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On the Public Discourse of Religion: An Analysis of Christianity in the United Kingdom

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Abstract: Debates over the involvement of religion in the public sphere look set to be one of the defining themes of the 21st century. But while religious issues have attracted a large degree of scholarly attention, the public discourse of religion itself, in terms of the effort to assert and legitimize a role for faith in the public realm, has remained notably under-researched. This article marks an initial step to address this deficiency by deconstructing the public discourse of Christianity in the United Kingdom. It argues that, while appealing for representation on the grounds of liberal equality, the overall goal of this discourse is to establish a role for itself as a principal source of moral authority, and to exempt itself from the evidentially-based standards and criteria that govern public life.

INTRODUCTION

Politics and religion may form two of the three great conversational taboos, but their inter-relationship forms one of the most potent and contentious issues of modern times. In particular, the debate over the role of religion in the public sphere looks set to be one of the defining themes of the 21st century. Yet, for all the scholarly attention that has been devoted to religious matters, the discourses that are deployed by religious actors in their efforts to gain, exert, and legitimize public influence remain an area that is notably under-researched. This article marks an initial attempt to address this deficit by deconstructing the public discourse of

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Christianity in the United Kingdom (UK). Based on an extensive analysis of speeches, sermons, interviews, and texts from senior Church representatives, as well as from prominent public figures and other organizations engaged in the debate, it sets out to map the internal architecture of this discourse, and to show how its various nodes combine to form an overarching structure of argumentation. The article contends that, while asserting the legitimacy of public influence on the grounds of liberal equality and fairness, the public discourse of Christianity in the UK ultimately seeks to establish a role for itself as a principal arbiter on moral issues, and to exempt itself from the evidentially-based standards and criteria that govern public life. In so doing, this highlights the clear tensions that exist between secular and religious arguments for the representation of faith in the public sphere.

RELIGION AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Debates over the role of religion in the public sphere, look certain to be one of the central and defining areas of political life in the 21st century. At the present time there are few countries in the world that can claim to possess a fully secular separation between the state and religion (Fox 2006), and the influence of the latter in the public realm is one that continues to grow (Philpott 2007). Indeed, that the multifarious and abundant intersections of politics and religion in the modern world need no introduction, and that highlighting them would be a conspicuous and mundane task, it aptly demonstrates the salience of the issue. As an obvious field for scholarly endeavor, the topic of religion is one that has also attracted an intense amount of academic attention, traversing a variety of disciplines, often with interdisciplinary overlap between them, including anthropology (Hann 2007; Saler 2008), history (Morris 2003; Mancini 2007), sociology (Davie 2000, 2006; Coleman, Ivani-Challian and Robinson 2004; Crockett and Voas 2006), law (Greenawalt 1998; Danchin 2008); philosophy (Macdonald 2005; Habermas 2006), psychology (Green and Rubin 1991; Barrett 2000; Boyer 2003; Rossano 2006); economics (Lipford and Tollinson 2003; Fase 2005), and political science (Keddie 1998; Kotler-Berkowitz 2001; Philpott 2007). Within this highly congested scholarly sphere, however, the issue of religious discourse has been something of a neglected area. Moreover, even when this has been touched upon, studies remain problematic, often focusing on internal theological issues and on promoting the role of faith in the public

realm, rather than seeking to unpack the internal structures of religious discourse itself (Elliot 2007; Bedford-Strohm 2008), or focusing on aspects of religious discourse that are limited to particular issues or to specific denominations within a particular faith (Laermans 1995; Dillon 1996; Wuthnow 1988; Karaflogka 2002; Leonard 2003).

But while the public discourse of religion remains overlooked as a topic of study, an understanding of its internal dynamics is of crucial importance for understanding the intersection between religion and politics in the modern world. As the principal means by which those advocating a public role for a particular faith seek to promote and legitimize this end, a public discourse of religion is necessarily based on a mutually shared interpretation of the main problems and challenges that such objectives face, as well as the most appropriate and effective method of dealing with them. Emerging, on this basis, through a process of deliberation and debate, the resultant discourse (which exists only as a fluid societal relation, and which is independent of those from whose efforts it arose) denotes an attempt to shape, mould and frame both the terms and content of public debate. In essence, this involves marshalling and deploying various lines of argument, emphasizing and de-emphasizing certain aspects, principles, and values rather than others, in an effort to explain, persuade and mobilize support. In so doing, the overarching structure of a public discourse comprises a range of specific argumentum nodes, or components, each of which serves a specific and limited purpose, but all of which, when combined, form a holistic, strategically constructed and purposeful narrative (Fairclough 2000; Finlayson 2007). Indeed, as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams (2007b, 43), himself explains, the language of public life "is more than just "mere words." It is "rhetoric" in the classic sense of that term … rhetoric as language meant to persuade others."

The aim of this article, then, is to establish a marker in the attempt to understand the public discourse of religion in terms of the manner in which it seeks to secure and legitimize a role for faith in the public sphere. The core objective in this regard is to deconstruct the arguments that are presented by those in favor of this form of religious influence and to map out the main features of its internal structure; to outline the way in which its various elements combine to form an interrelated seam of argumentation. In so doing, the focus here is on the public discourse of Christianity in the UK. For this, there are two main reasons. First, restricting the focus to a limited and specialized case, as opposed to a broader analysis of religious discourse in general is useful in several important respects.

In this particular instance, the sufficiently entrenched, although sufficiently declining, nature of Christianity in the UK provides fertile conditions for the emergence of a pro-actively argumentative discourse; namely one that is compelled to justify, legitimize, and account for its public role, and one that is therefore more likely to contain a heightened emphasis on the core discursive elements of the public case for religion, than one derived from a religion whose public role was assured, without challenge, and taken-for-granted. Determining these core elements is also more likely to be achieved in the case examined here since the arguments deployed by those seeking a greater public role for Christianity are unlikely to be diluted by the incorporation of "extraneous" elements, such as would in all probability be required by those seeking a greater role in UK public life for Islam or Judaism, for instance, where the discourses in play would invariably be shaped by their minority and, certainly in the case of Islam, by their "culturally alien" status. This is not to say that understanding such extremities and the extent of their divergence from more linear modes of religious discourse is unimportant, merely that it is necessary, as a first step, to try and establish the base-lines that more straightforward discursive strategies might take, before broadening the analysis to include more complex cases and varieties.

A second reason why it may be instructive to study the public discourse of Christianity in the UK concerns its diversity. Indeed, one argument that could be made against the study of religious discourse *per se* might naturally be that the sheer diversity of religious groups and beliefs precludes the possibility of a single coherent discourse emerging. And, certainly, Christianity in the UK is nothing if not eclectic; consisting of multiple denominations ranging from Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Mormon, Evangelical, and Christadelphian, along with a wide range of Christian organizations seeking to influence the public sphere, notable examples of which include Theos, Ekklesia, and the Christian Institute. Nevertheless, an extensive reading of texts, sermons, speeches, interviews, commentaries, and documents from leading figures and agencies involved in the public promotion of the Christian faith in the UK reveals that, while divergent views clearly exist on theological and other matters, most of those involved do, in fact, share a broad set of common positions on the means of securing a role for Christianity within the public sphere. These are based on both a common interpretation of the broader socio-cultural position of Christianity in the UK, and a common view of the best means of dealing with the challenges that it faces. While Christian groups and actors may well have different interests and objectives concerning the

particular use to which Christian influence within the public realm should be put (although, as shall be seen, common elements abide here also), the discursive efforts to establish and legitimize admittance into the public realm in the first instance are markedly similar. To this extent, therefore, there are clear grounds for asserting that a coherent public discourse for Christianity in the UK does exist. Indeed, that the same discursive elements (arguments, emphases, assertions, and so on) are advanced by a wide range of Christian groups and individuals (although this is not, of course, to say that each and every group, still less, each and every individual within them, will subscribe to every single aspect) indicates that the nature of these discursive forms is far from superficial. As Bartley (2007a), co-director of the Christian think-tank, *Ekklesia*, notes, while it may seem as if "the Church's political perspective is so diverse that it can hardly be considered a movement at all," there is, at the same time, "a growing recognition that where Christians are divided over theology they can be united around a political viewpoint."

The rest of this paper outlines the core elements of Christian public discourse in the UK. These nodal points, which together constitute the broader narrative for Christianity in the public sphere, are as follows: (1) that religion in general (and Christianity in particular) faces marginalization and exclusion from the public sphere by an intolerant form of secularism. (2) That secular critics have, willfully or otherwise, misrepresented religion as being irrational and dogmatic. (3) That the ontological and epistemological claims of secular Enlightenment thought are not universal, but are merely one of a number of equally valid world-views. (4) That religion (and therefore Christianity) is an equally valid world-view to that of the Enlightenment, and thus has a right to be represented in the public sphere. (5) That religion (and, again, Christianity in particular) is a principal source of, and authority on, human morality (which Enlightenment thought is unable to provide). (6) That any attempt to exclude religion from the public sphere will have adverse social consequences. And (7), that the claims of religion are not amenable to scientific, evidentially-based modes of inquiry, and, as such, should not be subject to the usual, evidentially-based rules and norms of the public sphere.

PERIPHERAL VISIONS

The broader social context shaping the public discourse of Christianity in the UK is characterized by four main processes: the progressively waning

influence of Christianity throughout the postwar period, the concomitant rise of secularism over the same duration, the spread of other faiths (most notably Islam) over the past three decades, and recurrent internal tensions within Christianity over issues such as homosexuality, abortion, and the ordination of women priests and bishops. Here, the steady decline in church membership (with the Church of England now at a third of its 1930s levels) as well as the numbers of people whom regularly attend church services (falling persistently from the 1960s) provides the most apparent and often cited indicators of decline (National Secular Society 2006; also see Morris 2003). While 71.6% of the population declared themselves Christian in the last census during 2001, this is considered by many to be an inflated figure,[1] and according to a more recent estimate, the scale of erosion is such that Christianity in the UK is now on course to be superseded by Islam in terms of actively practicing members by 2035 (Brierley 2008). Alongside this, a more general decline in religious belief itself is also evident (Voas and Crockett 2005; Crockett and Voas 2006); a recent poll by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, for example, finding that faith is now regarded by many people in the UK as intolerant, irrational, and divisive (Watts 2008).

This weakening socio-cultural position, manifest in concerns about the decline in Christianity's position as the UK's dominant faith and the erosion of the UK's Christian culture, forms one of the main themes in Christian public discourse. The Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir-Ali, for instance, has persistently warned of the "inherent tendency in Anglicanism to capitulate," asserting that "all that is of worth in [Britain] is based on Christianity" (Mackay 2008), a view that is shared, among others, by the Bishop of Winchester, Michael Scott-Joynt (2003), who states, given the long and deeply-entrenched role of Christianity in British social, political, and cultural life, that "this society has some responsibility to listen to Christians if it's going to understand itself and its formation." A central motif in such concerns is a sense of marginalization, discrimination, and disempowerment in the face of an ever-more secular society, and as those critical of religion (most prominently the so-called "New Atheists" such as Harris 2004; Dawkins 2006; Dennett 2006; Hitchens 2007) have become increasingly emboldened in their attacks. Lynda Barley (2006), the head of research at the Church of England, notes that **Q1** Christianity is under assault from the "forces of secularization"; Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor (2006b), the head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, observes a "new secular aggressiveness" marked by a desire "to close off every voice and contribution other than their own";

the ex-Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey (2007), describes the challenge as that of "a militant atheism that is determined to rubbish faith at all costs"; and Jonathan Chaplin (2007), director of the Kirby Laing Institute for **Q1** Christian Ethics, notes "a widely held and intensely felt prejudice against appealing to religious convictions in the public square." The Christian view on this point is well summarized by the Evangelical Alliance (2006, 22), who protest that "anti-religious secularist forces … have recently tended to push their way into dominance in the regulation of public life," and that "secularist policies, far from being "neutral" … merely replicate discriminatory attitudes towards religion" (Evangelical Alliance 2006, 91).

From this sense of peripheralization comes the accompanying assertion that Christians in the UK need to counter these threats by becoming more politically active and by seeking a greater involvement in public affairs. As the Christian think-tank, Theos (2006), notes, Christians need to seek an "overall aim of putting God "back" into the public domain", and that (despite acknowledging an "extreme nervousness" on the part of the general public "about any hint of the divine in public discourse") it is now necessary "to demonstrate that religion in public debate … is crucial to enable such public debate to connect with the communities it seeks to serve." Seconding this, the fellow Christian think-tank, Ekklesia (2006), similarly notes that "faith communities (not least the churches) are looking for a new role, new finance, and a new credibility in their battle against long-term decline and public indifference." Indeed, the point is also put that Christians have, in fact, no other credible alternative to political activism. Nick Spencer (2008), Director of Studies at *Theos*, asserts that "[t]he Christian religion is a public one and no amount of theological wriggling or low-level secular bullying will change that," while the Archbishop of Canterbury (Williams 2008a) maintains that "politics is inescapable for anyone in or out of the Church or any other religious community." Arguments over the public influence of religion, he thus observes (Williams 2007a), are, in fact, the terrain of a much deeper conflict, one that "is not simply a matter of religious believers defending themselves," but which is fundamentally "about the character of intellectual debate, about the politics, the power struggles." A similar point on this is also made by Murphy-O'Connor (2008b), who, warning that Britain cannot be allowed to become "a God-free zone," declares an urgent need "to reach a new consensus on how best the public role of religious organizations can be safeguarded and their rights upheld" (BBC News 2007).[2]

Whether intentional or otherwise, such calls-to-arms against perceived injustice have two important effects. On the one hand, these opening

claims may help to unify and galvanize members of the Christian faith, and, on the other, may elicit (at least potentially) a more sympathetic hearing from non-Christians and moderate secularists on the legitimacy of Christian involvement in public affairs. These effects, and the image of unfairness from which they derive, are also present in the second element of Christian public discourse in the UK; namely, a negation of the apparent way in which religion has been portrayed by secularists (and particularly by the "New Atheists") as dogmatic, irrational, and the antithesis of the Enlightenment values of reason, rationality, and progress. In short, the subsequent assertion is that religion has been misrepresented in secular discourse in a crude and one-dimensional fashion. McGrath (2005, 135), for example, professor of historical theology at Oxford university and a prominent public defender of Christianity, staunchly criticizes what he describes as the prevailing secular view of religious people as "dishonest, liars, fools and knaves," of being "incapable of responding honestly to the real world, and preferring to invent a false, pernicious and delusory world into which to entice the unwary, the young and the naïve." Against such calumny, McGrath (2005, 112–123) contends that a key aim of Christian discourse should be to reject the "ludicrous definition" of faith as blind and irrational (a view designed "with the deliberate intention of making religious faith seem a piece of intellectual buffoonery"), and to assert instead a view of faith as "the conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence." This concern is also expressed by Tony Blair (2008), the ex-British Prime Minister, now head of his own Faith Foundation and another prominent advocate of Christianity in the public sphere, who maintains that politicians declaring themselves to be people of faith run the risk of being "considered weird," as acting "at the promptings of an inscrutable deity, free from reason rather than in accordance with it." The claim that secular critics of religion have duplicitously attacked a false target for their own ends is also put up by Williams (2007a), who insists that "whatever the religion [that] is being attacked here it's not actually what I believe in," and by Murphy-O'Connor (2008a), who contends that "[f]aith for us is the flowering of reason, not its betrayal," and that "I simply don't recognise my faith in what is presented by these critics as Christian faith."

By taking issue with the apparent secular critique of religion in this way, the claim that the core of the secularist case is no more than a crude misrepresentation plays a key role in Christian public discourse, helping to erode the view that Christian beliefs (or religious belief in general) might in any way be irrational and thus warrant exclusion

from the public sphere. Indeed, this point is taken further in its ensuing, third discursive element, which aims to undermine the dominant position of Enlightenment thought itself as the sole source of properly constituted knowledge claims about the world, to challenge its assumptions about human reason, the role of rationality and the inevitability of progress, and to present this as being simply one among a multitude of equivalent world views. By calling into question the epistemological claims of the Enlightenment on the grounds of their inherently unprovable and hermetically sealed nature, this seeks to establish an intellectual space into which can be inserted the claim that religion is an equally valid view of human reality, and thus has an equally valid claim to representation in the public realm. On this, for instance, Murphy-O'Connor (2008b) states that critical secularism "sees religious belief as mere prejudice while failing to recognise the doctrinaire nature of its own position; the Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu (2007a), contends that "dogmatic assumptions also underline non-religious worldviews — Marxism, Darwinism, Freudianism, capitalism, secularism, humanism and so on"; McGrath (2005, 116–117) notes that "[p]aradoxically, atheism itself emerges as a faith, possessed of a remarkable degree of conceptual isomorphism to theism"; and Theos (2006, 64–68) claim that the Enlightenment belief in human progress is "little different from a religious one ... an article of faith just like the resurrection." Indeed, as Williams (2008c) puts it, the secular-scientific world view "is itself deeply vulnerable to intellectual challenge and is so partly because, precisely, it's trying to be a "theology" (Williams 2008c) Enlightenment liberalism, he thus maintains, "now appears as simply one cultural and historical phenomenon among others." (Williams 2005).

AFFAIRS OF THE STATE

From this it is a short step to the claim that, since Enlightenment thought and faith are equally valid means of understanding reality, there can be no reason to preclude religious involvement in public affairs, and the more so in a pluralist liberal democratic society (and especially one in which Christianity remains numerically and culturally prominent). Yet beyond this there is no fixed political theology on the precise form that church-state relations should take. As Joel Edwards (2006), head of the Evangelical Alliance, explains, "'[f]rom its very beginning Christian faith has been embroiled in the ambiguity between the state and the

individual," and as Murphy-O'Connor (2007c) points out, "the diversity of ways in which the Church can and has conducted its public witness suggests that there is no blueprint for that witness, no model for how close to or distant from the public authorities the Church should operate." Indeed, according to one particular variant, the so-called "Post-Christendom" perspective, the declining cultural dominance of Christianity is viewed in a positive light, as a force for change offering the prospect of a revitalization of the church and the pursuit of a more direct form of political engagement, rather than one which seeks to bolster traditional institutional links to the state. Here, Bartley (2007a), an advocate of this view point, describes "the ending of the churches" privileged position in society as an exciting opportunity to recapture the radical social vision of the Gospel of Jesus," and warns that excessively close relations with the state "runs the risk of buying into the state's policy goals and targets rather than a vision of a different kind of social order" (Bartley 2007b). Simon Barrow (2008a), co-director of *Ekklesia*, adopts a similar position, calling for "a relocation of the church from the centre to the margins" in order to establish a more participatory mode of politics; a view expressed by Ekklesia (2006) itself, which hails the opportunity for "a shift in religious practice towards questioning power rather than colluding with it."

This view, however, remains a minority one among Christians in the UK. For most, the objective is not to accelerate the process of de-linking the state and religion, but to secure the legitimate right for Christian groups and organizations to exert influence within the established political institutions of the British state. As far as the Christian Institute (2003) is concerned, the aim in this respect is clear: "Christians," they proclaim, "are to work for the state to adopt Christian values and to implement godly laws." This vision is also promoted by the Jubilee Centre, a Cambridge-based research organization seeking to promote social reform along Christian lines. As Michael Schluter (2007), the Centre's founder and chairman, puts it: "wherever possible, Christians should seek to see God acknowledged in public life — in the constitution, the school curriculum, and the courts — and not accept a "secular state" where the Trinitarian God is excluded from the formal activities of the state." Going further than this, the proclaimed *manifesto* of the Jubilee Centre calls for the explicit adoption of a theologically-inspired social order, stating that "Government has a divine purpose," that "God is the ultimate source of all political authority," and that "[t]he final goal of the political, economic and social system is "righteousness" ... defined

throughout Scripture in terms of a set of values which are exemplified in the life of Jesus." "Christians," it exclaims, "should prioritise evangelism ... to build the Christian community and to increase a right "fear of God" across society as a whole" (Schluter 2007).

The ground for assertions such as these typically rests on the normative basis of political pluralism; namely, that people of Christian faith have the same right as anybody else to make their case in the public sphere. The Evangelical Alliance, for example, state that "[o]ne of the most fundamental freedoms for Christians is liberty to proclaim the gospel," to "go on asserting our right to proclaim Him freely as such in the public arena (Theos 2008); Chaplin (2007) declares that "Christians may in principle freely avail themselves of every available avenue of political influence afforded by a representative constitutional democracy"; Scott-Joynt (2003), insists that "from [the] point of view of the public arena in general ... we have as much right as anybody and that includes as much right as people of other faiths and those from a number of secular philosophies"; while the Baptist Union of Great Britain states that "for the good of society, faith communities make their unique contribution ... a partnership that must recognise the proper role of both Church and state, allowing the latter to exercise proper and legitimate power and releasing the former to be a truly prophetic voice" (Evangelical Alliance 2006).

This call for pluralism is combined with a disarming and seemingly innocuous assertion; namely, that the church has no desire to wield direct political power, and that it neither seeks nor desires an overly close relationship with the state. As Williams (2008b) puts it, the goal is not to establish a theocracy, but for "a crowded and argumentative public square" in which "religious convictions are granted a public hearing in debate; not necessarily one in which they are privileged or regarded as beyond criticism" (Williams 2006). While the church should not "be able to dictate what Parliament does and what the nation does," he notes, it nonetheless "has a right and a duty to get into the argument and to try and persuade people" (Williams 2008b). The same point is also well made by Murphy-O'Connor (2006a), who calls for "respectful dialogue and co-operation between all interested parties, whether Christians or members of other faiths, agnostics or secularists, and who maintains that "[t]he Church claims only its legitimate part in the political process ... not to propose technical solutions to questions of governance or economic activity, but to help to form a social culture based on justice, solidarity and truth, for the common good"

(Williams 2007a). The aim, then, is for a situation in which Christianity serves as the "metaphor of the leaven in the dough, the unseen agent that enlivens and animates society from within … The Church understood as leaven does not rule but serves." On this basis, since "[t]he Church in a plural society must shun every form of privilege and power and dedicate herself to serving the common good," it thereby follows that "[a] servant Church poses no threat to anyone, so there are no good grounds for excluding it" (Williams 2007b).

Indeed, a central notion in this aspect of Christian discourse is that the wielding of direct political power, whether in the form of a church-state or anything approximating a Christian theocracy, would be eminently undesirable since this would delimit the freedom of Christians themselves in matters of morality and conviction. In this sense, the pursuit of a framework in which Christian groups exert influence within a pluralist public sphere, as opposed to wielding direct political control, thus becomes more than a matter of political expediency, but, rather, provides the best possible form of political arrangement. A key reason for this stems from the conception of Christian identity, which, as Williams (2005; also see Williams 2004) explains, contains "graded levels of loyalty" to state and church. Thus:

> The Church of Christ begins by defining itself as a community both alongside political society and of a different order to political society … it does not seek to set up another empire on the same level as the Roman imperium. It has "citizens", but their citizenship is not something that requires them to set up societies in rivalry to the existing systems.

In this context, then, since direct religious rule would leave no space for independent moral conviction (since all such matters would, by definition, be determined by the ruling authority), such a political form would threaten this conception of a dual Christian identity. Put another way, such an identity would become far harder to sustain if the legitimate authority for such differentiation was itself the predominant force in the political realm; a state of affairs, as Williams (2006) puts it, in which "the Church's administration [came to] look more and more like a rival kind of state," resembling the pre-Reformation "religious sanctioning of state power as exercised by "godly princes." In sum, therefore, "the churches do not campaign for political control (which would undermine their appeal to the value of personal freedom) but for public visibility — for the capacity to argue for and defend their vision in the public sphere"

(Williams 2007b). This point is also emphasized by Murphy-O'Connor (2007a). As he maintains:

> The attempt by a state to proclaim a particular religion as true and to force its observance on people is inimical to Christianity itself. Truth and freedom need each other, which is why from its beginnings the Christian Church proclaimed the distinction between temporal and spiritual.

The call for equal participation in the public realm, for faith to be treated in an equivalent fashion as all other interests and view points, however, comes with an important qualification; namely, the right for Christians to reject the authority of the state when it acts in contravention of Christian teaching. As the Christian Institute (2006) declare: "There may be circumstances where the Christian cannot obey the state: if the state should command what God forbids or forbid what God commands then the duty of the Christian must be to obey God rather than man." Similarly, as Spencer (2008) puts it, the degree and nature of Church-state relations is, to a great extent, dependent on the nature of the governing authorities. Thus:

> If they do what the Gospel indicates they should do ... then there is real opportunity for partnership. If, on the other hand, the authorities' concept of the good is in serious tension with what the Gospel proclaims it should be ... the Church cannot but work against it.

A more extreme version of the same point is put by the Evangelical Alliance (2006). As they note: political action on a Christian basis "may, where necessary, take the form of active resistance to the state. This can take different forms and may encompass disobedience to law, civil disobedience, involving selective, non-violent resistance or protest, or ultimately violent revolution." On this, both mainstream and Post-Christendom streams of thought are at one. Barrow (2008b), for instance, contends that a Christian's relationship to the state and human authority is "necessarily conditional," that "good citizenship is a Christian virtue. But "the good" is very much the defining feature in this formula, and when it goes wrong ... resistance is just as much a duty." In sum, he concludes, the idea that "religious commitments should always be secondary to civic ones" was "not a position many of us find remotely credible." Here, too, Williams (2008a) is also clear. "Christians," he explains, "have historically held to the right to resist

what is believed to be directly against God's justice: to disobey, to fail to obey a command — even from a legally appointed superior — which is in conscience held to be against God's justice."

While these assertions to the limits of political authority may well be honorable, or even dutiful (indeed, no serious democrat of any persuasion could contend otherwise), there nevertheless remains an important point to be made concerning the bases from which the legitimacy, or the right, to assert such resistance is said to derive; namely, between the notion of resistance based on an abstract, Enlightenment-based conception of human rights, and that deriving from elements which are theologically determined. While this distinction, for most intents and purposes, may appear largely semantic, the principle it raises is one that is nevertheless significant. Real ethical differences may, and frequently do arise, for instance, on matters relating to sexuality, gender, reproduction, and free speech, which may offend the "convictions" of those professing religious faith while remaining an interwoven part of the secular tapestry of human rights that are now central to many liberal democratic societies. In terms of Christian public discourse, this differentiation between the secular basis for human rights and that of the divine thus serves to establish a key argumentative principle; namely, that the legitimate allegiance of Christianity lies not with "pluralism," "democracy," or "human rights" *per se*, but with a realm that separates itself from, and subjects itself to, an altogether different set of criteria.

MORAL STANDARDS

The significance of this point is highlighted by the final components of Christian public discourse in the UK. Here, a central theme is that contemporary British society is currently enduring a state of social, moral, and spiritual decay as a direct result of modernity and its associated culture of individualist consumerism, and that a greater role for Christianity in the public sphere is essential if the situation is to be reversed. At this juncture, Christian public discourse takes a crucial strategic turn, moving from general and ostensibly neutral claims concerning equality of representation in the public sphere, to particularist claims in which it is asserted that religion provides a principal source of morality, and that Enlightenment-based secularism has no foundational basis for the elaboration of human values and ethics. This invokes a subtle discursive shift, from the apparently innocuous request to be granted a seat at the public table on the grounds of fairness and

plurality, to a framing of the more general public narrative in terms of the problems of (post)modern society, the solution to which, it is argued, can only be found in a reassertion of religion through its unique abilities as a provider of ethical virtue and social cohesion. Thus, while Christian discourse asserts the right to equal participation in the public sphere, the terms of its entry into the public sphere are shaped in such a way as to allow for unique and particularizing claims to be made about Christianity as a major source of morality and as an ethical guarantor of liberal society.

Representative of such claims, for example, are the views of Carey (2006). Pinning the blame for Britain's social atrophy squarely on "the shallow roots of a secular culture," the ex-Archbishop contends that this has led invariably to "more crime, broken families, acceptance of cohabitation instead of marriage, soaring numbers of teen-age pregnancies ... and a general decline in moral values and standards." Carey's successor makes the point emphatically too, stating that the social problems of modernity were "a predictable result of abandoning the belief that each person is the work of God" (Williams 2007b), that "moral perspectives don't just derive from abstract civic principles," and that Enlightenment liberalism offers "a set of practices which may exhibit values and morality but doesn't generate them" (Williams 2008c). The involvement of faith, he duly concludes, is necessary in order to counter "the increasingly atomised and consumerist approach to civil participation" (Hansard 2006, Cl.501). The same point is made by **Q2** Murphy-O'Connor (2007b), who also attacks the culture of "mindless consumerism" as the root cause of today's social problems. This, he maintains, has helped to create a moral and spiritual vacuum in which people are experiencing "a sense of loss," but are being held back from addressing deeper spiritual questions by the strident nature of contemporary secularism. "[T]here is a pervasive message," he laments, "that to commit yourself to God through a religious faith is to take a step back from being independent and mature" (Williams 2008b). Continuing the theme, the Archbishop of York also rounds on individualism, highlighting "consumption and the vaunting of individual economic status over our communal well being" as having "led to a politics which has given the market the role of moral guardian" (Sentamu 2008). As he explains:

> if we push for the end of religion in the public arena, in our politics and the public square ... moral responsibility will be displaced not by reason, science or ethics but by sheer consumerism. The moral imperative of doing the right thing is in danger of being replaced by the consumerist

imperative to buy the right thing. And to buy it now, whatever the cost (Sentamu 2008).

Buttressing the claim that religion, and more particularly Christianity, offers the proper repose to such decline, and indeed provides a mainstay for moral authority in the public sphere, is an assertion that excluding religion from the public realm will lead to a far worse state of affairs. One reason that is frequently given for this, and one that again draws on the virtues of liberal pluralism, is that denying Christian groups access to the public sphere would undermine the very principles of liberalism and tolerance on which Western society itself is based. As Murphy-O'Connor (2007b) puts it, "to banish religion from the public square in the name of freedom and democracy is to threaten freedom and democracy, and the very existence of that public square"; or, as Williams (2007b) explains, "the state will become a sterile and oppressive thing unless it is continually engaged in conversation with those who speak for the gospel," and that "without a willingness to listen to the questions and challenges of the Church, liberal society is in danger of becoming illiberal" (Williams 2005).

Another reason that is often advanced for the necessity of inclusiveness, however, although one that sits uneasily with claims of moral virtue, is that denying religious groups access to the public sphere will only cause them to become more fundamentalist and more extreme in their beliefs and actions. As Williams (2005) puts it, allowing religious groups access to the public sphere "reduces the risk of open social conflict," since confining moral and spiritual matters to the private sphere runs the risk that "they may be distorted into fanaticism and exclusion." Or, as the Bishop of Derby, Alastair Redfern (2007), explains, ignoring the voice of the religious "would risk creating an open space ripe for the proselytising of far more radical operators of theology and nurture." Still further, in the words of Theos (2006, 64): "If you exile religious communities to the margins, then they will start to speak words of fire among consenting adults, and the threat to public order and the public arena . . . will grow."

Having shifted the terms of debate from the general to the particular in this way, the final aspect of Christian public discourse in the UK attempts to put its claims concerning the provision of morality beyond question by stating that religious argument should not be submitted to the same evidentially-based standards and criteria to which all other participants in the public sphere are held. Having initially appealed for a right to representation in the public realm on the basis of liberal equality, it is now asserted that religiously-based claims should not be bound by

what are considered by many to be the normal terms of public discourse. A crucial point here is a claim, not merely that no evidence need be submitted in defense of religiously-based assertions, but, more fundamentally, that the very idea of evidence is itself an inappropriate form for adjudging the value of such propositions. Thus, McGrath (2005, 135), for example, asserts both that "the scientific method is incapable of adjudicating the God-hypothesis, either positively or negatively," and that "evidence takes us thus far, but then when it comes to deciding between a number of competing explanations, its extremely difficult to have an evidence-based argument for those final stages" (McGrath 2007). Faith, from this perspective, is now defined not as the originally formulated "conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence" (McGrath 2005), but as the point "at which it goes beyond the evidence," the need for which is circumvented by an assertion that God is "above, rather than within, the natural process" (McGrath 2007). This line is also advanced by, among others, the Archbishop of York, who explains that:

> We've gone into the logic, the reasoning, the explanation. Ultimately, when you have done all of that, there is something bigger than that which we call mystery … Not all things are explainable. Not all things are solvable. Some things really remain unresolved (Sentamu 2007b).

Or, as Murphy-O'Connor (2006c) maintains, "you don't prove the doctrine of the Resurrection just by reason. It comes as a gift of faith," "the mystery of God" means "that proper talk about God is always difficult, always tentative … A God who can be spoken of comfortably and clearly by human beings cannot be the true God" (Murphy-O'Connor 2008b). The view that religion offers a form of knowledge and experience that is not open to, and thus cannot be subjected to, rational scientific inquiry, is also offered by Rowan Williams. As he puts it, religious doctrine should not be regarded as something akin to "a scientific system," but is rather "an account of the context in which the whole of the universe exists — the context of God … a vision, an imagination, a commitment rather than a set of explanations" (Williams 2008b). Thus:

> that very structure requires some comprehensive energy at another level that sustains it as what it is. And because that comprehensive energy at another level is not the product of other things, doesn't have a history, isn't the result of processes going on … we are not going to find successful or comprehensive words for it, but can only gaze into what is undoubtedly

mysterious, but not mysterious in a way which simply says this is a puzzle somebody one day might solve (Williams 2007a).

In terms of the overall aims of Christian public discourse, such claims, which many secularists would regard as little more than obfuscation, are not simply a case of unreflective ambiguity, or evasion. Rather, they signify a definite strategic maneuver; a means of circumventing any thorny arguments about evidence by denying the validity of the very notion that "God," and hence by extension claims made on the basis of faith, can be understood in rationalist and evidential terms. Moreover, reprising the theme of an aggressive secular assault, and of the theological and hermetically sealed nature of Enlightenment thought, it is also asserted that any attempt to take issue with the above formulation and to impose any uniformity of criteria on religious groups in the public sphere is itself a form of discrimination. As Theos (2006, 28) maintain, "religious participation within the public square must accommodate itself to public reason, but public reason must be willing to accommodate itself to religious participation." Religious bodies and actors, then, should be willing to adjust their reasoning and language "to what is currently acknowledged as the norm in public discourse," although, at the same time, "should also be willing to challenge that norm, questioning axioms, confronting arguments and asking all parties, irrespective of their public identities, to justify their faith-based positions." Thus:

> there remains a wider question about who sets the terms of public discourse. Who defines what public reason is? We deceive ourselves if we say that public reason can be truly neutral … and not just because certain people deem certain texts to be revelatory and others don't … Who decides what constitutes a proper political reason?

On this, Murphy-O'Connor (2007c) proposes a similar argument, rejecting any notion of "the establishment of norms that everyone must accept," and asserting instead the need to provide "space in which this conviction can be respected in the public sector." "[B]eing secular," he asserts, "does not mean closing down the space in which religious conviction and motivation can shape and contribute to the common good." And so, too, is the point made by Williams. Despite claiming that "[r]eligious groups may organize themselves however they choose in private life, but they must enter public society accepting liberal principles" (Williams 2007b, 53), the reality is that the Archbishop remains critical

of the liberal secular world view, taking issue with "[t]he tempting idea that there is always an adequate definition of what everyone will recognise as public and reasonable argument" (Williams 2006).

CONCLUSIONS

In their efforts to justify and legitimize a role for the Christian faith in the public sphere, Christian actors and organizations in the UK assert and adhere to a coherent public discourse. This is based on a common context of decline and secularization, and a common analysis of the most appropriate forms of argument to deploy in response. Outlining the core elements of this discourse, and the way in which its nodal points of argument combine to promote an overarching political objective, offers a useful initial framework for building a deeper and broader understanding of the public discourse of religion more generally. The above analysis thus raises a number of important issues for further research. It would be particularly useful, for example, to establish whether or not there are any common elements in the challenges that are faced by Christianity in the UK and those that are faced by other religious faiths, both in the UK and in other states; whether there are any common elements of discourse that exist between separate religions in different national contexts; and what factors might account for any similarities and differences that may be observed. Consideration of whether or not there are any grounds for establishing a common public discourse among religious faiths as a whole also remains a crucial question, as does the issue of whether there are any inherent compartmentalization between faiths and locales, and, if so, whether this leads instead to a patchwork of separate and mutually exclusive "islands" of religious discourse. The answers to these questions, or at least research into attempting to provide the answers, will go a long way to furthering our understanding of what is one of the most important dynamics of our time.

Although this Endeavour is not one that is likely to be completed with any degree of rapidity, the foregoing analysis of Christianity in the UK nevertheless has important implications for the ongoing debate over the involvement of religion in the public sphere. While consideration of the terms of religious participation has typically turned on issues such as "reason," "fairness," and "equality" (however they may be defined), and on questions of how a political framework based on these lines could be devised (e.g., Audi and Wolterstorff 1997; Rawls 1997;

Dworkin 2006; Habermas 2006), the above examination highlights the real tensions that exist between secular arguments for representation and those that are advanced by Christian public discourse based on claims of a unique epistemological status. Given the incompatible nature of these two positions, especially given the denial of evidentially-based norms by the latter, it is highly unlikely that these tensions will be simply or easily resolved any time soon. If they are found to be a feature of religious discourse beyond the confines of Christianity in the UK, then debates over the public role of faith are only likely to become more fractious as time goes on.

NOTES

1. In a British Social Attitudes Survey conducted in the same year, 41% of the population declared they as having no religion (see http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/esds/variables/bsa/bsa4615/religion/). Methodological flaws in the census, such as requiring all questions to be answered by the head of the household, are also thought to have skewed the results. See Voas and Bruce (2004); National Secular Society (2005).

2. On the tension between the claim that Christianity deserves a role in the public sphere due to its deeply entrenched position in British life, and the claim that it needs protecting from marginalization, see Bartley (2008).

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