

## Restoring religion to the public square - Faith's role in civil society

### Restoring religion to the public square - Faith's role in civil society



Results of a £12-million research project on the place of religious belief in public life will be aired in a series of groundbreaking debates as well as in *The Tablet* beginning next month. One of the main aims, argues the project's head, is to help correct the secular bias at universities

Being jeered by a lecture room full of academics is a memorable experience. It happened to me recently after a lecture delivered by a notable and brilliant feminist scholar. As a fellow feminist, but also a professor of religion, I made an unguarded comment about feminism's global influence being bound up with its ability to engage seriously with religion. Big mistake.

Intellectual openness extends only so far. Academics have their own taboos and no-go areas. Religion is one. It may be OK to come down to breakfast and tell your peers about your sexual exploits the night before, but try telling them about your devotion to the Virgin Mary and planned pilgrimage to Lourdes.

Actually, the picture is not uniform. Contrary to popular opinion, "hard" scientists are often very open to religion, as are many in more applied fields such as computer science. In these cases, the interest is often personal as much as professional. When it comes to academic engagement with religion, there are islands of openness as well. Social history, anthropology, and of course theology and religious studies stand out. More recently other fields – such as geography and law – have also started to contribute.

So what are the most secular fields? I would say the social sciences in general, including politics and international relations, and – within the humanities – literary and creative subjects such as art, design and cultural studies. This secularism matters a lot. It's not just that religion gets caricatured and demonised. It's that it gets left out of the picture altogether.

For decades, feminists battled to correct the distortion whereby the "male gaze" determined what was seen in history, literature, politics, and even the laboratory. The broadening of perspective that resulted changed the way we view the world. Now another revolution is needed: one to correct the secular gaze that airbrushes religion away. It's a crazily narrow-minded approach, which has to turn a blind eye to the luxuriantly variegated religiosity of most of the world, and ignore the past. Including our own.

I am exasperated with all those books, examining some concept or institution (such as “democracy”), that begin with the classics and then leapfrog to the modern era. “What about the 1,700 years in between?” I find myself exclaiming. How can you think that nothing of value was said, written, established, or debated in that time? Just because it was “religious”?

How about the institution of the university, for starters, never mind the nation state? This isn't merely academic. Henry Kissinger's 900-page tome *Diplomacy*, published in 1993 does not contain the word “religion” in the index. “A mistake”, he now concedes. The distortions of thought leach into public life and politics – and vice versa.

Take four of the most momentous events of our times: the revolution in Iran, the collapse of Communism, the attacks of 9/11, the Arab Spring. All had to do with religion as well as politics. And all took us by surprise – academics and politicians alike. Had we not airbrushed religion out of our world view, might we not have been able to anticipate and understand a little better?

A less secular bias in our universities, and a more mature understanding of religion, is needed. Most religion is fascinating. Some is awe-inspiring. Some is ludicrous. A small part, often in combination with a political cause, is downright dangerous. But you need to be educated about it in order to have the confidence to discriminate.

There are, however, some encouraging signs of change in higher education. Students are now more openly interested in religion, and a new generation of academics is taking the subject more seriously, even in traditionally secular disciplines. It is the baby-boomer generation that finds religion hardest to deal with.

I gave the annual lecture sponsored by *Feminist Review* last year. It was the first time since the journal was founded in 1979 that they had had a lecture on religion, or an issue dedicated to it. What struck me most was the division in the audience between age groups. The responses of senior academics made it clear that religion was still a difficult and touchy topic for them. But it was quite different for the younger academics and PhDs.

Part of the explanation is that the younger generation are much more international – in origin as well as outlook. Quite a few in the audience were from countries touched by the Arab Spring. The idea that religion is a private matter, or something essentially repressive, made little sense to them. They explicitly questioned the assumption that the path of European secularity is one which the rest of the world must follow.

But even with British and other European students, there has been a shift since I started teaching in the early 1990s. They don't carry the baggage about religion that their predecessors did. Often they carry no baggage at all: they are simply ignorant about religion. But their interest, and their open-mindedness, makes them eager for knowledge.

In research, the single biggest sign of change was the decision made by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council between them to invest £12 million in research on “Religion and Society”. I've been director of that programme since 2007, and it finishes at the end of 2012. More than 240 academics, researchers and research students have been involved,

from 38 British universities. The decision was made because consultation with academics and stakeholders at the start of the new millennium highlighted religion as an area where investment in research – and in training new researchers – was needed urgently after decades of neglect.

Results from that research are being made public this spring in a series of “Faith Debates” being held in the heart of Westminster. I’m organising them with the help of the former Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, many distinguished scholars, and other politicians and public figures. They are open to anyone who is interested. It’s a small step in the direction of getting religion discussed with as much intelligence and seriousness as politics, but a timely one.

Linda Woodhead - The Tablet