

#LSEreligion Lecture: "The state should not hold citizens' values to account" – Gwen Griffith-Dickson

In May, **Professor Gwen Griffith-Dickson** gave a lecture at LSE entitled '**Religion, Security and Strategy: An Unholy Trinity?**' as part of LSE's Religion and the Public sphere **lecture series**. In the lecture, Griffith-Dickson explored how it is in issues relating to 'religious extremism' where the traditional boundaries between religion and state are breaking down. **Michael Livesey** writes that her talk serves as a repudiation of the benefits of the intrusions of the state into the life of public religion.

As part of a programme of lectures exploring the role of religion in the public sphere, Professor Craig Calhoun began the event by stressing the series' central premise: that is, a bid to ascertain how religion does and doesn't (or should and shouldn't) play a role in British public life today. Professor Gwen Griffith-Dickson's response to that central theme was interesting and stimulating for a number of reasons.

Griffith-Dickson began by analysing the incremental extension of the state's remit into the sphere of public life, as embodied in the government's counter-radicalisation and **Prevent** initiatives. As concerns about the integration of non-native religious groups have grown since 2001, the state has found itself – according to Griffith-Dickson's account – in increasingly unfamiliar terrain. Feeding off her experiences as founder of the **Lokahi Foundation**, Griffith-Dickson highlighted Whitehall officials' limited understandings of the communities and philosophies they seek to control – recalling one such official's question regarding 'what to do about the Saloofis?' (To which Griffith-Dickson answered: 'go back and tell your minister the ones we really need to look out for are the *Wasabi* Muslims!'). Griffith-Dickson claimed that, as a product of its elementary insensitivity to the subtleties of religious practice, government strategy has often lacked coherence in tackling the challenges of extremism.



Professor Gwen Griffith-Dickson speaking on religion, security and strategy at LSE on 9th May.

Without what Griffith-Dickson calls a joined-up 'strategic philosophy' government departments have adopted divergent agendas, and ambiguous daily nostrums have been converted into official policies on an ad hoc basis. Michael Gove's deployment of Mi5 agents to interview school staff whilst he was Education Secretary exemplifies this trend – for, as the Home Office noted on that occasion, 'schools aren't really their skillset'. New funding structures after 2010, moreover, provided utterly insufficient financial bases for the programme of counter-radicalisation. In an age of austerity, funding for large-scale community projects has dried up and been replaced by a structure of one-to-one conversations (with each potential 'victim' being offered a maximum of 3-6 meetings), hardly a sound basis for so ambitious an agenda as Prevent!

Beyond such practical challenges, Griffith-Dickson highlighted the ethical problems associated with the delineation of 'British values' by the state. Originally conceptualised during the premiership of Gordon Brown as a system of 'shared values', negotiated through dialogue between communities and officials, the list of state-sponsored ethics has grown increasingly unilateral. Under successive coalition and Conservative governments, the state has developed a dictatorial tendency in deciding which values deserve official approval. As such, the 'top four' British values according to **government legislation** – 'Democracy; the Rule of Law; **Individual**

Liberties; Mutual Respect and Tolerance' – seem to have been drawn up in direct opposition to the values of a particular community – namely, the values conventionally associated with Islam. Naturally, then, renewed enthusiasm for a set agenda of 'Britishness' has come to be seen in some quarters as a reaction to the social life of an 'alien' group. This dynamic is not unique to the UK, moreover – as Justin Gest noted in *Apart*, various Western European governments have 'constructed competing fundamentalisms of freshly re-imagined European national identities – pristine cultural paragons like 'Britishness', *fraternité* and *hispanidad* – around which new policies of integration have been cobbled. Much of these new citizenship ideals have been styled with values that directly counter those set by Islamic identities. Muslims have thus, in many ways, become a litmus test for patriotism, as the character of true democratic equality and fellowship is questioned'.

This element of identification by negative association, which has been built into counter-radicalisation projects, is in itself something of a paradox. For, as current **UK legal definitions** suggest, extremism is 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values... including mutual respect and tolerance of different beliefs'. And yet, in order to comply with legislation that requires tolerance for beliefs, British people must be explicitly intolerant of a particular set of beliefs. Such a contradiction in terms was not lost on Griffith-Dickson, who emphasised the philosophical inconsistencies inherent to counter-radicalisation programmes – inconsistencies that only go to highlight the institutional marginalisation of a particular group.



Gwen Griffith-Dickson and Craig Calhoun in dialogue at LSE on 9th May 2016.

These trends raise interesting questions as to the relationship between the state and the values expressed by its society. Griffith-Dickson detected in the counter-radicalisation agenda a tendency amongst states to adopt a 'command and control' mind-set, in regard to the management of contemporary values. But the issue is not unproblematic – according to Griffith-Dickson, 'the state should not hold citizens' values to account; rather, it should be citizens that hold state institutions to account'. Griffith-Dickson's key question, therefore, came to be one of how much diversity of opinion a society can support

organically. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom driving current state initiatives (namely, the assumption that religion is 'disorderly' and requires management), Griffith-Dickson argued that diversity of opinion and belief only becomes a social ill when other major disruptions occur. Society, according to Griffith-Dickson, has an endogenous ability to manage diversity – which breaks down as a result of exogenous stresses (particularly material pressures).

Implicit to this line of arguing is an assumption that, should states successfully manage the conditions in which society operates, society will look after values and norms itself. In the current climate, accordingly, the very fact that norms and ideas are issues of such concern suggests that society's inbuilt coping mechanism has disintegrated – and that the state has fallen short of fulfilling its non-normative constituent functions effectively. But the reason that agendas like Prevent come to occupy such a central part of the state's public vocabulary is because, as an audience member suggested during the question-and-answer session, the state lacks either the means or the will to act on real issues. Counter-radicalisation initiatives' public ascendancy ought to be seen, therefore, as something of a distraction from more intransigent problems of structural social inequality or major foreign policy strategies: problems which provide the permissive condition for social and normative fractures.

Griffith-Dickson's response to all this was a call to arms under the banner of 'strategic philosophy'. For Griffith-Dickson, such possibilities as there exist for reversing the process of radicalisation, rest in the promotion of a so-called 'village approach': in which a holistic appreciation of community life prompts us to invest material and social capital in the functioning of diverse social groups. Griffith-Dickson called on attendees to 'occupy Prevent' – mounting a 'hostile takeover' bid

of counter-narratives' so that counter-radicalisation might be taken out of the hands of strait-jacketed Whitehall officials, and so that ownership of 'values' might be returned to British society as a whole.

To conclude, then, by returning to Calhoun's initial question: 'how religion does and doesn't play a role in British public life today'. It seems to me that the substance of Griffith-Dickson's argument was to turn this question on its head. The matter under discussion was not so much, as I had expected, what role religion has to play in public life, including the life of the state. Rather, Griffith-Dickson's was an analysis (and, arguably, a repudiation) of the benefits of the intrusions of the state into the life of public religion. It will be interesting to see whether future lecturers will share her conclusions.

About the author



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