternatives.' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37: 177–182.
- Girard, Rene, 2013. *Violence and the Sacred*. London: Bloomsbury
- Greengrass, Mark, 2015. *Christendom Destroyed: Europe 1517-1648*. London: Penguin.
- Habermas, Jürgen, 2005. 'Equal treatment of cultures and the limits of postmodern liberalism', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 13 (1): 1- 28.
- Habermas, Jürgen, 2006. 'Religion in the Public Sphere', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14 (1): 1-25.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. Griego, Dinah, & Soboslai, John, 2015. *God in the Tumult of the Global Square: Religion in Global Civil Society*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Further Reading

- Ulrich Beck, 1999, *World Risk Society*, Polity: Cambridge
- Beaumont, Justin and Baker, Chris, 2011, *Postsecular Cities – Space, Theory and Practice*. London and New York: Continuum Press.

Recommended Listening

- [Chris Baker](#) speaking at 'Building a Politics of Hope' conference, 24 February 2015.
- [Mohammed Mamdani](#) speaking at 'Building a Politics of Hope' conference, 24 February 2015.
- [Chris Sunderland](#) speaking at 'Building a Politics of Hope' conference, 24 February 2015.