# Chapter 1

# The need to re-imagine religion and belief

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## Why do we need to reimagine?

Why reimagine religion and belief? What’s wrong with how we think about them now? This is the question at the root of this volume, made pressing by a greater visibility of religion and belief across the public sphere than for a generation, and a public policy freneticism about it which has been largely preoccupied with sex, money and violence (Dinham and Francis, 2015). Policies abound about inequality, cohesion, extremism, migration, abuse, and unethical investments. These are reflected and sometimes magnified in media representations of dangerous Muslims on the one hand and marginalised Christians on the other (Lovheim, 2013). A lack of religious literacy has been one way of looking at this – observing a public sphere which struggles to cope with a growing diversity as well as visibility of religion and belief in every sector and setting (Dinham, 2017). How has this come about?

A combination of old binaries and powerful paradigms is critical to the explanation. They reside in academic disciplines and are reflected in policy norms which may have run out of road. The conundrum is that they no longer equip us for the challenges that are faced – of super-diversity, extremism and the continuing role of faith groups in the provision of increasingly critical social services.

The dominance of the secular paradigm is foremost, and is arguably sociology’s greatest success. It is at the root of Western difficulty with talking about religion. There appears to be a wide-spread and deep-rooted assumption at large that religion and belief are essentially in decline and likely to disappear. Nuanced and contested though the notion really is, this ‘vanishing point’ perspective of secularity informs much of what schools and universities teach, and how professions and leaderships practice, as the chapters below unpick. Yet as critics have noted, simple decline is too simple a tale. People are ‘believing without belonging’ (Davie, 1994), as well as the inverse of ‘belonging without believing’ (Hervieu-Leger, 2000). At the same time, a de-formalisation is observed which detaches people from institutions and reveals religion and belief as subject to the same consumerist and marketised behaviours and choices as are exercised in other walks of life (Woodhead, 2012). Most (84 percent) of the global population reports a religion or belief (Pew Reserch Center, 2012). Europe’s apparent secular decline is the exception not the rule (Davie, 2015). It turns out that the world is neither simply secular nor simply religious, but complexly both. As Weller (2009) points out in relation to Britain, it is more secular, more religious and more diverse at once. So secular assumptions – whether procedural or programmatic (Williams, 2006) – look increasingly like a dead end. Globalisation and migration put everyone in to daily encounter with a diversity of religion, belief and non-belief, whether they like it or not, in every public sphere. An insistence on private, not public, religion looks shaky in that light. More religious diversity does not seem well met by more secularity.

Yet this is the other great binary which persists. Habermas’ (2006) earlier proposal of the privacy of religion and his requirement that it appear in the public sphere only in the language of ‘public reasons’ is problematic in societies which find themselves needing to name religions and beliefs, engage with them, and increasingly to hold them to account. How can we both talk and not talk about religion and belief? The neutrality implied by ‘public reasons’ is itself in question anyway, since the non-religiousness of shared space is full instead of other normativities, beliefs and world views, revolving around liberal and neo-liberal commitments. Habermas himself developed the concept of the postsecular in the early years of this millennium in order to scope and interrogate this dynamically shifting religious and cultural modernity. As we unpack in greater detail in Chapter 2, for him, the postsecular represents a new ‘self-understanding of society as a whole in which the vigorous continuation of religion in a continually secularizing environment must be reckoned with’ (Habermas, 2005, p.26). For Habermas, the postsecular acknowledges several things. One, the resurgence of global religion due to immigration and growth in fundamentalist religion, especially Islam and Pentecostal Christianity. Second, the decline in confidence in secular Enlightenment narratives of the modern liberal democratic state, the ideals and values of which have been hollowed out by neo-liberal capitalism. Third, issues of equality and human rights in respect of the approach to religious identities and beliefs in the public sphere. Fourth, the requirement for a new re-imagining of the relationship between the religious and the secular for the sake of a flourishing civil society and participative democracy. These four elements are highly relevant to the issues that this volume seeks to address.

## What’s different about the 21st century?

Another major shift feeding into the genesis of this research network and this volume is the general recognition that the 21st century has generated a new form of modernity that is profoundly different to that devised and envisaged in the 19th and 20th centuries. There are several elements to this shift. The first is the exponential acceleration of the processes of globalised capitalism that combines both neo-liberal deregulation with innovations in communication technology and travel to allow the maximum fluidity and frictionless crossing over geographic and cultural domains for the sake of market efficiency. This has created more intense flows of migration, ideology, innovation, investment and knowledge that show little respect for existing forms of local identity or community.

The increasingly interconnected nature of this new hyper-globalised modernity (what Beck, 2010 calls ‘Modernity 2’) has also generated hitherto unparalleled levels of risk, as good or intentional policy decisions often get diverted by the complexity and unaccountability of new networks of decision making and agency. The financial crash of 2008 was a global event that epitomised this new modernity, and its impacts continue to reverberate ominously a decade later. These negative impacts include growing social and economic inequality, and a heightened sense of anxiety and fragmentation at the apparent loss of any political party or strategy that will restore a sense of control and order. This largely explains the dip in trust in more liberal and democratic forms of political engagement which has led to the rise in support for parties or movements offering simple and comforting solutions to complex globalised problems (epitomised by Brexit and the rise of despotic leaders like Trump in the US and Erdogan in Turkey). Religion and belief are once again brought to the fore, either as a source of personal consolation in times of fear and anxiety, either as an ideological prop to a ‘pure nation/culture’ narrative, or as a diffuse but powerful presence in new alternative movements of participation and democracy.

Meanwhile, Western understandings of secular modernity following the European Enlightenment (what Beck, 2010 calls ‘Modernity 1’) lose global traction in favour of geo-political shifts eastwards towards growing populations, economies and cultures that don’t subscribe to rigid norms of separation between religion and belief and the public and the private. The blurring of hitherto rigidly-imagined intellectual boundaries in ‘Modernity 1’ has also given way to real-world blurring associated with ‘Modernity 2’. How complex, diverse, increasingly crowded and also privatised public spaces are being contested and shared in the real world presents constant challenges to both established policy and academic ideas, which struggle to keep touch with these new realities. This real-world experience highlights the usefulness of the concept of the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) of identities which overlap within and between people and which are fluid and shifting. This helps us understand religion and belief, not as blocks of unchanging tradition but as lived experience in ordinary everyday lives that spills over and directly influences other aspects of private and public modernity.

## Why the growth in religion and belief talk, and why across academic disciplines?

It is perhaps unsurprising that greater visibility of religion and belief in the public sphere is reflected in a similar growth in engagement in a broad range of academic disciplines. Universities are frequently expected to provide intellectual leadership on matters of public interest and concern to the communities in which they are located. At the same time, student and employer expectations that graduates are ‘work ready’, increasingly includes the capacity to effectively work with individuals and communities with diverse religious beliefs and practices.

The re-emergence of religion and belief is a new twist on medieval notions in which the study of theology was considered integral to the idea of a university. The rapid expansion of higher education in many countries in the 20th century led to the contentions that a ‘real’ university was one which taught medicine and law. At the same time, social science disciplines, such as psychology and sociology, have claimed the expertise as to the essence of human existence, once held by theology. In a neoliberal era, the continuing existence of faculties of theology and religious studies is often dependent on financial considerations, i.e, whether the disciplines bring in sufficient funds to the institution.

Academic study of matters religious, has never entirely occurred in faculties of theology and religious studies. But just as theology and religious studies have been marginalised in many universities, scholarship about religion in other disciplines has frequently been dismissed or disregarded as having little relevance in supposedly secular societies, even when the majority of the population, at least in private, identifies with religious institutions, teachings, and/or cultures. All three of us work in avowedly secular universities which have no theology and religious studies faculty but in 2017 have introduced new units of academic study in religion to cater, something which would have been unimaginable just a few years ago.

Our own experiences and observations of a changing culture in the academy towards matters associated with religion and belief in the broader society, has been the impetus for the work which this volume presents. Academic expertise once considered marginal and of little consequence to society, is increasingly recognised as making an essential contribution. Another change we have observed is that scholars of religion and belief, once almost exclusively people for whom their own religion was of personal importance, is increasingly attracting scholars of no, or no stated, religion.

Despite our own experiences of living and working in a number of countries, of working in different disciplinary settings, as well as our differences in a range of socio-demographic characteristics, each of us has struggled with the overly simplified paradigms about faith and religion in which we were socialised, both personally and academically. As such, the editors and other contributors to this volume reflect the boundary dissolving and crossing that we have come to recognise as essential if we are to take seriously questions of religion and faith in the societies in which we live.

## Why does it matter for policy?

A critical question for religion and belief in the public sphere is whether old forms of thinking result in old forms of policy which misalign the real religion and belief landscape and policy about them. Thinking as a secular polis in which religion is traditional, private and declining is likely to determine policy which misconceives the opportunities and risks. It accounts for a focus on religion and belief as oppressive, sexist, homophobic and violent, as reflected in attempted policy solutions in equality law and initiatives for the prevention of violent extremism. Each implicitly emphasises the risk side of the equation. Religion and belief diversity is engaged as a problem to be solved - by banning Burkhas (in France), restricting the travel of Muslims (in the US), and allowing employers to forbid the wearing of religious symbols (in the EU).

In other cases, the opposite happens and faith groups are cast as heroic providers of community and social services which states cannot afford or deliver without them (Putnam, 2000; Dinham et al., 2006). In the US this has frequently resulted in heated debate about the propriety of faith-based services which may be exclusive to people of the providing faith, or come with evangelical strings attached. Yet rose-tinted views of churches full of volunteers are also cut across by evidence of declining congregations of old ladies who are dying and not being replaced (Day, 2017). Where then is the army of volunteers which is imagined? Is it where policy-makers think it is, and what happens when resources are targeted there and very little happens?

It has been observed that we are on religion where we were on race in the 60s, gender in the 70s and sexual orientation in the 80s, 90s and 00s (Dinham, 2017). None of those identities is solved either but there are at least bottom lines and ways of talking about them which make the conversations visible and possible. By contrast, there are few policy norms on religion and belief and ill-tempered debates are falling in to the gaps. Law is one site of this struggle and reflects old forms of thinking. Equality law constructs religion and belief as risky identities to be protected. Freedom of religion provisions, such as those in the *UN Declaration of Human Rights*, and in the *US Constitution*, go back much further and as such are also rooted in out-dated assumptions of private religion in otherwise secular states. This challenges the public sphere to come to terms with new ways of thinking which engage with a world which is religious and secular, private and public, after all.

## What are the implications for practice?

While a conventional approach to policy analysis is to analyse a set of reforms (actual or proposed) in respect of how they solve the stated problem, a more illuminating approach is to consider how a problem is construed in the first place. Hence, it has been proposed that ‘rather than reacting to “problems”, governments are active in the creation (or production) or policy “problems”’ (Bacchi, 2009: 1) which in turn suggest a set of solutions. Understanding these differing perspectives may give us some insights about the place of religion and belief in a society, and the forces which seek to constrain or promote their existence and proliferation. This in turn requires exposing the underlying assumptions or presuppositions associated with this form of problem representation and considering how the ‘problem’ has come to be represented in this way. This in turn leads to considering the effects which are produced from a particular representation of a ‘problem’ and includes asking questions such as:

* What is likely to change with this representation of the ‘problem’?
* What is likely to stay the same?
* Who is likely to benefit from this representation of the ‘problem’?
* Who is likely to be harmed by this representation of the ‘problem’?
* How does the attribution of responsibility for the ‘problem’ affect those so targeted and the perceptions of the rest of the community about who is to ‘blame’? (Bacchi, 2009, p 18)

Such analysis of the practice implications of policy not only uncover deliberate discrimination of people or communities due to their religion or beliefs but also indirect discrimination that may not have been intended, as can occur by the prescription or proscription or particular items of clothing, or setting of working hours.

Although issues of religion and belief can emerge in all areas of policy and professional practice, practitioners in education, law and justice, health and social care are particularly likely to have to deal with the ramifications of policies which have not appropriately understood the complexities and lived experiences of people of minority religions or beliefs. Globalisation and migration are the most obvious, but far from the only contributors to the religious hyper-diversity, which daily challenges many public professionals.

There is clearly a need for evidence-based policy which supports the needs of religiously diverse communities, and in which has the capacity to not entrench existing stereotypes. However, this in turn may require new methodologies in forming policies, including relevant consultation processes, to ensure new policies and practices do not recreate religion and beliefs as inherently problematic.

## The Structure of the Book

In the remainder of *Part 1: Re-imagining Religious Spaces*, , we lay out the nature of the new debates and controversies around the public expression of religion and belief in both academia and policy unearthed by the data from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council [AHRC] AHRC Reimagining Religion and Belief project (Baker and Dinham). This begins to locate some of these policy interactions with lived experiences of religion and belief, within new interdisciplinary frameworks of theory and research within the Arts and Humanities. These include the turn towards practices and landscapes of religion and belief in critical geography (Cloke and Williams) and the spatial turn within Islamic religious studies (Scharbrodt).

In *Part 2: Re-imagining Public Policy and Practice*, we then explore the way in which religion and belief is both framed and then unpacked for public consumption by legal frameworks in the West (Vickers (UK) followed by Beaman (Canada)) and Brett (Australia). The case study of law highlights some of the ways in which the frameworks, procedures and discourses of secular modernity reify religion and belief in ways that no longer resonate with its deformalised expression. Brett in particular, focuses on the theological turn towards post-colonialism and indigenous rights in Australia, and how this might enhance and develop policy in the area of landrights and access to public services. It is then followed by two chapters that engage with areas of policy that adopt a more grounded approach to the lived expression of religion and belief amongst ordinary members of the public and within faith communities, namely social work in Australia and care and welfare services in Norway (see Crisp and Leis-Peters respectively).

*Part 3: Re-imagining the future*, explores how a new openness to religion in the sphere of public policy can contribute to individuals, communities and whole societies, being able to imagine and work towards positive new futures. The final chapter by the editors identifies a new set of policy futures for Religion and Belief in respect to how and where old ways of imagining and managing religion and belief in the public square are giving way to new ideas and experiences. These are not only generating new policy ideas, but also new forms of language and idiom with which to talk about these ‘matters of concern’ in our new modernity.

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