

Temple Tracts: Issue 4, Volume 2

# The Seven Pillars of Religion in the Public Sphere (or what on earth is religion?)

Greg Smith



**William Temple**  
Foundation

The Seven Pillars of Religion  
in the Public Sphere  
(or what on earth is religion?)

Greg Smith

**Temple Tracts: Issue 4, Volume 2**

Shelf Reference: Book 10

Sign-up for our free e-newsletter at [williamtemplefoundation.org.uk](http://williamtemplefoundation.org.uk)

© William Temple Foundation 2016

Edited by Chris Baker

**Greg Smith** has worked for almost forty years in urban mission, community development and social research in London and Preston. He has published extensively on religion in the inner city, faith involvement in urban regeneration, and urban theology. Greg is Development Officer for [Together Lancashire](#), a joint venture of Church Urban Fund, Diocese of Blackburn and the Lancashire Methodist District. He also works for the Evangelical Alliance managing the [21st Century Evangelicals research programme](#). See more on [Greg's work and publications](#).

# Content

Introduction .....	4
Working Definitions of key terms and ideas.....	5
Secularisation, secularism and secularity .....	6
Issues of religion in the public sphere (bringing it down to earth) .....	7
The Seven Pillars of Religion in Public Life .....	9
1. Religion as affiliation or identity.....	9
2. Religion as institutional belonging.....	10
3. Religion as participation in rituals, which serve to strengthen a sense of community belonging .....	11
4 Religion as a virally spread, charismatic outpouring of emotion .....	13
5. Religion as a corpus of teaching or advice for a shared ethics, set of values, or moral code.....	14
6. Religion defined around the notion of a metaphysical belief .....	16
7. Religion as communication (devotion, praise or prayer) directed at a sacred or supernatural other .....	17
Final Thought .....	19
Reflection .....	20
Further Reading .....	22
Bibliography .....	23

## Introduction

In the rapidly moving and confusing currents of British political life in 2016 it is evident that religion is far from a silent elephant in the room. Four out of five contenders in the election that never was for the leadership of the Conservative Party, trumpeted their personal Christian commitment. In the election of Sadiq Khan as the first Muslim Mayor of London the dynamics of interfaith relationships were never far from the surface. Meanwhile, accusations of antisemitism have dogged the Labour Party. In the EU referendum campaign Anglican bishops took a public position in favour of "Remain", although recent polling by Linda Woodhead suggests that people who identified as Church of England disproportionately favoured Brexit.

Previously, for a long period, under two Labour Prime Ministers both personally grounded in Christian faith and values, government "did not do God". However, under David Cameron there was less hesitation in expressing personal (if vague) Christian beliefs and claiming that Britain is a Christian country. Unsurprisingly such speeches proved controversial, not only with secularists but among Christians, especially as in the case of Cameron's 2015 Easter message it was interpreted as a pitch for the Christian vote. Thus it is no longer clear that the UK operates as a secular democracy. However, it is even less clear what religion *actually means* in public life.

In this paper I shall argue that definitions of "religion" and arguments about its public role, are not only contested but confused, and I shall do my best to clarify some of the confusions. I briefly allude to some of the leading thinkers in Sociology of Religion, from both classical and contemporary periods. I locate the discussion within the context of local government and its interaction with the voluntary community and faith sector in particular districts. It is in this part of the public sphere that issues of the delivery of local services come to the forefront, and where partnerships are regularly built on a relational basis. At the heart of this *Temple Tract* is an original seven-fold typology (what I am calling 'The Seven Pillars of Religion') which describes the multifarious ways religion exerts a power and influence in the current public sphere. My hope is to raise the level of religious literacy of the reader and that discussion of religion in the public sphere might become a more nuanced and sophisticated conversation than it often is at the present time. As a committed Christian, living in post-Christian Britain, and writing for a research foundation firmly grounded in the Anglican church, much of my theological and interdisciplinary reflection will be grounded in the Christian tradition. However, I hope that as someone who has lived and worked for many years in a multi-faith environment my observations will be more widely inclusive.

## Working Definitions of key terms and ideas

In an interview in 2008, leading Sociologist of Religion Robert Bellah commented:

I certainly think, at this point, both the word "religion" and the word "secularism" are used in such chaotically diverse ways that they are almost useless.

We need to be alert that many of our conceptual frameworks are socially constructed and often reflect power relations. For example, even the notion of particular religions such as "Christianity", "Islam" or "Hinduism" are reifications of lived religious cultures, codified by scholars who participated in the projects of colonialism and imperialism. But in an attempt to overcome the uselessness of such terms for the purposes of the discussion we are about to embark upon I want to set out some working definitions of some key concepts.

**Spirituality** is a personal property linked with the desire or active quest in an individual to connect with the divine, the numinous, the ultimate reality or purpose of life. Usually interpreted as a private consumer choice it is not in itself of great concern to politicians. Linked with this is the concept of **spiritual capital** [defined by William Temple Foundation](#) as the internal and individual force, generated by beliefs, values and worldviews, which motivates people of faith in their social involvement.

**Religion** in contrast is fundamentally social in nature and our concept of **religious capital** concerns what is put into practice by groups of people of faith - in institutional or network form. Within religion it is important to distinguish at least seven (often overlapping) elements or manifestations, which may be regarded as its seven pillars.

1. Religion as affiliation or identity - just a tick in a particular census or survey box;
2. Religion as institutional belonging - usually expressed by membership or active participation in a congregation or faith group;
3. Religion's participation in rituals, which serve to strengthen a sense of community belonging;
4. Religion which may manifest itself socially in a spontaneous, virally spread, charismatic outpouring of emotion (such as on the death of Princess Diana);
5. Religion as a corpus of teaching or advice for a shared ethics, set of values, or moral code;
6. Religion defined around the notion of a metaphysical belief, system of meaning, or cosmically explanatory world view;
7. Religion as communication (devotion, praise or prayer) directed at some sacred or supernatural other.

We also need to consider whether religion is different from **faith** for the latter term seems to have caught on in recent years, especially in discourse about religion in the public arena.

Perhaps "faith" is seen as less pejorative, more inclusive of non-western traditions, more hopeful, and above all more of an individual lifestyle choice that resonates in a neo-liberal consumer society. In this respect it can be closely associated with the term "spirituality". However, it is also used interchangeably with our usage of "religion" for example when talking about world faiths, interfaith dialogue, or "faith communities" (Dinham, 2011), faith sector and faithful capital. Additionally, the term faith can be used with deliberate unintended ambiguity when used in phrases like "Faith in the City", "Faith in the Nation" etc. I would argue that the word has become almost empty of meaning as it is used mostly as an adjective (in a similar way to "community") rather like a thin layer of sugar icing on a cake, to gloss over sweetly some tensions and conflicts. Because of my unease with the term and its multiple ambiguity I will try to avoid using it in the rest of this paper.

## Secularisation, secularism and secularity

Almost everyone seems to agree that religion "ain't what it used to be". For over a century sociologists have been talking about these changes in terms of **secularisation**. While it is clear from empirical evidence measuring conventional indicators (such as church membership and attendance, expressions of orthodox religious belief and the social, moral and political status and authority of church leaders) that religion is in decline in the West, and particularly in Europe, the story is a complex one and has produced contested and competing narratives.

One strand suggests religion is inexorably in decline, and that as 'God is Dead', the future of all churches and forms of religion is to wither away to nothing (Bruce, 2002). A second strand suggests that while organised religion is experiencing a major decline in developed societies, with Western Europe in the vanguard, religion tends to mutate, people continue to believe in something spiritual, that satisfies their individual religious longings, a cultural religious memory persists, and people are glad that the church remains to vicariously pray and worship for the wider community (Davie, 2002). A third strand best expounded by David Martin, (2011) accepts the general direction of secularisation, but studies it in its relationship with political, national and ethnic identity in the context of globalisation, and concludes that there will be very different trajectories in different societies. Finally, there is the view of rational choice theorists who contend that there will always be a religious market place and that organised religious groups can continue to flourish as long as they are able to supply a product that meets the needs of individual religious consumers (Stark & Lannacone, 1994).

If secularisation is the account of decline of the power and influence of religion, a second strand is the 'disenchantment' of the world, the weakening of religious belief, and the idea of progress towards the triumph of rationality. As this aspect is fundamentally about the transformation of ideas and beliefs it is perhaps most appropriately labelled **secularism**. It is marked by the aggressive polemics of New Atheism whose most well-known champion is Richard Dawkins (2006). But if as we have already argued spirituality remains significant and religion is multidimensional such a line of attack on religion is far too simplistic. As Bellah (2008) puts it:

Today many people, including the harshest critics of religion, like Dawkins, Hitchens, et cetera, think religion is a theory or a set of theories that are simply wrong: science has disproved those theories; If you go into the deep evolution of the human species and look for where religion is, you find something that's quite different from much of what goes on today.

He is arguing here for the importance of lived religion as opposed to the highly intellectualized religion of theologians and philosophers.

For the purposes of this paper a more important concept is **secularity** by which I mean the changing relationship between the religious and the political. If we follow the Durkheimian (1915) line that social religion is fundamentally about rituals which reinforce the sacred nature of society itself, our starting point will be that political power is almost always linked with the numinous and the sacred. Thus in ancient times, kings and emperors claimed to be divine and expected to be worshipped as gods. The prophetic tradition of Israel uniquely challenged such claims, developing through to Jesus' challenge to Pilate and in the early Christians' insistence unto death that Christ rather than Caesar was Lord. The Christians of the first century, (as many committed believers today), began from the basis of a life transforming encounter with the risen Jesus, whom they came to recognize as both fully human and fully divine. They were not so much interested in founding a new religion, as journeying on a new way, participating in a new age, the already inaugurated but still to be fully realised reign of God. Much of subsequent Western history from Constantine, through the Reformation and French Revolution to the collapse of communism and has been a working out of the dialectical tension between the two kingdoms, described by Augustine as the earthly city and the city of God.

Today many scholars, at least from a Western perspective, are asking "Is God Back?" (Helm 2011). Globally, the picture is more complex. While more than forty years ago for Peter Berger, the term secularisation described a process 'by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols' (1973: 113), now Berger and others are using terms such as 'de-secularisation' to describe the resurgence of 'furious, super-naturalist, fundamentalist or conservative expressions of religion' (1999: 6) in politics and public life. |

## Issues of religion in the public sphere (bringing it down to earth)

Having skimmed through some of the academic debates it is now time to link theory to the everyday world of community work practice and local politics. We should bear in mind that four main contextual factors seem to account for the re-emergence of religion in the public sphere in the UK.

1. Globalisation and the reality that most of the world apart from Europe remains widely and deeply religious.
2. The securitisation of religion, largely but not exclusively in reaction to the politicisation of various forms of Islam. This is most obvious in community cohesion policies, counter

extremism strategies such as the Prevent programme and the current promotion of 'British values' in education.

3. The political and legal debates over equalities legislation - in which the churches in general have taken a traditionalist rather than a progressive stance - most obviously around gender and sexuality. Numerous high profile cases have come to court ranging from the right to wear religious symbols at work, praying for a patient, 'offensive' speech and preaching and the refusal to produce a cake iced with a slogan in support of same sex marriage.

4. The neo-liberal project involving the dissolution of the welfare state, which has increasingly consigned the care of the vulnerable to the voluntarism of civil society. Foremost among the groups taking on the roles vacated by the state are faith communities whose members are motivated by values of altruism and 'loving your neighbour'. This is what we at William Temple Foundation [define as spiritual capital](#). Alongside our concern with spiritual capital, as the internal and individual force which motivates people of faith in their social involvement, we have distinguished religious capital as *being put into practice by faiths - in institutional or network form*. Growth of this capital requires the exploitation of labour, both spiritual labour (prayer and worship), religious labour (in keeping churches, mosques and temples in operation) and practical labour - all of which are offered for little or no pecuniary remuneration.

# The Seven Pillars of Religion in Public Life

## 1. Religion as affiliation or identity

Since 2001 UK census, and more so since religion and belief became one of the protected characteristics under the Equalities and Human Rights Act of 2010, the average citizen has become familiar with forms and questionnaires requiring them to choose a category of religion. Of course, this practice was also in use at much earlier dates, for example when called up for military service or admitted to hospital, if only for "burial purposes". Traditionally in England the default option for those with little enthusiasm for religious practice was to write "Church of England", while those who chose "RC" or "Methodist" for example would be making a statement about family or "tribal" identity regardless of their level of personal belief or religious practice. As the social norms around identifying as Christian have weakened, the default option, especially of younger generations is more likely to be "none". Yet at the same time as religious diversity has increased and global politics has developed, many people identify more strongly with a religious identity. It may even be that the state's bureaucratic impulse to categorize, count and map religious identity and affiliations so they can allocate resources accordingly, works in symbiosis with the processes of identity formation in communities. It is certainly the case that in England over fifty years the dimensions of racism and exclusion of the "other" have shifted from a focus on skin colour in the 1960s, though a discourse of linguistic and cultural difference in the 1980s, to a focus on religion - particularly in the shape of Islamophobia - since the turn of the millennium. Significantly far right groups across Europe and North America, such as the EDL, the Front National in France, Jobbik in Hungary and the supporters of Trump in the USA are articulating their hatred of Muslims and highlighting their own identity as "Christian".

In this sense religion acts as it has done throughout history as a boundary marker associated with a social group, making a distinction between "us" and the "other", and creating rules about who we can pray with, share food and fellowship with, marry or in the extreme case of wars of religion, legitimately kill. At times the religious identity boundary marker has been used to oppress (think Spanish inquisition); at others to define a liberation movement (think the Irish independence struggle, or the overthrow of the Shah in 1979). Sometimes the mobilisation of a boundary definition is based on a specific "taboo" associated with religion, as for example in the uprising of troops in British India in 1857 when ordered to bite cartridges which contained animal (pork or beef) fat. However, religion is one boundary marker among many, as difference with the "other" can, and has often been, defined by skin colour, national identity, language spoken, ethnic heritage, local territorial loyalty, social status or class position, gender or sexuality. In globalised urban societies the intersections of these identity markers can become incredibly complex and hybrid identities proliferate. Unlike in a traditional settled society where identity tended to be ascribed at birth, in contemporary society (which Castells (1989) has famously described as the 'space of flows'), identity may be seen more as an individual 'consumer choice'. People may stress different aspects of their identity in different contexts or even playfully switch and manipulate their identities in the public presentation of their selves, especially for example in online avatars.

The concern of governments with religion and other social boundary markers arises when these are mobilised in identity politics. If interest groups coalesce around religion or ethnicity, and when these groups enter into competition for power or resources, or into open or violent conflict with one another the state seeks to manage the tensions and exert its hegemonic power. At the local level it devises policies in terms of social cohesion, a term which rose to prominence in the UK following urban disturbances in the highly segregated Northern towns of Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in 2001. In this case poor ethnic minorities predominantly of Pakistani heritage, who were over 95% Muslim by religious affiliation were concentrated together in particular multiply deprived urban neighbourhoods. Meanwhile across the town equally deprived neighbourhoods housed predominantly white, "English" working class residents who if rarely practising any religion, identified with the "Christian" culture of the UK. The two communities had little meaningful social contact and perceived themselves to be in competition for housing, employment, education and health services. The attacks on the USA in September 2001 added a global dimension, which highlighted religious difference as the underlying cause of both global and local conflict. The public policy response at the local level was to attempt to define policies fostering social integration, as social cohesion strategies, which placed much emphasis on improving interfaith relations and religious literacy. (Holden, 2009)

Yet at the same time because of concerns over security the government tended to divide religion into "good religion" and "bad religion", seeking to manage and co-opt the former into delivering their own policies while marginalising or even banning as extremist the latter. More recently the UK government has sought to promote the concept of British Values in an effort to boost a sense of national identity - in the process tending to alienate not only Muslims but people of other faiths - perhaps most significantly evangelical Christians. At the same time government was committed to a series of military interventions in the Muslim world that tended to polarise opinion even further, and for some Muslims at least to propel them into an even stronger sense of Islamic identity.

## 2. Religion as institutional belonging

In Western thought and culture much of the discourse about religion is inextricably linked to the idea of the Church. In European history, politics has often been shaped by the competing claims of religious and political institutions, from the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, through the English Reformation, to the Faith in the City Report of 1985. Different national states and cultures have settled this tension in various ways ranging from the concordats between the Roman Catholic Church and the state in mid twentieth century Ireland, Spain or Italy, through the "pillarisation" of parallel institutions in the Netherlands, to the *laïcité* of the profoundly secular French Republic, or the neutrality favouring a free religious marketplace of the USA. In England, and in a different form in Scotland, the settlement takes the form of an established national church, where institutions of church and state are closely interwoven, where the sovereign who is anointed by the Church has a distinct role in its governance and the Church is represented in the political structures through the presence of bishops in the House of Lords.

However, for the average citizen with a religious belief, the sense of institutional belonging is most commonly expressed by participation at the local level in the activities of a parish or congregation. Historically in the UK there has been vigorous competition at the local level between the various strands or denominations of the Christian church, but in contemporary times when levels of participation in religion and membership of institutions has steeply declined there is generally more peaceful co-existence and sometimes active collaboration that even extends to the local congregations of other world faiths. Often local religious institutions are federated together in national or global churches or religious movements, which inevitably tend to compete for market share or institutional power.

However for the most part it is in the local congregations that the religious capital of a faith community is concentrated, and it is with these institutional forms that local government has to deal. The resources include assets such as buildings (churches, mosques, temples and their associated parish halls or community centres), land, the ability to raise and invest money, the labour of paid staff and unpaid volunteers, the cultural capital of their educational enterprises and the goodwill of the local populace. Religious buildings often have symbolic power, be it the historic hegemony of an Anglican parish church where 90% of a village community over 700 years have been "hatched, matched and despatched", or the attempt to pierce the heavens and dominate the skyline of the town, as in the case of churches with tall spires.

The role of buildings inevitably raises practical and mundane issues for local councils, including management of parking and noise, fire and food safety, and safeguarding of children and vulnerable people. Council officers and other public servants are not always very sophisticated in their understanding of faith communities and their subcultures, and often not particularly sympathetic especially towards minority faiths. They prefer to deal with "leaders" who represent an institution, but usually still operate on Christendom assumptions, assuming (not always rightly) that it is the priest or imam they need to talk to. They may assume a building is only used once a week, or that people who do not attend are not concerned with religion or community life. Or they may think that the handful of people who participate in interfaith forums are representative of whole faith communities. Religious literacy and cultural awareness can be improved by training and experience of work in multicultural/multifaith settings and in some cases it really does need to be improved.

### 3. Religion as participation in rituals, which serve to strengthen a sense of community belonging

Throughout the history of humankind going back thousands of years into pre-history anthropologists have discovered evidence of ritual behaviour which can be defined as *a ceremony or action (repeatedly) performed in a customary way*. Some biologists are even arguing that [other animal species also may engage in ritual activity](#). Usually rituals can be taken as having some element of symbolic meaning, but they do not necessarily imply connection with the numinous or the divine. Functionalist explanations suggest that social religion is fundamentally about rituals which reinforce the sacred nature of society itself.

We are all familiar with everyday personal rituals which can be as simple as the habit of always putting on the left boot first before a football game which has acquired a superstitious sense of bringing good luck. Simply wearing a cross or a turban or a *hijab* each day may be seen as having symbolic and ritual significance for an individual. Family Sunday lunches, or the annual custom of office parties, shopping sprees, festive street lighting, TV shows and Santa themed events that can be observed across the world each December are ritual behaviour at the social level. Almost every religious group participates in collective or public ritual activities such as gathering together for prayers or liturgies, by collective singing, by eating together (perhaps symbolically as in the Mass), carnival or parade events, or in ceremonies marking the rites of passage between generations. Even the most austere Christian denominations such as the Free Church of Scotland, or the most exuberant and spontaneous Pentecostal assembly has repeated patterns of ritual forms of word and action in their regular acts of worship that can be described as liturgies.

Contemporary research on people who describe themselves as *spiritual but not religious* suggests that the traditional rituals of institutional religion may be losing out to more personalised rituals. For example, funerals which once took for granted traditional forms involving prayers, scripture reading and hymns, are now commonly personalised with favourite pop songs and informal tributes from friends and family of the deceased. In some cases, the religious flavour of an event and the role of the clergy is replaced by a secular service with a humanist celebrant, in much the same ways as registry office civil wedding ceremonies compete with traditional church weddings.

In the public sphere ritual remains important and public institutions sometimes retain traditional ritual forms derived from Christian church practices. One thinks in particular of educational institutions, some of which retain formal ties with the church. School assemblies, speech days and prize-giving or the graduation ceremonies of universities still resemble acts of worship, however inexplicit and blurred is the encounter with God. Each event serves to bind together the participants as a community and to reinforce the values and traditions of the institution. People who are not believers are still drawn in by the ritual and become familiar with its religious form, perhaps coming to (mis)understand that it is this form which is the substance of religion itself.

From ancient times states and empires have made use of religious and quasi-religious rituals to evoke patriotism and loyalty to the rulers. In today's globalised world, governments seek mechanisms of binding populations together around explicitly shared values and citizenship obligations, even to the requirement that schools should teach "British values". Ceremonies involving flags, sporting events and the initiation of new citizens all play a part. In England where there is a centuries old partnership between the state and the national established church there is a panoply of civic rituals which serve to strengthen national identity and inevitably privilege Christianity in the Anglican tradition. Foremost among these are the monarchy (especially coronations, royal weddings and funerals), the role of the Church in Parliament, the festivals of military remembrance and the singing of the national anthem.

There are of course other national rituals where the church is less prominent such as the last night of the proms, the Olympic ceremonies, and the collective grieving over the

repeated elimination of rugby and football teams from World Cup competitions. Dissent from participation in national rituals may not be popular as Jeremy Corbyn recently found to his cost on declining to sing *God save the Queen*. Tensions between the nations that make up the UK are evident, especially in the anthems sung at sporting events, with English teams making do in an effortless show of hegemony, with the UK national anthem.

In the local public sphere religious rituals are still to be found in the programmes of local authorities. Prayers before Council meetings, though contentious, are still permitted and take place in many town halls. Mayors have their chaplains, and there are annual civic services, as well as parades to the war memorial, civic funerals for local leaders and celebrities and on special occasions grand ecumenical services which civic dignitaries attend. For example, at Preston's once in 20 years Guild in 2012 the city leaders welcomed to a worship service an Archbishop, local bishops, a Cardinal, and other national church leaders. For the most part such civic religion is under the management of the clergy of the Church of England, although in multi-faith areas compromises are often necessary and in the interests of equality, local authorities prefer to deal with multi-faith forums. Yet, whether openly articulated or not, there is often an underlying political competition for influence and resources between different local faith communities. Problems sometimes arise when secular authorities assume that all religions are basically the same and that their followers are happy to share in multi-faith observances. Since not every religious tradition is totally inclusive, multi-faith rituals rarely satisfy everybody and usually offend the consciences of those who affirm their own tradition as a universal truth and unique way of salvation. Perhaps the best approach at such events involves an emphasis on shared reflective silence.

#### 4 Religion as a virally spread, charismatic outpouring of emotion

Most of the religious cultures of the world are familiar with unpredictable outbreaks of religious fervour, which in many cases are linked with the personal charisma of a prophetic leader who is popularly accepted as carrying some divinely given power and authority. In many cases, such revivalist movements are disturbing to the social order, which is typically undergoing a period of tension or rapid change, and may be extremely difficult for the political authorities to keep under control. Such events may transform into a millennial or politically revolutionary movement, with or without a single specific charismatic leader. The Iranian revolution of 1979, and some elements of the Arab Spring of 2011 are examples in the Islamic world of religious fervour mutating into political upheaval. In British history the most significant examples come from the mid-17th Century with the fervour of the Puritans, the Fifth Monarchy Men, the Levellers, the Diggers, the Scottish Covenanters and the Quakers resulting in what Christopher Hill (1991) described in [The World Turned Upside Down](#). The immediate outcome of this ferment was a time of religious repression, though within a half century the transformation to toleration of religious dissent in Britain was well under way.

Subsequent religious revivals and outbreaks of charismatic fervour in Britain and North America tended to take the form of Evangelical awakenings which were less overtly political and revolutionary in form. Possibly this was linked to the post-Enlightenment turn to the

primacy of the autonomous individual, to the spread of religious toleration and pluralism, or to the organising genius of leaders like Wesley who channelled religious enthusiasm into bands of good citizens and honest labourers and entrepreneurs, committed to spreading social holiness by non-violent social reform, such as the abolition of the slave trade, the factory acts and the growth of co-operatives and trade unionism. Some historians argue that it was these revivals that spared Britain from the type of bloody revolution that came to France (Ditchfield, 1998). Or it may simply have been the social processes described by Weber (1922) as the 'routinisation of charisma', whereby the transforming message of Methodism became a movement, then a machine and finally a memorial.

The more recent turn from organised religion to personal spiritualities, and in the age of mass and now social media outpourings of emotion in the public seem to have less connection with organised religion. There may be a few exceptions to this as when a religious leader with "superstar" status (though it is hard to find one other than the Pope, or the Dalai Lama) pays an official visit. Yet there are many instances of collective and virally spreading grief that are marked with the spontaneous emergence of floral shrines such as in Liverpool at the time of the Hillsborough tragedy, or on the death of Princess Diana. Though this may have some implications for the authorities in terms of immediate crisis management, such "religion" has little political impact. For local politicians, events and community responses are usually on a smaller scale, and revolve around practical issues of ensuring sound health and safety procedures are implemented, or that in due course piles of rotting flowers are turned into compost. Yet even here they need to be aware of the power of religious symbolism and approach with sensitivity the spiritual needs of local residents.

These situations do, of course, present opportunities for the church to comment, and offer pastoral support, and as in the case of the Hillsborough enquiry to place itself in the role of advocate and honest broker. However, these events are unlikely to increase stocks of religious capital, or to bring people into Christian discipleship and membership of the church.

## 5. Religion as a corpus of teaching or advice for a shared ethics, set of values, or moral code

Throughout history there has been a close connection between religion and morality, though the philosophical connection between the two, as well as the details of ethical behaviour have been vigorously disputed. From the giving of the ten commandments onwards, the framework of moral, civic and criminal law has been premised on the idea of divine edicts and the possibility of ultimate judgement and punishment for transgression. Undoubtedly in Western societies there is a heritage of Biblical commandment both in legal statutes and the cultural understanding of acceptable moral behaviour. And in the contemporary Islamic world the crucial debates around *Sharia* law, and the political attempts to implement it, highlight the same connection.

Modern secular plural democratic states, in contrast, will claim they show neutrality on truth claims and world views and operate legal and administrative systems with impartiality.

In fact, they tend to dismiss as "medieval" beliefs and value systems that are not grounded in secular rationality. Yet sometimes they themselves operate on taken for granted values and ideologies and treat as "sacred" rational bureaucratic decision making, and a neo-liberalism which defines the national interest almost exclusively in economic terms as measured by GDP.

Religious values do not necessarily come into conflict with those of the state or with prevailing culture. There is a constellation of "motherhood and apple pie" values which few would gainsay, for example "jaw-jaw is better than war-war", prosperity is better than destitution, stable family life is good for society, dishonesty is wrong, and everyone should try to care for their neighbours. On the other hand, highly committed believers of different faiths often hold firm views about particular ethical and moral issues, and in some cases believe that these should be social norms throughout society and/or implemented in law with sanctions for transgressors. While it is one thing to argue for freedom of conscience and expression for individual believers to follow the teachings of their faith, it is another to demand that abortion should be a criminal offence or that adulterers or blasphemers should face the death penalty.

In the public sphere in Britain, and in many Western countries, the discontent with secular values and ethics has two distinct elements, which in some cases are held simultaneously by the same people. A religious world view often has conservative or traditional elements, especially in its understanding of virtue and the value of human life. The great faiths usually praise honesty, self-denial, faithfulness in relationships, chastity and prudence. They struggle with a culture which they perceive as full of lies, greed, promiscuity and instant gratification. Such traditional views generate litigation, protests and campaigns against legal and cultural changes around such issues as abortion, euthanasia, same-sex marriage, and restrictions on preaching or promoting these viewpoints. Often, perhaps because of links with authoritarian personality tendencies, the same people support calls for law and order, restriction on immigration and the preservation of Christian privilege in society.

However, faith-based ethics and morality also plays a strong suit in terms of social justice. The scriptures of the great monotheistic faiths can be read as containing a major strand advocating equality of worth for all people, a condemnation of oppression of the poor and vulnerable, a generous provision of assistance for the weak and destitute, a love of neighbour and hospitality to the stranger and a commitment to peace and non-violence. Governments and big business controlled by the interests of the rich and powerful are happy enough when these concerns are expressed in terms of personal generosity and organised charity; after-all for neo-liberals this reduces demands on the public purse and is a benevolent operation of the market. However, when the demand fired by religious values is for political change, resistance is likely.

Currently, a number of issues are running where the church and its members have challenged government policy on the basis of justice and ethics, for example welfare reform and benefit sanctions, food poverty, international aid and trade justice, migration and refugees, pay day lending at high interest rates and human trafficking. In national politics in some of these areas church supported campaigns have achieved some mitigation or reform of the most unjust policies. At a more local level in some parts of the country an organized

movement for justice is being built through coalitions such as Citizens UK. In local government issues, resistance to injustice seems less likely to involve organized political action by faith communities. However, in most local campaigns on issues such as environment, housing, transport, health or schooling it is normal to find people with a religiously shaped sense of justice and morality at the heart of each movement.

It may however be a fundamental mistake to conflate religion with the notion of ethical and moral codes. For Christians at least their faith is based on grace rather than law. As Edmund Clowney (1989) put it: 'Christians cling, not to an impersonal moral code, not to philosophical abstractions. They cling to the grace of God; not what they have done for God, but what God has done for them in Christ.'

Their concerns for justice are not simply those of retribution and revenge, but of forgiveness and mercy, that would share the love, grace and personal transformation they have experienced with the wider social world.

## 6. Religion defined around the notion of a metaphysical belief

In the context of post-Enlightenment western thought, "religion" has largely been constructed around the notion of a belief system of meaning, or cosmically explanatory worldview. As such it has been critiqued on the basis of a scientific methodology, which claims that there is (and indeed cannot be) any evidence that proves, or even falsifies the hypothesis of a higher power, creator god or supernatural intervention in the universe as we know it. In this reading the social importance of religion is based on shared meanings drawn from a tradition or revelation of truth that has been enshrined in scripture (be that the Bible, the Qur'an or a secular sacred document such as the U.S. Constitution). Arguably this approach favours rational, legal and bureaucratic forms of debate, though it may not take much for certain readings (and obedience) to the text to be considered extreme.

We have no space here to unpick the theological and philosophical ramifications of this debate between religious and scientific explanations of the universe. Yet it is worth noting that in contemporary western culture a diversity of philosophies and religions has proliferated and the notion of a shared public truth has been displaced by a wide range of overlapping, competing and sometimes incoherent understandings of "what works for me". While states are rarely concerned about the eccentric beliefs and rituals of individuals, they have problems when groups organize around a shared belief which contradicts the hegemonic narrative of the state. Perhaps this is why governments have felt ill at ease with the religious fundamentalisms of Christianity and Islam, who appear to promote an all-encompassing faith that dogmatically answers every question, and seeks to stand above the negotiation and compromise of the everyday politics of a civic common life. Indeed, there is good reason to fear should any of these fundamentalisms gain control of the reins of power. However, 20th Century history showed that the totalitarian and ideologically secular regimes of Hitler, Stalin and Mao can be just as evil in intent and outcome.

At the local level the public issues that arise are mainly around education. Faith communities have a historic stake in schooling and in some parts of the country such as Lancashire the majority of primary and many secondary schools are church controlled. As long as a dominant majority culture remained overwhelmingly Christian in ethos, if not in convinced belief and practice, this was no real problem. However, with the growth and increased assertiveness of minority faiths, and the transformation of churches to communities of active believers, tricky issues now arise. How far do faith schools lead to segregation and parallel lives because of their restricted admission policies? With the move towards academies and free schools is there too much room for governance and management of schools to be taken over by faith activists pushing a narrow religious agenda? Do parents have an absolute right to choose the ethos and world view that is imparted to their offspring? Has the state a duty or a right to impose a national curriculum and national standards, which may demand the teaching of scientific secular rationality, and the imposition of "British values"? There are no easy answers to such questions, but they do at least deserve a discussion based on a sophisticated understanding of the notion of public truth in the context of religion(s) and secularism as world views.

## 7. Religion as communication (devotion, praise or prayer) directed at some sacred or supernatural other

Religion is distinct from other social phenomena in that it is usually directed at some sacred or supernatural other, be it the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as understood through the scriptures and creeds of the church, or a notion of a higher power invoked in addiction recovery groups. Worship and prayer whether individual or corporate is central to the spiritual or religious enterprise. People simply would not do it unless they believed it brought some form of blessing, guidance or response into the mundane and tangled circumstances of their lives. Believers persist in prayer because they recognize the possibility of divine intervention and that sometimes at least prayers are answered. To the western philosophical tradition such claims are usually dismissed as un-testable by scientific method. In western legal and political systems such claims are treated as personal opinion rather than admissible evidence. Yet it is clear that for the vast majority of people across today's world, the possibility of a relationship between human beings and the Divine is more than plausible and that this conviction provides the spiritual capital, the dynamic life force, and the ultimate value for the believer.

In the world of secular politics in Britain and Europe (though less so in the USA) it is safer to keep quiet about prayer. A formal ritual of prayer may be acceptable in Parliament and City Halls. Many individual politicians, civil servants and council officers undoubtedly do worship and pray, and may be strengthened for their work by the spiritual capital they possess. Yet in the public sphere they find it wise not to talk about it, especially in connection with public affairs. When it was reported that Tony Blair and George Bush had prayed together prior to the decision to make war on Iraq, the news was met by widespread derision. Had God told them to send in the bombs and the troops? In the light of the grave consequences it would be too easy to say they had been deluded. Or if God had indeed guided them it would not

be a very attractive sort of God which anyone would wish to follow. For reasons such as this many in public life prefer "not to do God". Or at least not to do the kind of God that can make a difference to the world.

## Final Thought

And yet God does make a difference in the public world today. Followers, disciples or "botherers" of God are inspired by spirituality and faith, and organised into religious institutions and active in working for various interpretations of the common good. For the most part they see themselves as walking in the true tradition of their religion, interpreting and applying ancient sacred writings in today's world. In one of a handful of Bible verses where the word appears (pure) religion is defined by the apostle James (1.v27) as to *look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*

In our current global political, economic and environmental crisis, as the state retreats from welfare and the market produces inequalities and oppression there are new opportunities for religious engagement. Often, and especially in times of economic, political and environmental crisis, these are going to be disturbing or challenging to the status quo both in organized religion and the state. In the Christian tradition (and perhaps in others) such engagement can be expressed in terms of what the late [Ken Leech](#) described as subversive orthodoxy, which may lead to a breaking of the body politic in the struggle for justice.

Ultimately the church and the state may need to accept that what religion brings, is more than an identity category or the need to recognise the political interests of religious institutions. Religion cannot be treated merely instrumentally as part of social policy, for delivering welfare service and binding communities together through rituals of social cohesion, or to support a normative set of values, or moral code. Nor is religion just a metaphysical view at odds with the scientific rationality along which the modern world operates. It is a force that at certain times and places can produce cultural and social power. And most disturbingly of all, what if...

What if God actually is, and actually hears, sees, judges, cares, acts and rules?

## Reflection

Do you consider yourself a spiritual person, a religious person or a person of faith?

How significant is religious identity or affiliation important to you? Does it mean something that goes to the core of your being, or is it just a label or category that marks you as "different from those others"?

Do you see religion as in decline or resurgent? What is your evidence for this view?

What do you see as the appropriate role of religion in relation to the state in the UK? Is it good that one religion (the established Church of England) should have a privileged position? Or should all religious groups be left alone to promote their beliefs and practices and compete for a share of the religious market?

What characteristics of religious and civic rituals do you encounter in the life of your local community?

Having read through these different perspectives, has your opinion or understanding of religion changed at all? Why? What difference will that make?

Does religion today tend to divide communities or bind them together?

How far should laws be based on religious codes of ethics and morality? What are the current issues where conflicts are brewing?

How far should believers be free to promote (or impose) their beliefs to others? What difference does it make if these others are (their own) children?

How should politicians and other public figures testify to their faith?

Thank you for reading.

If you enjoyed this e-book, we would really appreciate it if you could take 5 minutes to write a review.

Please tell your friends and colleagues about this book.

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

### **Out Now**

[21st Century Religion: Violent Extremism to Civil Society?](#)

By Chris Baker and John Reader

[Religion, Government and the Public Good](#)

Craig Calhoun

[Ethical Consumerism](#)

Eve Poole

**Download Temple Tracts Series 1 now.**

Popular titles include:

[God and Money](#)

by Eve Poole

[Grace & Power: Gender and Sexuality in the Church of England](#)

by Hayley Matthews

[Faith, Progressive Localism and the Hol\(e\)y Welfare Safety Net](#)

by Greg Smith

Follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)

## Further Reading

Calhoun, C., M. Juergensmeyer, and J. VanAntwerpen, eds. 2011. *Rethinking Secularism*. New York: Oxford University

Hjelm, T (ed). (2015) *Is God Back? Reconsidering the new visibility of religion*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Martin, D (2011) *The future of Christianity: reflections on violence and democracy, religion and secularization*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Woodhead, L & Catto, R (eds) (2012) *Religion and change in modern Britain*. London: Routledge.

*Reimagining Religion* - 20 interviews by leading scholars on the issues of religion in the public sphere. Online: <http://www.gold.ac.uk/faithsunit/reimaginingreligion/landmark-interviews/>

## Bibliography

Bellah (2008), "Rethinking secularism and religion in the global age" Mark Juergensmeyer and Robert N. Bellah in Conversation University of California, Berkeley – September 11, 2008 .. On SSRC blog "The Immanent Frame" at <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2009/09/08/rethinking-secularism-and-religion-in-the-global-age/> (accessed 20/7/2016).

Berger, Peter. (1973) *The Social Reality of Religion*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Berger, Peter ed. (1999.) *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*.  
Washington DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center.

Bruce, S. (2002). 'Praying alone? Church-going in Britain and the Putnam thesis'. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol 17, no. 3, pp. 317-328.

*Castells, M. [1989], The informational City, Oxford: Blackwell.*

*Clowney E. (1989) The Message of I Peter: The Way of the Cross (The Bible Speaks Series, ISBN 0-8308-1227-X) Downers Grove, IL 60515 InterVarsity Press.*

Davie, G. (2002) Praying Alone? Church Going in Britain and Social Capital: A Reply to Steve Bruce *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 17(3), 320-334.

Dawkins, R. (2006) *The God Delusion*. London: Black Swan.

Dinham, A. (2011) What is a 'faith community'? *Community Development Journal* (2011) 46(4): 526-541.

Ditchfield, G.M. (1998) *The Evangelical Revival*. London: Routledge.

Durkheim E., (1915), *The Elementary forms of the Religious Life*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Hill C. (1991) *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*. London: Penguin History. also available free online at [https://libcom.org/files/%5BChristopher Hill%5D The World Turned Upside Down R\(Books.org\).pdf](https://libcom.org/files/%5BChristopher Hill%5D The World Turned Upside Down R(Books.org).pdf)

Hjelm, T (Ed). (2015) *Is God Back? Reconsidering the new visibility of religion*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Holden, A. (2009) *Religious Cohesion in Times of Conflict: Christian-Muslim Relations in Segregated Towns*. London: Continuum.

Martin, D (2011) *The future of Christianity: reflections on violence and democracy, religion and secularization*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Stark, Rodney and Laurence R. Iannaccone. 1994. "A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the 'Secularization' of Europe." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 33: 230-252.

Weber, M (1922) *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Chapter: "The Nature of Charismatic Authority and its Routinization" translated by A. R. Anderson and [Talcott Parsons](#), 1947. Originally published in 1922 in German under the title [Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft chapter III, § 10](#) (available online).