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The Militant Strain:
An Analysis of Anti-Secular Discourse in Britain

ABSTRACT

Issues about the relationship between the religious and the secular have become increasingly prominent in recent years. In Britain, one of the central themes around this topic has been the emergence and propagation by leading religious and political figures of a concerted anti-secular discourse. This warns of the dangers posed by a militant, aggressive and intolerant form of secularism that is said to be driven by an ideological desire to force religion out of the public square, representing a clear threat to religious freedoms and social morality. This discourse has been shaped by a number of interrelated causal dynamics, but the religious and political influences involved differ substantially. Respectively, these relate to on-going processes of secularisation and the increasing use of identity politics, set against the changing capacities of the British state and the electoral considerations of the Conservative party.

Introduction: Spheres of influence

The boundary between the religious and the secular is intrinsically political. The forms taken by this division determine the extent and the terms of religious engagement in the public sphere, and shape a variety of factors including matters of public policy, debates around freedom of speech, issues around multiculturalism, security, and the use of medical and scientific technologies. The demarcation between the religious and the secular is also variable, porous and highly contested; embodying deep-seated power relations and being constructed, maintained and reproduced by a variety of social, cultural and political forces. With the public influence of religion having experienced something of a resurgence since the latter decades of the twentieth century, these themes have been a source of increasingly evident tension in many parts of the world.

The relationship between the religious and the secular has been the subject of much scholarly debate. Among the central issues involved here include the normative merits of secularism (e.g. Rawls, 1997; Modood, 2010; Habermas, 2011; Taylor, 2011); the conceptual validity of the religious/secular dichotomy itself (e.g. Fitzgerald, 1997); institutional relations between religion and the state (e.g. Fox, 2006; Madeley, 2009); processes of secularisation (e.g. Casanova, 1994; Norris and Inglehart, 2004); as well as the influence of religion on a variety of particular issues such as voting behaviour, party systems, social capital and political engagement (e.g. Wuthnow, 2002; Kalyvas and Kersbergen, 2010; Minkenberg 2010; Gu and Bomhoff, 2012).

One area that has been relatively overlooked within these debates, but one that is of critical importance for understanding secular-religious dynamics, is the use of public discourse. As the principal means by which actors seek to persuade public opinion and to frame the terms and content of public debate, the issue of public discourse represents a key site of contestation, engaging attempts to promote and legitimise – and, conversely, to invalidate and

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undermine – a variety of objectives, behaviours and courses of action. In this way, the use of public discourse is a central part of the exercise, reproduction and legitimation of political power (for example see Fairclough, 2000; Wodak, 2009).

Scholarly analyses of the use of public discourse in the context of religious-secular relations, though, remain limited. While debates around secularism and religion attract a high level of attention, studies into the issue of public discourse are few in number, and have centred on a small number of topics. Most research in this area has centred on developments in the United States, either examining the discourse of religious groups in general (e.g. Lichterman, 2008; Knutsen, 2011) or its use by the broader Christian Right movement (e.g. Jelen, 2005). Research into the use of public discourse in Britain has primarily focused on debates around the impact of homosexual issues (e.g. Hunt, 2007) or on wider attempts by religious organisations to legitimise a role for faith in the public sphere in a more general sense (e.g. Kettell, 2009).

A core theme in recent debates around the relationship between the religious and the secular in Britain has been the emergence of a vigorous anti-secular discourse. Propagated by leading religious and political figures, this claims that a militant, aggressive and intolerant form of secularism is seeking to drive faith out of the public square, posing a serious threat to religious freedoms and endangering the moral health of the nation. The purpose of this paper is to examine the conditions underpinning the rise and development of this anti-secular discourse, exploring some of the possible reasons why it has emerged at this particular point in time, and why it has assumed the specific form that it has. The explanation for this centres largely on two overlapping, but nonetheless divergent sets of interests: religious and party political. Key issues for the former involve the challenges posed by secularisation and the dynamics of identity politics in promoting a greater role for faith in the public sphere. For the

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latter, the main objectives and motivating factors are based around the changing nature of governance and the electoral fortunes of the Conservative party.
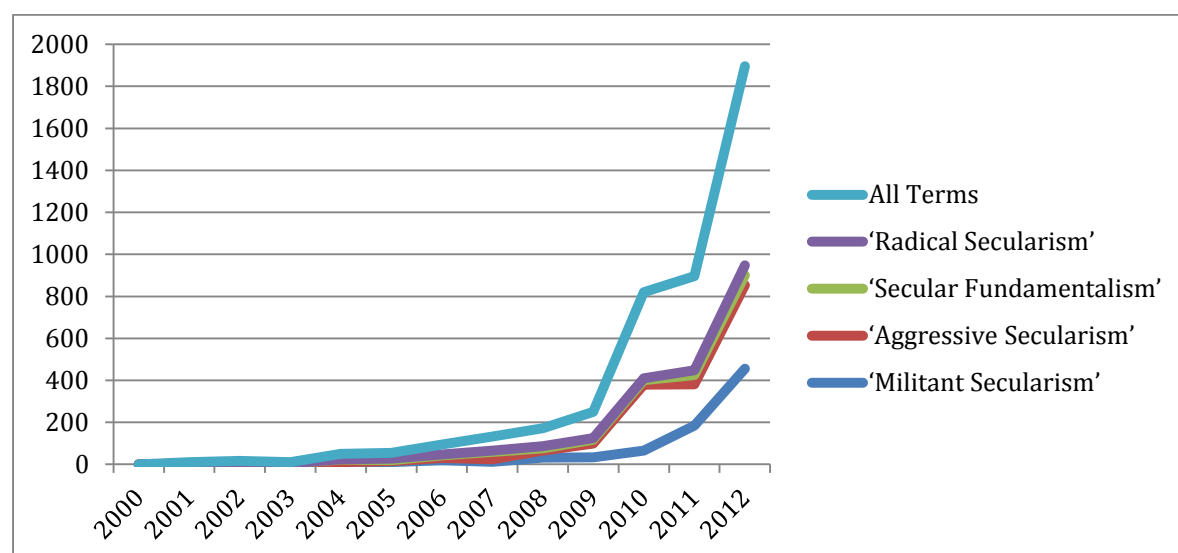
Barbarians at the gates?

In Britain, recent debates about the role of religion in the public sphere have been marked by the emergence of an avowedly anti-secular discourse. Propagated by a range of leading religious and political figures, this claims that religion (and Christianity in particular) is being marginalised and forced out of the public square by a militant, aggressive and intolerant brand of secularism. Presented as posing a serious threat to religious freedoms as well as to the moral health of the nation, militant secularism is said to be fuelled by an ideological cocktail of anti-religious sentiments, combined (somewhat paradoxically) with politically correct concerns about the rights and sensitivities of minority social groups, most notably Muslims and homosexuals. Driving this, it is claimed, are a collection of actors and organisations, foremost amongst which include secular cause groups (principally the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association), and high-profile public intellectuals, such as Richard Dawkins and AC Grayling. Left-leaning sections of the media, as well as elements within the judiciary and organisations such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission, are often highlighted too.

The intensity of this discourse has increased since the turn of the century. Although there is no simple way to measure its prevalence with any degree of detail or accuracy, one useful indicator, to the extent that most public discourse is now reflected through the prism of electronic media, is the frequency with which key phrases relating to anti-secular concerns appear in internet search results. In contrast to software designed to search media outputs, such as LexisNexis, internet search data covers a wide range of outlets and forms of public discourse, including traditional media, but also a variety of other sites such as blogs, forums

and social networks. While this method is far from perfect (being shaped, amongst other things, by the algorithms of the particular search engine used, as well as by the continually expanding nature of the internet itself), the exercise nevertheless provides a useful barometer, albeit a rough and impressionistic one, for the growth of anti-secular discourse. Examining key terms and phrases in anti-secular discourse using advanced search tools provided by Google (which is unique among major search engines for allowing data to be filtered by region and date) reveals substantial growth in their use, particularly from the mid-point of the decade. The terms 'secular fundamentalism' and 'radical secularism', for example, show a moderate and uneven rate of increase, while references to 'militant secularism' rose from a total of just 10 search results in 2005 to 455 in 2012, only slightly ahead of 'aggressive secularism', the use of which grew from 5 to 398 hits over the same period. The figures for all four terms combined show an increase from 0 results in 2000, to 27 in 2005 and 948 in 2012 (see Chart 1).[1]

Chart 1: The growth of anti-secular discourse in Britain

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[1] Although these figures also include outputs produced by people opposed to the use of terms such as 'militant secularism', they are nonetheless indicative of the extent to which debates around the use of such terms has grown in recent years.

The growth of anti-secular sentiments underpinning this discourse can be seen in other ways. A 2009 opinion poll conducted by ComRes found that 58% of Christians felt that living according to their faith in Britain had become more difficult compared to five years ago, with this figure rising to 66% when the timeframe was extended to two decades (Premier Christian Media, 2011). A recent survey by the Evangelical Alliance (2012), Britain's largest umbrella group for evangelical Christians, found that 77% of evangelicals thought that it was becoming harder to live by the Christian faith, and a 2010 poll revealed that 93% of Christians believed (60% strongly) that religion (and Christianity in particular) was being marginalised in Britain (ComRes, 2010). Evidence given to an inquiry into Christian experiences in Britain conducted by the cross-party group, Christians in Parliament, shows similar results. Of the total number of organisations to give evidence to the inquiry, 73% (22 out of 30 respondents) cited 'religious freedom' as a pressing issue, far ahead of the second and third placed issues of 'family' (with 46%), and 'life issues' and 'charity' (with 30% jointly). A majority of respondents (56%) also said that Christians in Britain were being marginalised, and 50% claimed that they were being 'discriminated against' (calculated from Christians in Parliament, 2012). Alongside this, a study of religious claims made in the British media from 2000-2010 found a growing number of Christian claims from the middle of the decade expressing the view that religion was being progressively side-lined. The majority of all media claims made by Christians throughout the latter half of the decade centred on cases of alleged discrimination on issues relating to employment (Stuart and Ahmed, 2012: 17, 35).

The language of anti-secular discourse has been promoted by a number of high-profile public figures and groups. Amongst the most notable of these include members of the Church of

England, such as the former-Archbishops of Canterbury, Rowan Williams (2012) and George Carey (who warns that secularist forces are 'hollowing out the values of Christianity and driving them to the margins', see Moreton, 2012), the ex-Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir Ali (e.g. Beckford, 2008), and the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu (2008). Leading figures from the Catholic church, such as the Archbishop of Westminster, formerly Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor (2006), and his successor, Vincent Nichols (e.g. Teahan, 2012), have been vocal on the issue too. The ex-leader of the Catholic Church in Scotland, Cardinal Keith O'Brien, has warned that 'aggressive secularism' is trying 'to destroy our Christian heritage and culture and take God from the public square' (BBC News, 2011).

Beyond the leading national churches, a variety of religious cause groups have also been active proponents of anti-secular discourse. Key organisations here include the Christian Institute (e.g. 2009), Christian Concern (e.g. 2011), the Jubilee Centre, Anglican Mainstream, Christian Action in Research and Ethics, and the Evangelical Alliance. In a refrain typifying views expressed by most of these groups, the latter asserts 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' (2006: 91). Beyond Christianity, proclamations about the dangers of militant secularism have also been issued by senior figures from other faiths, the most notable of which, perhaps, has been the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks (e.g. 2010).

The use of anti-secular discourse has also been strongly promoted by figures in British political life. The ex-Prime Minister, Tony Blair, now head of his own Faith Foundation, has claimed that religion is 'under attack' from 'aggressive secularism' (Blair, 2008), and similar sentiments have been expressed by a variety of MPs from across the political spectrum, including Peter Bone, Frank Field, Edward Leigh, Nadine Dorries, David Lammy, Fiona Bruce and Mark Pritchard, who has persistently warned against the growing threat of

'Christianophobia' (e.g. *Hansard* 2/12/07 Col.255). The Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, has also warned of the apparent dangers posed by a 'secularist agenda' (NSS, 2012).

The most notable political support for anti-secular discourse, however, has come from Conservative members of the current Coalition government. One of the staunchest advocates here has been Baroness Warsi, the ex-Co-Chairman of the Conservative Party and one of Britain's highest-profile Muslims. Warning that faith in Britain is being 'sidelined, marginalised and downgraded', Warsi (2012) has railed that 'militant secularisation' is 'attempting to remove all trace of religion from culture, history and public discourse', and claims that '[i]n order to encourage social harmony, people need to feel stronger in their religious identities'. Making the same point is the Communities and Local Government Secretary, Eric Pickles. Accusing the previous New Labour governments of having allowed 'so-called equality laws to undermine the fundamental right of freedom of religion', Pickles (2010) attacks an 'aggressive school of secularism' for having 'marginalised faith groups in this country'. The theme extends to the apex of government itself. Insisting that Britain remains 'a Christian country' and deriding secularism as a position of 'moral neutrality', the Prime Minister, David Cameron (2011) maintains that 'it is easier for people to believe and practise other faiths when Britain has confidence in its Christian identity'.

Reflecting these assertions, in recent years key elements of government policy have promoted a greater role for religion in the public square. Much of this was initiated by the New Labour administrations, which placed a strong emphasis on supporting faith groups as a source of social cohesion, leading, *inter alia*, to the establishment of a Faith Communities Unit in the Home Office and to the creation and expansion of 'faith schools' across the country. While the policies of the Coalition have not been entirely one sided (a point exemplified by the on-going controversy over same-sex marriage), the overall tendency has also been towards favouring a greater public role for religion. Notable measures here have included the creation

of a Minister for Faith and Communities (currently Baroness Warsi), an extension to the faith schools programme (via the creation of free schools and academies), and, most prominently, the involvement of faith-based organisations in the provision of welfare services through the auspices of the 'Big Society' (Kettell, 2012).

The emergence and development of anti-secular discourse in Britain has been driven by a number of interrelated causal dynamics. These involve both domestic and international factors, and have been shaped by religious and political influences. Yet while these factors may overlap at various points, the core interests and motivations behind the promotion of anti-secular discourse by religious and political actors are substantially divergent. The principal concerns of the former relate to the increasing use of identity politics and to problems posed by on-going processes of secularisation. For the latter, the changing capacities of the British state and the electoral considerations of the Conservative party are paramount. The following sections explore these points in more detail.

Religious interests

A principal objective underpinning the use of anti-secular discourse by religious groups and individuals is to legitimise and promote an active role for faith in the public sphere. One of the central drivers in this has been the growing salience of identity politics. A useful conceptual framework for exploring these issues is the 'social identity approach', which derives from the disciplines of sociology and psychology. This seeks to explain the various links between the cognitive and social realms; centring on relationships between the self, group membership, group processes and intergroup dynamics (see Hornsey, 2008; Smith and Hogg, 2008; Reicher et al, 2010). A key assumption here is that notions of identity are central to understanding human attitudes and behaviours, providing individuals with a set of interpretations and beliefs about the self, the nature of the world and the various

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interrelationships they involve. Much of this is collectively framed. Being shaped and situated in broader socio-cultural contexts, identities are not static or fixed, but involve on-going and open-ended processes of reaffirmation and reconstruction. In this, the role of groups is particularly influential. Although the precise motivations behind group membership vary (Brown, 2000), groups provide essential sites for the development and maintenance of identities; facilitating a sense of belonging and meaning as well as establishing norms for appropriate beliefs and behaviours. In this way, a collective basis for identity provides a focal point around which individuals can coalesce, and forms a motivating factor for the promotion of shared interests based around common themes, issues and concerns (Monroe et al, 2000; Brewer, 2001).

Another key feature of collective identity is a desire to maintain intergroup differentiation. This involves a process of 'depersonalisation', in which the attributes of other individuals are viewed in terms of their own categories of group membership, leading to the fostering of in- and out-group mentalities that accentuate perceived similarities and differences between group members and non-members (Hornsey, 2008; Smith and Hogg, 2008). Sustaining group identity and cohesion requires constant attention, both to monitor the boundary between the group and wider society, as well as to police instances of deviance within the group itself (Vignoles and Moncaster, 2007). These pressures are typically heightened in situations involving uncertainty and/or where a threat to the group and its interests is thought to exist (Ysseldyk et al, 2010).

The successful projection of identity politics rests on a number of factors. These include a strong sense of group commitment, clear identity markers and a collective sense of relative deprivation, all of which are needed to sustain a necessary degree of group motivation (Reicher et al, 2010). Political action in defence of group interests formed on the basis of identity may therefore serve more than one purpose: being directed towards the maintenance

of group boundaries and internal solidarity as well as the influencing of opinions outside the group (Smith and Hogg, 2008).

Typically, collective measures pursued for these ends are framed around demands for recognition, respect for difference and claims for civic and political rights. The earliest forms of self-conscious identity politics, beginning with the new social movements of the 1960s, were based on issues such as race, gender and sexuality, and strove to gain mainstream acceptance for minority concerns and to secure redress for unequal treatment. This reflected a decline in modernist expectations of effecting large-scale change through a transformation of social structures, and denoted a shift towards cultural issues as a terrain of political struggle (Farred, 2000; Bernstein, 2005).

These points are particularly salient in the case of religion. As a driver of group membership based on ontological claims about ultimate truth and meaning, religion provides a particularly potent source of identity and belonging, and significant links have been established between religiosity and in-group bias (e.g. LaBouff et al, 2011). As such, issues of distinctiveness may be especially pressing for religious groups, and external threats may be felt more keenly than in groups based on other sources of identity.

Although trends in religious identity remain difficult to map out with clarity and precision, a notable feature of public discourse in recent years has been the growing tendency of religious groups to frame their political strategies around identity-based themes (Stone and Muir, 2007; Muir and Wetherell, 2010). This is clearly evident in the case of anti-secular discourse, which is deeply rooted in a language of minority group rights based on claims of marginalisation and discrimination, as well as related demands for equal recognition and support for religious freedoms.

One of the central drivers in the use of anti-secular discourse by religious groups and individuals has been a perception that faith in Britain is under threat. This has been driven

itself by a mix of domestic and transnational developments. The strategic emphasis on a rhetoric of rights, equalities and freedoms by the Christian Right in the United States (Jelen, 2005), for example, has provided a template for many faith-based organisations in Britain to follow, even if this has not yet led to the emergence of a US-style 'religious right' (Theos 2013) in this country, and repeated expressions of anti-secular sentiments from the Vatican, including a high-profile declaration by the Pope against 'aggressive forms of secularism' made during a Papal visit in 2010, have further kindled impressions of religion under siege (Jones et al, 2010). So too has the emergence, from the middle of the decade, of a more politically activist and publicity-attracting form of atheism, known as 'New Atheism'. Centred principally in the United States, but also making headlines in Britain (due, not least, to the activities of high-profile public intellectuals such as Richard Dawkins), this has avowedly sought to attack all forms of religious belief, and to undermine religion in the private as well as the public sphere (McAnulla, 2012).

Accompanying these developments, the legal entrenchment of human rights norms, along with legal provisions to promote the growth of civil liberties at both state and international levels, has been particularly influential. The European Convention on Human Rights and the 1998 Human Rights Act have been critical here, as has been the introduction of legislative measures (particularly from the mid-point of the decade) such as the 2003 Employment Equality Regulations, the 2004 Civil Partnership Act, the 2007 Equality Act (Sexual Orientation Regulations) and the 2010 Equality Act (see Stychin, 2004; Hunt 2007). These provisions have led to a series of high-profile court cases alleging employment discrimination on religious grounds (four of which have recently been heard – and three rejected – by the European Court of Human Rights), as well as a recent High Court decision against the inclusion of prayers as part of the formal business of local council meetings. One result of this has been to create the impression of a competing hierarchy of rights, in which those of

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Christians are said to have become subordinate to those of other social groups, such as ethnic minorities and homosexuals, who are thought to have successfully utilised campaigns rooted in identity politics to advance their own sectional interests.[2]

Underpinning such anxieties, and another core driver of the use of anti-secular discourse, has been the challenges posed by ongoing processes of secularisation (especially long-term trends of religious decline) and the increasingly pluralised nature of British society. As the Church of England admits, the 'exceptional challenge' posed by secularisation makes it all the more important to devise more effective 'strategies and innovations for growth', and 'to counter attempts to marginalise Christianity' (2011). A similar point is made by the Christian think-tanks, Theos, which has called for Christians to openly pursue the aim 'of putting God "back" into the public domain' (Spencer 2006), and Ekklesia (2006), which 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'.

These desires are exemplified in the approach of faith-based organisations to the Coalition government's Big Society agenda. According to the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Council, this offers nothing less than 'a chance to "shift the dominant narrative" about the role of religion in public life' (2010: 14). In the same vein, the Evangelical Alliance (2010) has hailed the Big Society as 'an immense opportunity' for Christian involvement in social affairs, while Christian Concern (2010) maintain that it offers 'potentially exciting opportunities for churches and other Christian groups'. The Jubilee Centre claims that the Big Society provides 'huge opportunities' for churches to expand their activities in Britain's social life (Brandon, 2011).

The scale of the problem facing Christian groups is well revealed by official census statistics. These show that the proportion of the adult population in England and Wales describing

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[2] The final ruling from the European Court of Human Rights can be found at:
http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-115881

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themselves as Christian fell from 71.7% in 2001 to 59.3% in 2011, while the proportion describing themselves as having no religion increased from 14.8% to 25.1% over the same period (Office for National Statistics, 2011). Other surveys have produced similar results. Figures from British Social Attitudes (2012) showed that the proportion of British adults describing themselves as belonging to no religion rose from 31% in 1983 to 50% in 2010, while the proportion describing themselves as Christian fell from 66% to 44%. Moreover, just 14% of the adult population reported attending a place of worship at least once a week, just 9% attended at least once a month, and 56% never attended at all. According to an Ipsos-Mori (2011) poll of people identifying as Christian in the 2001 census, just 30% professed to have strong religious beliefs, with 29% believing but not strongly and with 20% being either non-religious or 'spiritual'.

Negative public sentiments about a public role for religion are also common. Research conducted by YouGov-Cambridge (2012) found that 71% of people thought that religious leaders should not be able to influence government decisions (8% opposed), while 81% felt that religious beliefs should remain a private affair (with 6% against). Furthermore, 30% of respondents wanted Christianity to have less political influence than it currently wields, with just 16% wanting more. These adverse perceptions have been shaped by a variety of factors. Amongst these include controversies around faith schools, tensions over multiculturalism (principally involving issues of immigration and terrorism), events such as the on-going child abuse scandal in the Catholic church, as well as the problems associated with religious violence, witnessed most vividly in the attacks of 9/11 and in episodic outbreaks of religiously-shaped community unrest, such as that which has scarred Northern Ireland. Divergence attitudes on a range of issues on which mainstream public opinion is generally more progressive than the religious average, such as equalities legislation, medical research involving human embryos, assisted suicide and same-sex marriage, has been detrimental too.

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The particular interests of religious groups are not homogenous - reflecting a divergent array of theological standpoints, memberships and institutional structures - and groups mobilise to further their interests in a variety of different ways, using a range of methods and strategies (Leustean, 2011). The issues confronted here, however, are common to most religious organisations in Britain, and pose a challenge to their interests in a broad and more general fashion that crosses religious and denominational boundaries. In this context, the use of anti-secular discourse represents a collective response to these difficulties, and marks an attempt to promote a greater role for faith in general in the public square. Framing the challenge around themes of discrimination and the defence of minority rights is useful here in a number of ways. Establishing a sense of injustice provides a means of establishing group cohesion and solidarity, as well as a basis for Christian activism, while basing an appeal around the values of group rights, liberties and perceptions of fairness, is one that promises to resonate with the concerns and language of the wider public given the salience of human rights norms and issues of identity (Knutson, 2011; von Stuckrad, 2013).

Such an approach, however, is not without its problems too. For one, framing a defence of religious interests on anti-secular discourse entails a subsuming of possible tensions between differing groups and denominations within a broad 'Christian' (or, more ambiguous still, 'faith') identity. While the dangers of 'militant secularism' may be effective in creating the impression of a common threat, it remains to be seen whether this can provide a sufficient basis on which to sustain a sense of unity between a diverse range of faith groups, or whether intergroup tensions, desires for differentiation and the need to pursue individual group interests will come to the fore. Also problematic are the purposes for which religious groups often seek to emphasise identity issues. While the originating impulse behind the development of identity politics was to establish a public voice for marginalised sections of society, the principal motivating factor underpinning its deployment by faith groups has been

to combat a threat to the weakening socio-cultural influence of religion. In this context, the use of anti-secular discourse represents an attempt to co-opt the methods of identity politics as a means of defending established interests, rather than challenging the status quo. As such, the extent to which such claims will resonate positively with the wider public also remain open to question. Negative attitudes relating to the public influence of religion are a portentous indicator here, and, indeed, moves to secure a more prominent role for religion, whether through anti-secular campaigning or public policy measures such as the Big Society, risk opening-up a host of potentially toxic areas on issues such as gender equality, sexuality and reproductive rights.

A still greater potential problem for religious proponents of anti-secular discourse involves the very nature of this discourse itself; namely, that promoting religion with a language of civic and human rights itself denotes the use and acceptance of norms and patterns for public discourse that are themselves secularised. One problem this poses is that putting the case for religion in such a way effectively concedes the point that in order to influence wider opinion, public discourse needs to be framed around avowedly liberal secular values; a tacit acknowledgment of the fact that religious views no longer command much influence among large swathes of the populace. In the same breath, claims that religious groups need to be accorded the same formal rights and equalities as other social interests themselves highlight the special interest character of religious groups, and provide no obvious reason as to why they should continue to be treated differently to other social interests in the enjoyment of special political and legal privileges.

Party political interests

Issues of identity are also central to the promotion of anti-secular discourse by political figures. However, in contrast to the motivations driving its deployment by religious groups

and actors, the primary causes here are rooted in a number of concerns based on issues of governing and electoral strategy. These are set against a backdrop of broader social, political and economic changes that have occurred during the past few decades.

The key transformations in this respect have involved processes of globalisation, privatisation and deregulation. Increased interdependency and the growing influence of market forces have been associated with a diminution of state power, a loss of governing capacities and a narrowing conception of the 'political', raising questions about the meaning and relevance of notions such as state sovereignty and democracy. One of the main impacts on the British political system (commonly described in terms of an emergent era of 'governance) centres on the institutional framework for policy-making and implementation. In this, government drives to transfer decision-making responsibilities to non- and quasi-governmental agencies, ostensibly driven by technocratic concerns to increase efficiency and responsiveness, have been accompanied by the development and extension of sub- and supra-national organisations, such as legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as the European Union, leading to a multi-layering of institutional structures. Taken together, these changes have produced an increasingly pluralised and complex policy-making environment, encompassing a greater variety of actors and agencies, but have also contributed to a growing sense of public disenchantment with the political process as the ability to shape important decisions and exercise democratic accountability becomes ever-more circumscribed (on this these, see e.g. Richards and Smith, 2002).

These issues have been compounded by extensive social changes. The intensification of market pressures has fuelled a shift towards a post-industrial, individualistic consumer culture, replete with heightened economic insecurity, widening levels of inequality and a rising degree of social fragmentation and dislocation (Hickman et al, 2008). Combining with this, tensions around issues of social and cultural pluralism, driven not least by immigration,

the promotion of multiculturalism and the growth of nationalist sentiments within the United Kingdom, have added to the strains on Britain's social fabric, fostering concerns around social cohesion, eroding a sense of overarching national identity and creating problems for the legitimacy of state authority itself (Stone and Muir, 2007).

In echoes of the theme taken up by many religious groups, one way in which recent governments have sought to deal with these problems has also been through recourse to identity politics. A core aspect of this, in contrast to earlier policies of multiculturalism which sought to encourage a sense of specific cultural identities, has involved efforts to foster the idea of 'Britishness' with the intention of inculcating a sense of shared national solidarity and common values – an approach pursued with some vigour by the governments of Tony Blair and, especially, Gordon Brown (Malik, 2005; Muir, 2007). While the idea of Britishness has been typically based on the invocation of ambiguous qualities such as 'tolerance', 'fairness' and 'justice', and while the religious component of British national identity has diminished since the late Victorian era, the notion presented by the Coalition government (particularly its Conservative elements) is infused with the ostensible values and benefits of religious beliefs and practices. In this, Christianity is framed as a core part of British national identity, providing a repository of shared values and furnishing a sense of community and belonging that brings with it a number of important social and cultural benefits. Conversely, this framing of Britishness invariably has the effect of setting the aims and objectives of secularism in a tone that is decidedly 'un-British', a construction that itself helps in determining the sense of an 'other' against which 'Britishness' itself might be defined and consolidated (Grube, 2011).

Emphasising a connection between Britishness and Christianity also provides particular benefits for the Conservative party, forming an anchor for its ideological beliefs of supporting traditional values and promoting small state politics. Reasserting conventional

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bases of social order, and linking the Conservatives to symbolic representations of national identity, plays directly to heartland constituencies as well as to assertions about the need to deal with the social consequences of New Labour profligacy (exemplified in party slogans such as 'Broken Britain' and the 'Big Society'), thereby helping to create the impression of a coherent governing narrative imbued with a wider sense of moral purpose. Promoting the idea of national solidarity helps in this endeavour too by directing attention away from divisive, class-based economic issues, as does the commitment to enable religious groups to become more active in the supply of public services – a provision that facilitates the Coalition's programme of public spending cuts while ameliorating the worst excesses of state retrenchment by leaving faith-based organisations free to fill-in some of the gaps left behind (Kettell, 2012).

Attacking secularism and promoting a stronger role for faith in the public realm offers other benefits as well. Not least of these is the potential for broadening the Conservative's appeal amongst religious sections of the electorate. While processes of partisan dealignment and the rise of value-based, issue voting have led to significant shifts in the nature of electoral competition in countries across Western Europe, and while processes of secularisation have undermined the overt social influence of religious beliefs and institutions, the salience of religious cleavages remains considerable. Religious affiliation continues to be a key factor underpinning patterns of voting behaviour, and the general trend – that members or affiliates of a religious group are more likely to vote for parties of the centre-right (and that, conversely, the religiously unaffiliated are more likely to support centre-left or liberal parties) – is consistent across the continent (see Knutsen, 2004; Van der Brug et al, 2009; Minkenberg, 2010; van der Brug, 2010; Raymond, 2011).

The influence of religion on party choice in Britain is less pronounced than in most other European countries (Knutsen, 2004), and the general centre right/left trend is filtered through

the specific lens of the British political context, but several broad trends can nonetheless be discerned. Affiliates of the Church of England (to which around 40% of all Christians in Britain belong) are typically more likely to vote Conservative than Labour, while the reverse is typically true for Roman Catholics (which comprise around a fifth of all Christians in Britain) and other Christian denominations, especially those from black and ethnic minority groups. Members of non-Christian faiths (currently around 12% of Britain's religiously affiliated population) also tend to be Labour supporting (Kotler Berkowitz, 2001; Heath et al 2011; also see Sobolewska, 2005).

These trends can also be seen in figures from the 2010 general election. These show that 45.5% of Church of England members voted for the Conservatives, compared to 25.5% for Labour and 20.5% for the Liberal Democrats. In contrast, two fifths (39.9%) of Roman Catholics voted Labour, compared to 29.3% for the Conservatives and 23.2% for the Liberal Democrats. Figures for Christians from other denominations are more even, but still show a leaning towards the Conservatives: at 32.6%, compared to 29.9% for Labour and 26% for the Liberal Democrats (Clements, 2010).

The broader associations between religion and voting are further supported by opinion poll research. According to a recent survey conducted by YouGov (2012), more than half (56%) of Conservative voters in 2010 considered themselves to be religious, compared to 43% of those who voted Labour and 35% of those who voted Liberal Democrat. Research undertaken for the Conservative peer, Lord Ashcroft (2012), confirms the picture. This found that more than two-thirds (67%) of people intending to vote Conservative at the next general election in 2015 described themselves as Christian, compared to 53% of those intending to vote Labour and 52% of those supporting the Liberal Democrats. In contrast, the figures for people describing themselves as having no religion were 27% Conservative and 38% each for Labour and the Lib Dems. Similar findings, if not as pronounced, have been produced by

Populus (2013), according to which 71% of prospective Conservative voters considered themselves to be religious, compared to 62% of those intending to vote Labour.

Against this backdrop, the promotion of anti-secular discourse, combined with calls for a greater role for faith in the public square and an emphasis on the Christian basis of British national identity, has the potential to produce electoral benefits. Along with enthusing traditional Conservative supporters on the right, such a mix is likely to be attractive to voters who believe religion (especially Christianity) to be under threat, and may also appeal to floating or undecided voters with a vague (if only nominal) sense of Christian identity. At the same time, promoting an enhanced role for faith also opens a possible channel for appealing to ethnic minority voters (whose traditional support for the Labour party has been in decline since 1997), supporting Conservative party efforts to broaden their appeal in this direction (Heath et al, 2011).

In addition to this, the use of anti-secular discourse also enables the Conservatives to pursue these objectives without overtly compromising claims to be a reformed, tolerant and diverse organisation, shorn of the 'nasty party' image of yesteryear (McAnulla, 2010). Framing militant secularism as being driven by oversensitivity to the concerns of minority groups provides a 'dog whistle' for right-wing antipathy towards issues such as multiculturalism and political correctness, but the risk that linking Christianity and Britishness will undermine claims of inclusivity is reduced by the parallel assertion that a strong sense of national identity is itself in the best interests of minority groups, since this provides a strong social and cultural framework in which they can feel more secure in their own faith-based identities.

Yet appealing to religious voters in this fashion is not without its risks. One obvious difficulty, given the extent to which secularisation has undermined religious belief in Britain, is that appeals on the basis of religion may only resonate with a progressively declining share of the electorate. A further problem is that it remains uncertain as to what extent the

promotion of faith issues might improve the standing of the Conservative party among ethnic minority voters, the large majority of which continue to support Labour. Figures from the last general election show that more than two-thirds (68%) of ethnic minority voters supported the Labour party, compared to 16% for the Conservatives and 14% for the Liberal Democrats (Sanders et al, 2013, Table 1). A recent poll by Populus (BRIN, 2013) found that 36% of people belonging to non-Christian faiths intended to vote Labour, compared to 16% Conservative, with the gap widening to 58% and 8% when the sample involved Muslims alone. Studies also suggest that there is no difference in the voting motivations of ethnic minorities compared to white voters, and the link between religion and party choice concerning the traditional attachment of ethnic minorities to the Labour party has been questioned. This particular link may owe more to high levels of partisanship and positive valence considerations about Labour deriving from their historical record in addressing issues of discrimination, thus limiting any impact that promoting religion might have (Heath et al, 2011; Sanders et al, 2013).

Another problem in appealing to support from religious groups is the potential this raises for clashes with the modernisation aims of the Conservative party. Indeed, more traditionalist elements within the party, including many religious groups, have viewed any attempts to move in a more socially liberal direction with suspicion, if not outright hostility (e.g. Furness, 2013). The most notable issue here, perhaps, has been the recent controversy over the issue of same-sex marriage. In a clear demonstration of the inconsistencies and tensions involved in trying to pursue a governing strategy based on both traditionalist and progressive appeals, the government's decision to legalise same-sex marriage has strongly antagonised large swathes of religious opinion, alienating many potential supporters on the right and exacerbating the Conservatives' current governing dilemma with regards to the challenge from the UK Independence Party. The point is well borne out in opinion polls on the subject. According to

a survey of Christians conducted by ComRes in October 2011, 57% of respondents claimed that legalising same-sex marriage would make them less likely to vote Conservative at the next general election. According to a recent survey by Populus (BRIN, 2013), the proportion of Christians now intending to vote for the Conservatives at the next national poll has fallen to the same levels as the proportion intending to vote Labour, with the figures standing at 27% and 28% respectively.

Conclusions

The use of anti-secular discourse in Britain has increased markedly during the past decade. Based on the claim that religious freedoms and morality are under threat from a militant, aggressive and intolerant form of secularism, this seeks to promote a greater role for faith in the public square and to delegitimise secular advocacy. The analysis here has centred on two lines of inquiry, considering the key reasons why this discourse has emerged at this point in time, and why it has taken the particular form that it has. This shows that the emergence of anti-secular discourse has been shaped by a number of domestic and transnational factors, but that the interests of the principal religious and political actors involved differ significantly. The former, centring on the declining social and cultural influence of religion, have utilised a language of identity politics framed in terms of rights and freedoms as a means of facilitating group cohesion and appealing to the prevalence of wider secular social norms. The latter, principally driven by the changing nature of governance and the strategic concerns of the Conservative party, have sought to connect anti-secular discourse to notions of 'Britishness' and to try and bolster and extend the Conservatives' electoral appeal. At the same time, assertions of militant secularism are problematic in a number of ways, and the increasingly secular nature of British society provides a particularly high barrier to overcome for those seeking to use this to legitimise a greater role for faith in the public square. Given these

various problems, it is unlikely that the continued use of anti-secular discourse can produce the kinds of results that its proponents might wish to see.

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