

Article

New Interdisciplinary Spaces of Religions and Beliefs in Contemporary Thought and Practice: An Analysis

Christopher Baker ¹ and Adam Dinham ^{2,*}

¹ Theology and Religious Studies, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester CH1 4BJ, UK; chris.baker@chester.ac.uk

² Faiths & Civil Society Unit, Department of Social, Therapeutic and Community Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW, UK

* Correspondence: a.dinham@gold.ac.uk

Academic Editor: Hans Zollner

Received: 11 November 2016; Accepted: 5 January 2017; Published: 24 January 2017

Abstract: This article is rooted in the observation that the 21st century has witnessed a resurgent interest in and a new visibility of religions and beliefs across a range of arts, humanities and social science disciplines, some of which have always focused on religions and beliefs, others are returning to it, while some have no previous tradition of doing so. The article reports on an analysis of these new spaces of interest in religions and beliefs, undertaken through semi-structured interviews with eighteen landmark figures in the study of religion internationally. Points of connection, disconnection and innovation are explored, and the concept of liminality is deployed to explore how understandings of religion, belief and the secular are in a process of being re-imagined within academic disciplines. By considering new thresholds and debates as they are emerging, the article concludes that there are opportunities to research and conceive of the role of religions and beliefs as an interdisciplinary exercise, which are yet to be addressed and which reflect the need to re-imagine how religions and beliefs are broadly conceived and how different disciplines engage with each other.

Keywords: religion; interdisciplinary; secular; post-secular

Many have observed in the last ten years a renewed visibility of religions and beliefs in the public sphere [1]. This has been opened up by Habermas' proposal that "a postsecular self-understanding of society as a whole in which the vigorous continuation of religion in a continually secularizing environment must be reckoned with" [2]. A growing plethora of publications has reflected on this, and versions of this argument, often with surprise that "God is Back" [3]. Others have contested the notion that God, religions and beliefs ever went away, drawing a distinction between the absence of public talk about religion on the one hand, and continuing religion on the other [4–6]. Some have attempted to reassert post-religious positions from highly normative stances, as in the group of "New Atheists" [7]. Bruce has suggested that what is underway is merely a last gasp before secularist predictions of the decline of religions and beliefs to a vanishing point are finally realized, at least in the West [8].

An apparently increasing prevalence of conversation about religions and beliefs across a widening range of disciplines and practices prompts the work reported here. Despite this prevalence, there has been little systematic analysis applied to the new spaces which are emerging. This work sought to induce an analysis of new thinking that is taking place simultaneously across a broad range of disciplines in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences around the increasing significance of the role and impact of religion in public life. A motivating issue is the absence of connection between these emerging discourses, which this project sought to address. There are two interconnecting goals: first, to portray and analyse what leading thinkers from different disciplines are saying about religions and beliefs in the contemporary world; and second, through this to identify the challenge posed by these new spaces in the research about religions and beliefs to how different academic disciplines interact.

The first section of the article explores the preoccupations in contemporary thinking about religions and beliefs as they have emerged in interviews with eighteen thinkers across ten arts, humanities and social science disciplines. Four main areas emerge, each articulated through fields of public policy: welfare; participative governance; cohesion, integration and violence; and equality.

The second section considers what new spaces have opened up. These include new spaces in the study of religions and beliefs within Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) where they have always been located; and their appearance in disciplines outside Theology and Religious Studies. The complexity and variety of these spaces and discourses is framed within the concept of liminality. This is used in a limited way to draw attention to the observation that this is a moment of change—a threshold—in which the relationship between disciplines may be ripe for renegotiation as they engage and re-engage internally and with each other with issues concerning religions and beliefs in new ways.

1. Liminality as the New Norm?

The global West appears to find itself in a liminal space in relation to religions and beliefs. It is suggested that public talk about religion continues to echo normative Western assumptions of the 20th century about a secular trajectory and a post-religious age [9], while at the same time those norms and assumptions are being challenged by widespread observations of a new presence and visibility of religions and beliefs. This has been described as a problem of religious literacy [10], in which there is a gap between a poor quality of conversation about religions and beliefs alongside their growing prevalence and visibility. Others are calling this liminal space “post-secularity” [11–15], asking whether we are entering uncharted territory where the forces of secularisation (as a social phenomenon associated with modernising), secularism (as a normative political and cultural position) and a newly-emergent and sometimes assertive religion have to re-learn how to share the public sphere. Others recognize the phenomena but critique or reject the term “post-secular” as inadequate to the complexity they perceive of simultaneously concurrent processes both of continuing secularity *and* continuing religions and beliefs [16].

At the same time, Charles Taylor refers to “unquiet frontiers” on the borders of modernity. The outcome of “a secular age” Taylor suggests, has been the consistent stripping out of “the language of transcendence” [17]. It has been suggested that this has been replaced with a more immanent narrative of individual salvation through consumer culture, albeit often dressed up in “religious form” [18]. Taylor suggests that many people are instinctively dissatisfied with this thin vision of human life, and the pressures that are involved in aspiring to it, and are seeking instead various forms of reconnection: what Landy and Saler describe as a “re-enchantment of the world” [19]. This search spills out into a multitude of personal positions that represent a “super nova” of possibilities ([17], p. 299) which are not likely to be met by old-style authoritarian and institutional religion, but which do not rule out the vicarious influence of such institutions in articulating a vision of a more communitarian and decent society.

These are challenging observations to a public sphere which appears to over-simplify the context, resulting in a continuation of outmoded assumptions about a simple secular trajectory. Neither Habermas nor Taylor offer a road map out of these liminal spaces. Post-secularity, itself, is highly contested, and even the idea that there is another side of the threshold is questioned. A state of constant change and fluidity becomes the only norm, driven by perpetual innovation and globalization.

Vasquez describes this relentless energy and change in a metaphor inspired by Deleuze: “Globalisation’s relentless dialectic of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation” he claims, has “released religion from the constraints of the personal sphere and the container of the secular nation-state” [20]. Woodhead agrees that the permanent fluidity and accelerated processes of change associated with globalised capitalism have seen religion in the 21st century West increasingly decoupled from the weakened nation state and instead ever more aligned to consumer capitalism and the media [21]. She asserts, “There is no question of a ‘return’ to religion”, by which she means a mindset and social order rooted in Christendom, with “state-like, religious bureaucracies and

hierarchies of leadership" ([21], p. 26). But neither is it clear what such a post-Christendom looks like. Instead, Woodhead suggests, the present era is one in which "old certainties were lost and a small number of old gods lost authority and a vast number of new ones arose to take their place" ([21], p. 27). At this threshold, what new intellectual spaces are shaping the way in which religions and beliefs are imagined?

2. Methodology

The research was undertaken between September 2014 and November 2016, in four stages. It began with "landmark" semi-structured interviews with leading critical thinkers in the study of religions and beliefs ($n = 18$). These were purposively sampled for their prominence in the field, and responders were self-selecting from a larger sample pool. The criteria for their potential inclusion was primarily their global reputation but many of the participants would also be considered to be public intellectuals who both transcend as well as epitomise key thinking in their disciplines, and it was this quality of perspective which we were seeking to engage. Each participant was asked to respond to three questions: how do you characterise the present debate/dialogue concerning religion and the public sphere in your field?; what are the key pinch-points and new insights?; where is the study of religions and beliefs going to go in the next five to ten years? The goal was to hear about current and future intellectual directions otherwise as yet unshared, in addition to those which these thinkers have already placed in the public domain. Each interview was recorded, transcribed and published on the project website [22]. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis [23].

The second stage involved convening a three-day residential colloquium in May 2015 in which a mix of presentations and facilitated discussion were used to put the findings from the landmark interviews in to dialogue with a further multi-disciplinary group of academic experts ($n = 15$). The group included five international participants (from Australia, Canada, Finland, Norway and the USA). In addition, the group was joined by seven doctoral or early-career researchers, selected on the basis of their innovative combining of disciplines in their own studies of religions and beliefs. The disciplines represented were Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Geography, Political Philosophy, Social and Public Policy, Religious Studies, Sociology, and Theology. These were selected on the basis that they represent mainstream disciplinary traditions which we could practically engage in varying mixes, coming from within the Arts and Humanities (as defined by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, which funded the project) or recently observed in an initial literature search to have connected with themes linked to religions and beliefs. Each participant was asked to present on what they (as individual scholars) think about: the 'old' forms of thinking in their field; new spaces; future directions; and to present the state of the art on religions and beliefs in their field, outside their own work. Presentations were one hour each, including thirty minutes for discussion. Every delegate was asked to note 'what they do and don't understand' about what they heard, to be posted in the room to be reflected on throughout the three days. Two world-leading academics (Grace Davie and James Beckford) were invited to act as "rapporteurs" throughout, with the task of giving the group feedback focused on the challenges for interdisciplinarity.

The third phase focused on policy engagement. Eight participants were purposively selected to reflect public policy settings where religion, belief and public policy meet, from the fields of government/civil service, local authorities, faith-based social action, and Councils of Voluntary Service. The group met in a one-day workshop at the House of Lords in the UK Parliament. Participants heard a presentation of findings from the first two phases, followed by discussion in mixed groups representing the four policy settings. Each participant was asked to give a "lightning" presentation of 5–7 min outlining the ways in which religions and beliefs "bite" in their setting. Participants were then invited to identify and prioritise a shortlist of between five and ten practical changes to public policy in relation to religions and beliefs in these policy areas. It is anticipated that these will form the basis of follow-up work to co-produce what emerged as practical resources for public policy settings.

The final phase was an international roadshow to test out how the ideas emerging in a UK context might translate in to public policy contexts elsewhere. This was also intended to draw attention to contingencies in the intellectual and practical application of new spaces of thought. One day events were held in Ottawa, Canada (in May 2016), Oslo, Norway (in June 2016), and Melbourne, Australia (in November 2016). These combined the formats of the colloquia and the policy workshop, to include a presentation of findings from the landmark interviews, and discussion of their translatability, though this time transnationally.

The second, third and fourth phases of the project are not reported here, and will appear in subsequent articles. The focus in this article is on the new intellectual debates which have emerged from the perspective of the landmark interviews. These are reported by discipline. Individual thinkers' perspectives are not distinguished, though it should be noted that not all of the thinkers shared in all of the issues which emerge. For individualized, attributable readings of specific perspectives, the full transcript of each landmark interview has been published on the project website. Some of the new spaces of critical interdisciplinary enquiry that are emerging as a result of this project are then identified as a series of new frontlines. These embryonic spaces will be developed further in the follow-up phases of this research.

3. Findings

A process of theme identification was undertaken in which transcripts were coded following Boyatzis' method for "transforming qualitative data" [23]. This involves the extraction of key elements as they present to the reader, and their organization in to themes which collectivise them. This is repeated until each code has been saturated and there are no remaining elements from the transcripts remaining to be allocated to codes. The lists of saturated codes and their constituent elements were then swapped and each researcher repeated the exercise once more, to establish consonance and address dissonance. Key preoccupations in each discipline emerged from this process and are reported as follows.

4. Anthropology

The Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, France, in January 2015 was a key catalyst for those reflecting on religions and beliefs from the perspective of current anthropological debates. This focused in particular on the issue of violence, but not in relation to extremism so much as violence to religious freedom in the "liberal public square". Whilst extremist violence has attracted most media and policy attention and debate, the questions addressed by anthropologists are more concerned with the nature of the implicit and legitimized violence generated towards minority faiths by the hegemonic assumptions and practices of the liberal democratic nation state. They identify stereotypical and negative assumptions as the constant and daily background noise against which more nuanced and complex views on religious and belief identities struggle to be heard and articulated. The thesis is posed in this space that the West is in danger of losing its ability to conduct a liberal conversation (inclusive and respectful, but also challenging and critical) about the role of religions and beliefs.

In response to this problem, anthropology reminds other disciplines that it comfortably works with a number of different perspectives and disciplines. Anthropology has, in the words of one interviewee, "infused" its own disciplinary approach with those of other traditions, including theology, feminism, Marxism and structuralism:

"So really...the most interesting anthropologists have been those who have been able to either take in or be receptive to ideas from other disciplines...[Most] Anthropologists are aware of this, and not too concerned about boundaries of their discipline".

Meanwhile, a traditional commitment to ethnographic fieldwork is seen as not only contextualising and “breaking open” often dense and abstract debates about “the postsecular” into its lived-out complexities and particularities. It also allows new sorts of questions to emerge that might help break the log-jam of debate in some areas of academia.

“The fact that anthropologists tend to do fieldwork has been important in the way in which it encouraged us to look at the detail in particular, and be open really to what will come so to speak. One doesn’t go into the field with a priori questions, detailed questions. But a willingness to listen and to hear what the people or the place one is going to has to say to one. And in that way I think that one of the most interesting things that has developed in anthropology in religion has been...the willingness to look out for new questions, and not be satisfied with a priori positions”.

This draws attention to what is involved in opening up new spaces of interdisciplinarity about the role of religions and beliefs in a period of change and uncertainty. As the spectrum of lived expressions of religious and non-religious beliefs becomes more apparent through fieldwork, the question is raised as to whether the West can discover more effective forms of co-existence. One interviewee asks:

“Can religious traditions and the language that different people have inherited in different ways from those traditions...contribute to enlightening us in ways that helps us both to resolve and to accommodate each other, but also to challenge each other? To think again rather than to get out of the way. I hope they will be more like that, and that means asking questions about the secular as well as the religious”.

Other anthropological perspectives reported within this project challenge the implied preference for religion as a normative source of moral sentiments, citing evidence of the growth in “no-religion” identities in the West, especially amongst those under the age of 40 who appear to be rejecting institutional Christianity in large numbers. However, the anthropologists interviewed for the project concur with what other academic disciplines associate with the current period, namely the loosening of identities with regard to either traditional or binary religious or secular traditions. Increasing numbers of people seem to be gravitating towards a religiously fuzzy, but politically and civically intentional “middle”.

5. Critical Geography

Several respondents in our interviews highlighted an emerging interest in landscapes and geographies of religions and beliefs within critical geography. It was noted however, that the debate still largely adopts a narrative that sees religious welfare, social care, and justice movements as compensating for the gaps left behind by a retreating state, rather than a phenomenon that is changing the public sphere in its own right. The “spatial” turn within sociology and religious studies based on close examination of the relationship between the material, the spatial and the imagined was noted by several interviewees. They reflected on the increasingly significant role played by religious individuals and communities in the creation of flourishing and resilient localities, especially in contexts of poverty and marginalization. One contributor reflected that the decline of the political left in these communities has created new opportunities for religion to step into the vacuum;

“When I was growing up you could change the world through left politics. It’s now short-changed. It’s much harder to do it through the secular, political tradition. It’s been defeated time and time again. And so religion stands out more because there’s a kind of vacuum all around...not just because it’s there but also because it has a strong value base, and it offers people...an anti-materialist analysis of the world in terms of having a good life, a community, solidarity. So it’s some of the space the left used to fill”.

Two further strands of interdisciplinary thinking emerge from growing interest in these new geographies of religions and beliefs. The first is that religion's ability to flourish in an increasingly globalized and urbanized world challenges one of the basic assumptions of the 'secularization thesis', that processes of modernization and technological innovation associated with urban planning and design render religious practices and discourses increasingly redundant and obsolete. Critical geography recognizes (along with other disciplines) that religion and modernity not only coexist, but are symbolically intertwined, creating the material possibilities for new progressive alliances.

The second strand is that the fluidity and liminality of the public square means that "the spatial" becomes the arena in which future configurations of the religious, spiritual and religious "nones" are being contested, negotiated and translated in real time. Theoretical assumptions and conceptual frameworks located in more binary readings of the world are thus likely to be behind the curve of events that are now beyond the scope of a single disciplinary perspective to adequately ground. This makes the interdisciplinary reading of religions and beliefs in the public square all the more essential. One example is the emergence of new spaces of ethical and political convergence in which previously recognized ideological barriers appear to be dissolving. One contributor reflected that:

"There is some evidence that alternative imaginaries and practices are generating new ethical spaces and subjectivities. Geographies of postsecularity suggest that we are journeying into rather different subjectivities. What has captured the imagination of hard-nosed Marxists is the emergence of a new kind of ethics and "leave your differences at the door".

6. Political Philosophy

In line with many other disciplinary perspectives, the preoccupation of political philosophy is the power of globalization. As the boundaries of the nation state become more blurred with the ascendancy of the global network there is a perceived concomitant dismantling or blurring of boundaries at the disciplinary level. Claims to superior knowledge or epistemology are no longer valid. The global de-privatisation of religion puts pressure on traditional categories of political analysis and philosophy that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries. A major question posed by political philosophers in this study concerns the implications of the "hushed-up voice of religion" [24] coming back into the public square. The flux and intense changes that have emerged since the 2008 financial crash, and the political charge being increasingly attached to religion, was interpreted by one participant using the scientific norms of thermodynamic theory, which is also closely associated with new materialism:

"What I like about what's called the new materialism is that it's not a reductionistic, atomic materialism. For me it's about energy transformation... Not just in political and economic terms but also in cosmological terms and thermodynamic terms. For me what I like about energy is that it can evade this dichotomy of matter and spirit so you can think about energy as flowing material, you can also think about it as spiritual as well... For me to think about religion and politics and the public spheres and spaces that we engage and live in and enter into, I want to think about energy as what makes all of that possible. In a sense without reducing everything to a kind of reductionistic, deterministic view of energy, but a more complex one that works".

In this reading, the impacts of religions and beliefs in the public sphere are creatively interpreted using scientific norms and principles. They are seen as forces of energy interacting. This scientific analogy by which to interpret religion, itself embodies a readiness for and opening up of new interdisciplinary thinking and analysis.

7. Theology

The responses of the theologians in our cohort could be grouped into two basic categories. The first could be labelled as reflecting a "pessimistic" response regarding the current role of religions and beliefs in the public sphere. The "pessimist" position sees religions, but particularly Christianity,

as being driven out of the public square by an aggressive secularism, often sponsored by the state and abetted by certain sections of media, opinion formers and academia. This view point offers a trenchant critique that links secularism and neo-liberalism with the creation of a public sphere in which citizens are imagined as social monads, for whom the stable solidarities fostered by institutions such as the family and the church are portrayed as infringements on individual freedoms and rights.

“We went through what you could call a humanist post-Christian phase where the values remain Christian, even though people were agnostic and some people were atheists. Now we’ve moved into a phase of far sharper contestation... Look at the last bastion of Christian influence, the family. It remains central to our ideas of what a family should be. Now you could argue that secular forces, forces of the state and the market, are trying to break up family life, trying to appeal directly to individuals. Just as all intermediary institutions between the state and the individual have been eroded, now I think the family also is being undermined”.

Others, who we might label “realist”, were more sanguine, seeing at least as many opportunities as challenges to harnessing a renewed interest in religion (and religious ideas) towards a new ethical consensus on the nature and purpose of the public square. One participant expressed the power relations between the religious and the secular in the memorable metaphor of the jacuzzi versus the shower: the traditional Western model of modernity operates as a “shower”. Religion is like a flow of water that can be specifically controlled and directed to certain areas, and those who do not want to be touched by it can choose to bypass or ignore that flow of water. However, under the new conditions of globalized modernity, religion is likened more to a Jacuzzi;

“It [religion] was a process through which we would be washed clean of our archaic and atavistic religious views. But I think in reality the context is more like a jacuzzi in that everything is bubbling up from everywhere”.

In other words, and in common with the “disintegrating of boundaries” motif identified in other disciplines, the religious and the secular are increasingly less differentiated, and instead, are more co-mingled spatially, culturally and intellectually. The public space is “one in which different constructions of religion, and therefore different constructions of secularity, are now bumping up against each other in shared space or shared territory”. How we learn to share such territory is therefore the major challenge. This particular respondent predicts that new political affinities and alliances will emerge, made up of “new and strange bed-fellows”. These alliances are less likely to be driven by loyalty to traditional ideological positions and political parties, but rather more by individual intuition. This search for what the contributor calls “a common-life politics” is envisaged as a defining feature of a new post neo-liberal consensus that has been gathering pace since the financial crash of 2008, and which seems to be partially re-expressed in the “Brexit” vote in 2016 and again in the election of Donald Trump to the US Presidency. A common life politics is thus described as:

“... different in kind from either multiculturalism or identity politics. The key difference is whether you’re willing to contribute to a common life or not. The ticket of entry is not adherence to a prior set of beliefs or ideologies. Rather... a better indicator of your commitment to the common life is that you actually turn up, you actively contribute to, and you invest as an institution or a tradition in forms of shared life”.

Another theological participant suggests that Western popular culture shows the persistent search for a magical or transcendent reality that exists beneath, or is intertwined with, the material and empirical realities of everyday life—referred to as “liquid forms of enchantment”. The cultural representations of these existential questions offer important opportunities for public discourse shaped by theological ideas and motifs.

8. Religious Studies

In Religious Studies (RS), there is a sense of being taken newly seriously and of renewed recognition and visibility, though what that recognition is, and that what the response should be, may not yet have come in to focus. Responses suggest that RS has been something of a ‘Cinderella’ discipline in many institutions (a distant relation, sidelined from the mainstream life of the universities), but that lots of universities are now sensing a need to engage with the study of religion, even if they have not yet worked out how or where. There is a sense that RS is itself recognising that this is being driven by certain newly hard-edged and visible aspects of religion, such as law, radicalization and the growth of black majority churches, which are making religion—and therefore religious studies—more prominent than they had expected. In many departments, new modules and courses have been appearing, revolving around the theme of ‘religion and society’.

Some interviewees noted that this is partly informed by technical dimensions peculiar to higher education, but reflective of neo-liberal trends in the wider world. The UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) is one such—a five yearly assessment of research quality across British universities, which emphasizes the importance of research with impact. This is seen as driving a focus on the lived and the spatial in the study of religion in particular. Hence respondents noted a turn to lived religion and experiential learning, located in issues which students can easily recognise. They also drew attention to the risk that this leads to talk confined only to controversies, which they thought could accidentally reproduce negative tropes and a focus on religion as risk.

RS respondents also sensed that public bodies are realizing that religion is an issue for them to take seriously too and that RS is challenging the notion that public bodies sit on one side of a secular/sacred divide—or that there even is such a divide. Likewise, nor do religions sit on one side or the other of the public and the private. These are binaries which RS thinks are dissolving anyway. This opens up new spaces in which RS thinks it can have something important to say. There is some concern that this could tip in to instrumentalising RS as a source of mere information (as opposed to deep learning and understanding) about religion in the public sphere. Religious literacy is emerging as one possible dimension of this—how RS might equip graduates for engagement with a religiously diverse and pervaded world—bringing forward the intellectual and theoretical while being mindful at the same time of how it applies.

There is also a sense of relief that there is a widespread recognition that religion never went away. Crucially for the focus on interdisciplinarity, RS is looking to other disciplines—especially Sociology of Religion and Social Policy—as it hardens up its questions. Importantly, it was also noted that, for the first time, other disciplines are also looking to RS. This raises the question of how these disciplines respond to each other, and whether there will be mutual respect: an important issue after a period when the status of RS has been in question. How disciplines talk with each other will need seriously working through.

9. Social and Public Policy

Social and public policy are beginning to be busy on religions and beliefs, though at least two of the interviewees said either that not enough is happening or that it is nothing but trouble. Welfare, violent extremism and cohesion are the three issues which were most apparent. These issues present themselves in the form of tricky dilemmas which policy makers have to deal with and which the study of policy can help with—key among them, how to handle visible manifestations of religions and beliefs, especially the hijab. Violent extremism is also a very obvious and very prominent theme, and this is the case across the interviews and disciplines. In policy contexts there are pressing questions about the extent to which policy is creating or at least complicating a difficult discourse rather than helping. This applies where policy meets law too. Respondents said that they are not at all keen on law in this area because it does not clarify the muddle. It adds to it. They detect a turn away from talk and towards rights which makes it harder to handle. The question for them is how can law settle policy questions about religions and beliefs?

More visible plurality is regarded as another key driver, playing out in the policy arena in anxiety and muddle about which approaches to follow and which words to use—multiculturalism, tolerance? There is a perception that these debates have been spilling over in to debates about how policy makers can be helped to understand the contemporary religion they encounter. Religious literacy is much discussed in this context too.

Political questions about religion are also raised in the context of the study of policy—what is the place of established churches if society is multicultural, or at least plural? More broadly, the study of policy is exploring questions about the extent to which we are really secular, or post secular, or something else. How should the policy-making class think about the categories of religion, belief and the secular? This draws attention once again to the challenge of interdisciplinarity—where are the scholars who can bring theology, religious studies, sociology and policy together like this?

10. Sociology

Two big narratives emerged in discussions about the sociology of religion. First is the problem of the long term marginalization of sociology of religion from the wider sociology community, and therefore relative silence in public debate. One respondent said:

“Our debates about religion happen within the community of sociology of religion. This is all very interesting, but who are we talking to? It results in a lack of analytical frameworks within which the commentariat can engage in this. They’ve no idea what the questions should be. This hasn’t changed, but the interest in religion has”.

Interviewees said that this paucity of conversation is mirrored in what happens in schools in teaching and learning about religions and beliefs, and they identified an appetite for addressing this.

The other big narrative is about change. This, itself, breaks down in two ways. First, there is interest in what has changed in wider society to make it suddenly interested in religion again. Here the same themes come up again—violence, law and plurality. Some new ones appear too, namely marketization and consumerisation of religions and beliefs, in common with other public spheres; the collapse of old political narratives, and meta narratives of other kinds, but including religious ones; and the move online, which is seen as highly democratising and flattening of the sorts of hierarchies which formal religion has previously depended upon.

Second, there is interest in how the religions and beliefs landscape itself has changed. This is not just about the facts and figures—plurality, decline and growth—but also about the quality of religions and beliefs. There is a discourse about the deformatisation of religions and beliefs. There is an emphasis on the embodied and lived, and on the material. There is also an interest in religions and beliefs as health and well-being, mindfulness, and spirit.

This adds up to a stretchier notion of religions and beliefs as including the ‘old forms’, but also now informal, non-creedal forms, re-jigged expressions of ancient ones, like Wicca and Paganism, and consumerised, fluid ones which are a something of a ‘pick and mix’. Interviewees also draw attention to non-religion (secularism, humanism), and non-religious beliefs, including those as defined in law (for example, environmentalism). This is contrasted with a widespread view of religion as narrow and top down, still interested in hierarchies and leaderships and structures.

To summarise, sociology draws attention to three big challenges: (1) rethinking secularity on the one hand and the real religious landscape on the other, in order to get religions and beliefs right in teaching and learning in schools and universities, and by extension in wider society; (2) raising the profile of sociology of religion so that it is not simply talking to itself. This is tactical and strategic; and the third challenge is theoretical and highly academic, and is raised by a number of interviewees across the disciplines—how to move beyond Habermas to a public sphere which can actively talk about religions and beliefs.

11. Cultural Studies

In cultural studies too, there is an emphasis on the need for religious literacy, finding expression in the observation that there is far too much focus on religions as structures of belief. There is a call to move on to a focus on structures of meaning which cut across religious boundaries. The idea is that this will help the discourse to move on—for example, from arid new atheism which sees religions in this old way, as structures of belief which are easily dismissible, rather than focusing on their morally charged meanings, which can be seen to continue to have traction *with* or more probably *without* the belief or practice commitments which used to pertain.

12. New Spaces: Hotspots and Blindspots?

Some common and strong preoccupations emerge across the disciplines in this study which are all identified as new spaces of thinking about religions and beliefs, partly in themselves, and partly in terms of their actual or potential relationships to each other. These relationships present a number of issues and challenges which we discuss here in terms of “hotspots” and “blindspots”.

Across the interviews, assumptions about secularism are regarded as an obstacle to a good quality of conversation about religions and beliefs. So too is a preoccupation with the decline of religion, rather than change in the religions and beliefs landscape, especially in terms of Woodhead’s “deformalisation”. The secularization story has been so dominant in the landscape that it appears to continue to resonate even if and when it is challenged expressly, and there is a strong sense that the notion clings on, despite a good deal of intellectual work which challenges it. Part of this revolves around contests and disagreements about the meaning or even efficacy of the concept of post-secularity in a context which is notably continually sacred as well as secular and post-secular all at once.

At the same time, there is a sense that the boundaries between disciplines are liquidating, but that this is not being addressed. This raises the question of how to make disciplinary incursions well. It seems pressing to find the confidence and skill to do so, especially across TRS and the social sciences, and between sociology and the sociology of religion, where particular breaches are noted. In particular there seem to be powerful echoes of classic epistemologies, some of which may well themselves have become subconscious—for example Religious Studies, which has tended to think of religion as coherent blocks to be studied, rather than lived, transactional, and steeped in fluid, located meanings and beliefs. How does it talk best to sociology, or theology, which may be caught in their own epistemological webs, preoccupied with dichotomies about science-religion (theology) and sacred-secular (sociology), for example? Moreover, how might disciplines which have previously had little or no connection—some of which may even have scoffed at one another—overcome their prejudices and talk well to each other?

Another issue is that controversies and problems tend to dominate the public debate and, like assumptions about secularism, they can get in the way, making the conversation bad tempered and more difficult to have. It might be argued that they also reflect the ill-temper since they often arise in the context of legal disputes and debates, and are often confused in themselves. What can disciplines do to rebalance the discourse? Perhaps the same applies to reactions and responses to them, especially noisy ones such as Dawkins and the new atheists, which have dominated.

There is also an important debate about “proper” versus “fake” religions and beliefs. Those who talk about “deliberate” versus “fuzzy” religion, such as Bruce and Voas, stand in contrast to Woodhead and Heelas who urge an engagement with new fluid forms which they detect, as exemplified in representative sites such as Kendal and Glastonbury in the UK, and at festivals and online. Many are somewhere in between, recognizing that the religions and beliefs spectrum is much broader and more fluid than a tradition-based focus would allow. A particular challenge is methodological—how to capture fluid and informal forms—and new thinking will need to be done on this.

These debates are complicated by the ways in which functionalist perspectives prevail. The tension between the usefulness and the experience of religions and beliefs is well felt at the grassroots where faith communities often talk about being “used” by government policy—and sometimes abused, as in policies to prevent violent extremism. This plays out in a tricky distinction between “values” and their religious roots, where publics and public spheres may be relaxed to talk about religions and beliefs in the language of “values” but not to name religion. The danger is that “values” gets used as an apologetic proxy for religion. For example, talking about human rights or equality, they may find themselves discussed as though they are secular and universal ideas and values while in fact other disciplinary insights might reveal them to be deeply Christian and western ideas, and the universalist assertion felt by others as imperialist. This will not suffice in a globalised and de-boundaried intellectual and actual world. But there is a reluctance even to acknowledge their religious roots, as well as an inability to do so. How do we bridge this?

Finally, there appears to be a gap between the idea and the reality of religion—some of these participants thought perhaps the biggest in an age. This makes for public and social policy which frequently gets it wrong, as seen in relation to the prevention of violent extremism in the UK and Europe, which has been criticised for “othering” moderate Muslims while failing to connect with extremists. It may also be detected in welfare spaces. A key example comes from the UK where aspirations to give welfare service contracts to faith groups are based on the expectation that there is an army of volunteers in particular places—notably the Church of England—where they may in fact no longer be, as in Abby Day’s observation that the churches are populated by elderly women who are gradually dying and not being replaced [25]. Other spaces of welfare engagement are being explored in this way, at UK, European, and global levels, including foodbanks, homelessness services, social care, youth services, mental health and addiction services, fair-trade cities, cities of sanctuary, climate change and energy provider networks [26].

13. Conclusions: Crossing Old Binaries into New Spaces

The challenge that is posed is both practical and conceptual. At the level of practice, it is about how to engage well with the greater secularity, plurality, informality and diversity of religions and beliefs which are being discovered or identified as happening all at once. Tools and approaches are emerging in a variety of disciplines and practices. But this presents a conceptual challenge too: how do these disciplines and practices communicate with each other in ways which can truly inform the future? Religions and beliefs pose a truly interdisciplinary challenge to the old and new disciplines which are increasingly engaging them. A key part of that will be epistemological: in order to engage across the range of intellectual resources and debates, it will be necessary to learn how to bridge the classic epistemologies and binaries—science and religion; secular and sacred; private and public; formal and informal. Another is methodological—working out ways of asking questions of and reaching constituencies who are not arrayed around identifiable hierarchies and structures. The real religious landscape no longer looks like that. Neither should the landscapes of the disciplines which study it.

Acknowledgments: The research reported in this article was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Grant Reference: AH/L015617/1.

Author Contributions: Christopher Baker and Adam Dinham conceived and designed the interviews and carried out equal numbers each. Analysis was carried out by Christopher Baker and Adam Dinham and they wrote the paper together.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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