

How does religion matter in Britain's secular public sphere?

*In Britain today there is no particular religion that can define our public concerns or shared identity. But ignoring the ways religion informs public life would be a mistake. The goal, writes **Craig Calhoun**, should be a way for the public sphere to benefit from the articulation of diverse views. After all, public life is important precisely because it allows for strangers of different perspectives and opinions to inform each other.*



Craig Calhoun speaking at “Beyond Election Day: Power, Money, Government and Responsibility” at St Paul’s Cathedral, London. Image: St Paul’s Cathedral

Religion has played an enormous role in British public life, but not lately. We can be grateful not to be fighting religious wars or repressing Bible translations. We should be glad that in the 19th century Britain did finally offer Catholics full political rights. Perhaps we should be content with a merely ceremonial role?

Before concluding this, we should also recall the mid-20th century, when the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, was the country’s foremost advocate for building a welfare state – and even coined the term. The middle of the 20th century was not the middle ages. The issues we face are not altogether different – though today, even though Britain is a much richer country, we seem to be **dismantling** not building the welfare state. Certainly Britain still faces basic questions about what values and commitments bind citizens together.

Religion hasn’t vanished from British public life, of course, but it has been marginalised. Sports and the monarchy seem now to draw more passionate commitments (and oppositions). Markets are more frequent foci for prayer and supplication (if not propitiatory sacrifice – though how else to understand George Osborne’s imposition of austerity?).

At the same time, anxieties over Muslim immigrants – indeed, Muslim citizens – figure prominently in public debate from pubs to Parliament. The debate is not always explicitly *about* religion. But it is fuelled by fear of ‘an invasion’ of immigrants who are decisively different from some imagined British (or English) norm. That ‘Muslim’ has become the quasi-ethnic label for a large population of immigrants and citizens adds to the worry. This is both because of Muslim involvement in **political**

violence globally and because religion seems an especially hard barrier to cross in order for conversation and interaction, somehow more than just a matter of cultural difference.

At the end of 2015, the **Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life** provoked controversy by **concluding** that Britain is no longer a Christian country and should stop acting like it. It noted three basic changes: increase in number of people who describe themselves as not religious, decline in Christian affiliation, and increase in non-Christian religious affiliation.

But though the Commission criticised faith schools as divisive, the **Report** didn't call for the elimination of religion from public life so much as diversification: rabbis, imams and other non-Christian clerics should join Anglican **bishops in the House of Lords** (some might even be women!); coronation services should be multi-faith. Wisely, it also called for rethinking UK anti-terror policies that all but explicitly target religious students, calling for universities to report to security services not just potential political violence but the peaceful expression of radical religious views (of course without defining terms like 'radical' or 'extremist'). Arguably Cromwell deserved to be reported, but did Wycliffe? (The issue of **religion in universities** is vexed, though also neglected on the assumption that universities and their members are less religious than they are)

At about the same time, the Prime Minister called Britain a 'Christian country' – and no, this wasn't Tony Blair (sometimes derided for overly overt religiosity) but David Cameron, whose **2015 Christmas message** repeated a point he had also **made in 2014**. The National Secular Society weighed in with **criticism**, of course, but the very existence of the National Secular Society is testimony to religion's continuing salience as a public issue.

It may be worth recalling that **secularism is not a synonym for non-religion**. The root of the word comes from the Latin (and before that Etruscan) *saeculum* – the time span of a human life or potentially a century. Its usage grew within Christianity to refer to the world of earthly, temporal reality, as distinct from the 'other' world of God and eternity. Priests outside of religious orders with missions to Christians dispersed into larger populations were called secular priests in the middle ages. Many religious people – Buddhists, not just Christians, have sought to minimise worldly entanglements and devote themselves as much as possible to prayer and contemplation. But for others, the question is how to engage in the secular world and remain moral.

Through the modern era, the secular sphere has grown. This is a matter of religious diversity of course, and more widespread unbelief. But it is also a matter of the growth of secular institutions from finance to health care. Religion may motivate participants, but it isn't the driving force of these institutions.

Religious people commonly not only seek to be moral in personal life, but to help shape a more moral world. Certainly some have tried to impose their religiously informed moral standards on others. Early modern Christianity was relatively extreme in this. But many have preferred persuasion and shared exploration of complex issues. And religious debates and dialogs were important sources for a *secular* public sphere. The debates are not just among religious people over how best to act on religious values, they are between religious and non-religious people, and values may come from many sources. But, for example, the idea of human equality before God is one source for a more secular notion human equality and indeed (mediated by the Christian religious tradition of humanism) for human rights. It's not the only one, but it illustrates the ways religion can inform public discourse without completely dominating it. And this goes for many different issues: how to think about death and assisted suicide for example, or life itself in an era when we have the capacity to alter it through genetic and other technologies, or war, or justice.

There are also aspects of public religion that aren't quite issues. The Church of England still plays a large ceremonial role, even if the ceremonies are as much national as religious. Citizens who don't make it to church most Sundays still call on the vicar to preside at weddings and funerals. Remembrance Day is celebrated with some enthusiasm and televised church services, but its religious content is mixed with celebrations of Britishness (complicated at the moment by Englishness, Scottishness, Irishness and Welshness). Remembrance Day is civil religion a[^]much

as denominational religion, a celebration of unity with each other through a remembering shared sacrifice. Religious themes and vocabulary seem especially important to grappling with issues of death and loss, of the human propensity to evil, and to moral questions like whether it is really a good idea to advance national interests by means of war. Remembrance Day brings out the importance of reaching beyond the mere moments of secular time, to think of eternity or at least enduring meaning and connection. (I explored some of these points further in a recent [William Temple Lecture](#), also available in [print](#).)

It is not just in Remembrance Day that we find ourselves calling on religious language and perspectives. As we grapple with what it means to be human in an age of genetic manipulation and artificial intelligence we find ourselves speaking of the human soul – even when we don't have a specific theological meaning in mind. Response to human suffering evokes not just pop psychological notions of empathy but religious themes like the Catholic notion of 'bearing witness' that has informed [Médecins Sans Frontières](#). We speak of whether politicians and bankers need redemption, of whether criminals are beyond salvation. Discussions of equality among humans have not lost all reference to equality before God. Sometimes this is just a matter of words with shifting meanings, but sometimes it is also evidence of the impoverishment of our dominant secular vocabularies, contained as most are within a very short-term temporality and a tracing of causes and effects that seems sometimes to underestimate the importance of seeking meaning.

The day has passed, if it ever existed, when any particular religion could define and circumscribe our public concerns or even the sense of shared identity for members of the public. As the Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life [found](#), this is partly because of disaffiliation from religion and partly because of diverse religious affiliations. But either repressing or ignoring the ways religion informs public life would be a mistake. The goal, surely, should be a way for public life to benefit from articulation of diverse views. Indeed, the specific importance of public life (as against both private life and community) has to do with the potential for strangers of different perspectives and opinions to inform each other.

One obstacle to a better-informed public is the equation of religion with matters of belief. Participation in a religion may involve worshipping, praying, singing, reading, preaching, communing, exalting, despairing, performing rituals, inhabiting a tradition, and indeed debating. It is never simply a matter of learning a catechism or subscribing to a set of propositions. It was perhaps the Protestant Reformation that most encouraged the idea that religion was first and foremost a matter of correct beliefs, but that role has been taken over by atheists who imagine religion simply as a source of competing propositions to those offered by scientists.

Religious voices are not alternatives to scientific voices (and indeed they include scientists). They are not alternatives to economic reasoning but often important additions. They are generally not decisive for political questions. I have heard no primarily religious argument at the centre of the [Brexit debate](#) – though more than once I have heard citizens exclaim 'Good God!' after listening to particularly excessive or divisive or pathetic political rhetoric.

The way religions matter in public is not simply as sets of beliefs. They matter because they motivate their members and as communities and networks that enable them to take action. When both French and British governments took a hard line against refugees in Calais, many ordinary British citizens sought to provide [humanitarian assistance](#) – warm clothes, food, medicine. And members of different religious communities were disproportionate among them. But beyond motivations and networks, religions call the attention of both members and non-members to important themes and questions. These are not just on specifically religious topics. They concern the morality of money and migration, the importance of civility and ethics in the media, the nature of community and the obligations we owe each other, how we should think about race relations and how we should think about sex and gender. There's no one religious view, nor in my opinion one right view. But there is a need to be informed by and about different perspectives.

The British public sphere is thus informed – and potentially much better informed – when citizens work with richer categories than just believers and unbelievers, Christians and others. [British](#)

public discourse should be informed by Catholics and Protestants, Pentecostals and Evangelicals, high-church ritualists and low-church advocates for simplicity. It should be informed by Jews who may be Orthodox or not or debate the proper definition. It should be informed by Muslims who are Sunni or Shia, Sufi seekers of mystical transcendence, worldly advocates for the justice of Islamic banking. And it should be informed by and about Hindus, Buddhists, and a range of others. It should be informed by atheists, secularists, and humanists – and be articulate about the different meanings of those words.

But there is a national tendency to be as embarrassed talking about religion as about money. The LSE has a larger role to play in remedying the latter inhibition. But perhaps it can do a little about the former as well.

About the author



Craig Calhoun is the Director of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Before taking up his post at the LSE, he was President of the Social Science Research Council, and taught at the University of North Carolina, Columbia, and NYU where he was most recently University Professor of Social Sciences and Director of the Institute for Public Knowledge. He has written extensively on critical social theory, political economy, social movements, nationalism, universities and democratic politics, including several works on religion, secularism and the public sphere including *Rethinking secularism* (2011), *Habermas and religion* (2013) and *The*

Power of Religion in the Public Sphere (2011).

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