Spirituality Meets Civic Engagement

Abstract: This paper starts with David Hay's data about the vast increase over the last fifteen years in people in the UK having religious experiences. This data confirms the underlying religious dispositions of the British, although there is clearly a significant decline of participation in religious institutions. However, as many have noted, religious organizations are amongst the strongest in civic society (more in church than involved in political parties). So we need to tap into the spiritual motivation to encourage a range of participation in civic society from boy scouts to rotary. The American sociologist Nancy Ammerman has shown that the more a person is involved in one organization the more they end up being involved in lots of organizations. Therefore spirituality is an important basis for civic engagement.

For some at Leeds Met, the theme of spirituality meeting civic engagement may sound odd. It will be odd on two levels. First, the word ‘spirituality’ sounds ‘other-worldly’ and preoccupied with the sense of the divine. One does not expect the word to be linked with the practical and ‘this worldly’. Spirituality being linked to civic engagement sounds like McDonalds being linked to a low cholesterol diet – it looks like a stretch. Second, for those who believe that Richard Dawkins – Britain’s professional atheist – anticipates the future, it is puzzling why we are still bothering with religion at all. The default secularism in British society, where congregations are getting smaller and increasingly composed of the elderly, leads the realm of the spiritual looking irrelevant.

Drawing on the insights learned from the social sciences – (a strength here at Leeds Met), this lecture will argue that both of these perceptions are mistaken. The argument will show that spirituality and religious belief in Britain is strong. However, civic engagement is weak (and this includes participation in congregations). Interestingly, those who are involved in congregations are more likely to be involved in
civic society. Then drawing on theology, I shall demonstrate that this sociological reality is also confirmed by theology – it is right and proper that an interest in God extends to an interest in humanity and community.

The Religious Disposition of the British

There is no disputing the significant decline in congregational participation. Unlike some of the traditional explanations for secularism (where religious decline was linked to modernity and science), the sociologist Steve Bruce attributes the decline to ‘indifference’. Steve Bruce writes:

‘We may want to explain the secularity of some elite groups (such as professional scientists) by the impact of science and rationalism, but to understand the mass of the population it is not self-conscious irreligion that is important. It is indifference. The primary cause of indifference is the lack of religious socialization and the lack of constant background affirmation of beliefs.’¹

There is a cultural shift at work here, which no longer takes religious categories seriously.

Two scholars who take issue with Steve Bruce are Grace Davie and David Hay. Grace Davie has documented the ways in which religious life in Europe seems to be ‘mutating’ but not disappearing. Grace Davie writes:

‘For particular historical reasons (notably the historic connections between Church and State), significant numbers of Europeans are content to let both churches and churchgoers enact a memory on their behalf (the essential meaning of vicarious), more than half aware that they might need to draw on the capital at

¹ Steve Bruce, God is Dead: Secularization in the West, (Oxford: Blackwell 2002) p.240.
crucial times in their individual or their collective lives. The almost universal take up of religious ceremonies at the time of death is the most obvious expression of this tendency; so, too, the prominence of the historic churches in particular at times of national crisis or, more positively, of national celebration. Think, for example, of the significance of European churches and church buildings after the sinking of the Baltic ferry *Estonia*, after the death of Princess Diana or after the terrifying events of 11 September 2001.2

Countries with a church tax system continue to collect revenue, even if the donors don’t actually attend. And when a crisis erupts, argues Davie, churches are suddenly ‘used’ as a mechanism of coping with the trauma. Although this might not be a particularly demanding form of religious life, it is still very much there. It is undoubtedly true that modernity has not created thousands of atheists and agnostics. Scratch a European you will find underneath the apparent indifferent exterior, a person interested in ‘new age’ and ‘spirituality’. The few atheists and agnostics assume that most of their friends are just like them. This is not true. The world is full of people of faith.

David Hay’s work confirms this analysis. David Hay is an educationalist, who is deeply interested in religious experience. In his recent study *Something there: the biology of the human spirit*, he starts by explaining a key assumption. He writes: ‘I am a committed Darwinian, but … I am [also] a religious believer.’3 The first step for Hay is to draw attention to the significant numbers of people who report that they have an awareness of God. In 1987 almost half of the population of the Britain reported a

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spiritual experience. 29% talked about seeing God in the ‘patterning of events’ around them; 27% had an awareness of the presence of God; and 25% had moments when prayer was answered. Now the most extraordinary finding is that the same questions were asked in 2000. Followers of Richard Dawkins would have expected a significant decline. However, as Hay writes, ‘I was astonished when I received the results. … Over those 13 years there had been an almost 60 per cent increase in the positive response rate. The figures suggest that around three quarters of the national population are now likely to admit to having had one of these experiences. The great majority of these people are of course not regular churchgoers.’ So 55% see God in the patterning of events, 38% have an awareness of God, and 37% have an awareness of answered prayer.

The second step for Hay is to build on the work of his mentor Alister Hardy. Hay summarizes the work of Hardy thus:

Hardy expressed his conviction that all of us as members of the species *Homo sapiens* have the potential for spiritual awareness. Amongst the thousands of metaphors human beings have used to describe it we might say: a presence rolling through all things, an unnamed power, God or the gods, a power coming from the unconscious, or … energy drawn from the earth itself. Hardy argued that this awareness is like a sense; it is there because it has an important function. It has indeed been “naturally selected” in the process of evolution because it helps us to survive.

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4 Ibid. p.11  
5 Ibid. p.9  
6 Ibid. p.37
For Hardy, we are – to use a phrase found elsewhere – religious animals. At some point in our evolutionary history, we had experiences of the ‘divine’ that we distinguished from everyday experiences. And indeed there is evidence for this sort of sensitivity reaching back some 60,000 years into our human evolutionary history. Now of course, we might invoke the arguments of Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud or Emile Durkheim as an explanation for this data: the problem is that the scientific data does not support this. People who experience the divine are often middle class (rather than poor as Marx would expect); they are often experiences which contrast sharply with our experience of our parents (contra Freud); and they are often counter-cultural (contra Durkheim). For Hay, the biological truth about humanity is that we have a ‘spiritual sense’ – a sense analogous with our other senses. And in situations where British people are invited to talk about these experiences, most have them.

So the British continue to be religious, albeit differently so from the past. They are having experiences of the transcendent and continue to affirm some reality beyond this world. They are also happy to allow a small minority to represent them in congregations. People who live in small villages around England want the church to remain open; they want services to be held; they want the church there when they need it; and they are pleased that a small minority are doing the hard work of keeping their church operational on their behalf.

We can go further. The truth about the British is that the challenges facing the congregation extend beyond the congregation. Anything that requires people to join and organize is struggling. Civic society in Britain is in trouble.
The crisis facing civic society

The European Values Survey is a remarkable tool. If we think Churches are in trouble, then it is worth comparing them with other groups and organizations in society. The data is interesting.

This first chart is the league table of belonging in Great Britain:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belong to none</th>
<th>65.9%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belong to education, arts, music, or cultural activities</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belong to labor unions</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belong to social welfare service for elderly</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belong to youth work</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belong to other groups</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belong to religious organizations</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belong to local political actions</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belong to sports or recreation</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belong to organization concerned with health</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belong to voluntary organization and activity linked to third world development or human rights</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belong to Political Party</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belong to a women’s group</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

According to this data, it looks as if religious organizations are holding up relatively well. Compared to membership of political parties or sports related organizations, churches and congregations are strong. Yet the most shocking aspect of the data is that almost 66% of the population do not belong to anything.

Interestingly, a higher percentage of the population are involved in some sort of volunteer work; youth work, health related, and social welfare attract the highest numbers. As this chart demonstrates.

The second chart documents unpaid work. The following emerges:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unpaid work</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid work none</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid Youth Work</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid work social welfare service for elderly, handicapped or deprived people</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid work organization concerned with health</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid work professional associations</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid work environment, conservation, animal rights</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid work religious or church organization</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid work human rights</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
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<td>--------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid work peace movement</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid work sports or recreation</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid work education, arts, music, or cultural activities</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid work labor unions</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid work political parties or groups</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid work women’s group</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, two conclusions stand out. The first is that volunteer activity in churches and religious organizations remains strong. And the second is that it attracts many more volunteers than political parties, trade unions, or other social justice causes.

Grace Davie is right to stress the similarities between religious organizations and other organizations. She explains that insofar as the churches need to radically reorganize themselves, ‘it must also be so for a whole range of other institutions which struggle for organizational existence in modern Europe. It is quite clear, for instance, that churches are not the only institutions which have lost members in the post-war period and which now seek alternative forms of organization. Obvious examples of this situation can be found in the political parties and in the associations of organized labor.’

The conclusion we should draw is that the British are finding it increasingly difficult to belong to anything. It is not as if people have stopped going to churches and are now involved in community organizations, rather people have stopped going to anything. In

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8 Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates*, p.50
between the individual and the state, the layer of ‘organizations’ is disappearing – what
the conservative political theorist Edmund Burke called ‘the little platoons’ have gone.
Although we might belong to a gym, we do not belong to anything that requires effort
and organization. We don’t want to be the Treasurer of a society.

So why exactly is this? I am yet to find the British equivalent of Robert Putnam’s classic
*Bowling Alone*. This is a study of ‘social capital’ in the United States. Although social
capital is much stronger than anything you find in Europe, Putnam notes that there has
been a significant decline in the last third of the twentieth century. People now ‘bowl
alone’ rather than in groups. He identifies four reasons for this decline, which are
probably true of the UK as well. Putnam explains:

> First, pressures of time and money, including the special pressures on two-career
> families, contributed measurely to the diminution of our social and community
> involvement during these years. . . . Second, suburbanization, communting, and
> sprawl also played a supporting role. . . . Third, the effect of electronic
> entertainment – above all, television – in privatizing our leisure time has been
> substantial. . . . Fourth and most important, generational change – the slow, steady,
> and ineluctable replacement of the long civic generation by their less involved
> children and grandchildren – has been a very powerful factor.⁹

So the likeliest explanation, which I think can also be applied to Britain, is the following:
civic engagement became harder as our lifestyle required two-career families, commutes
became longer, high quality home entertainment increasingly available, and as a

membership generation was replaced by generations interested in small informal networks.

Now does this matter? In my view it does. In *Do Morals Matter?*, I argued that a Morally-Serious Person is one that recognizes a civic responsibility by participating in community related organizations. This is important for several reasons. First, it leads to an enhanced sense of self and community. We are intended to work together. It is a tragic society that simply watches the television, attends an occasional movie, and does not develop deep connections outside the family. Second, it creates a culture where we enjoy ‘generalized reciprocity’, which Putnam defines as ‘I’ll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road.’¹⁰ So when I help out at a ‘Soup Kitchen’ for the homeless, I don’t do it expecting an immediate benefit rather I serve a culture that is there for others. So Putnam writes, ‘A society characterized by generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society, for the same reason that money is more efficient than barter. If we don’t have to balance every exchange instantly, we can get a lot more accomplished. Trustworthiness lubricates social life. Frequent interaction among a diverse set of people tends to produce a norm of generalized reciprocity.’¹¹ This flows into the third reason why it matters, which is civic participation supports a vast range of social services and networks that support those in need. The Salvation Army helps the homeless; Scouts help children; and various initiatives for persons with special needs helps the families who otherwise carry the responsibility for care alone. Finally, and perhaps most dramatically, it protects against the dangers of totalitarianism. One of

¹¹ Ibid. p.21
the arguments of Bellah’s et al. classic *Habits of the Hearts* is that an America (in this case) where individuals stop joining organizations is vulnerable to the totalitarian encroachment. An individual cannot stop the abuse of power by the state. However, organizations have real power. An organization means that people are meeting; they can, if need be, be mobilized; and organizations ensure that communication is shared. It is no coincidence that totalitarian rulers seek to undermine any competing organizations that might challenge the state (one of the reasons, of course, for Stalin’s brutal attacks on religious organizations).

**Tapping into British religious sensitivity can help civic society**

Thus far we have seen two contrasting tendencies. The first is that the British remain robustly religious: the second is that the lack of membership of congregations is part of a wider (and in my view more disturbing) trend of organizational disinterest.

I shall now argue that the challenge is to link our religious sensitivities to greater participation in society. The British propensity towards spirituality needs an outlet in congregations and other organizations. Now at this point one might object that participation in a religious congregation is likely to dissipate the wider involvement in society. However, this is not the case. Indeed, as Robin Gill and Nancy Ammerman have shown, the opposite is true: a person who is involved in a congregation is more likely to be involved in other organizations.

Robin Gill’s study draws on the data from the British Household Panel Survey. In this study, Gill explains, ‘a very high 27% of members of voluntary service groups reported that they were weekly churchgoers (in the sample as a whole it was 11%) and 42% went
at least once a month (it was 18% in the whole sample).\textsuperscript{12} Nancy Ammerman’s Pillars of Faith demonstrates that persons of faith make much of the voluntary work in America possible. Often this is in a direct way – the congregation has a partner in the community or supports a denominational program committed to social justice; however, it is also in an indirect way – a person of faith simply gets involved in more organizations because of his or her faith commitments.

Nancy Ammerman’s work puts to rest an anxiety that a person’s involvement in a congregation will make it less likely that he or she is involved in the community. The truth seems to be the opposite. Once a person has managed to leave the home for one evening a week, then it is likely that they will leave the home for two or three evenings a week. In other words, once a person joins one organization (say a congregation) that person is more likely to join another congregation. The secret is to get a person to join at least one organization.

\textbf{Theological Reflection}

The truth discerned by sociologists is confirmed by theology. God wants us involved in our communities. Part of the \textit{Imago Dei} is our capacity to be in relationship with others. Indeed, for the Abrahamic traditions, this is a primary reason why we are created. The universe came to be to enable sophisticated consciousness to emerge that has the capacity to relate to others – to give and receive love.

For some this seems just implausible. It seems to conflict with the growing knowledge that we have of the world through the physical and social sciences. But this is to force an unnecessary choice: we are not called to choose between either truths from Scripture or truths from the sciences. In the same way as there can be a picture of both an old women and a young women at the same time: so we need to learn to recognize that science (in all its form) can be illuminating and so can religion.

For those who are already sympathetic to a faith discourse, this sounds reasonable. The challenge then is to overcome all those factors that make the effort of leaving one’s home on an evening so difficult. The British need to reconnect with organizations. And once this happens, it is likely that new habits will be created.

For those who are skeptical about religious discourse, the obligation to ‘get involved’ in civic organizations remains. There are plenty of good secular reasons for involvement. However, I had better warn you: you will find yourself constantly surrounded by lots of odd religious people. They will be disproportionately present in the various organizations that you might join.

**Conclusion**

The work of this Institute for Spirituality, Religion and Public Life is enormously important. The Spirituality aspect captures an important aspect of life in modern Britain: this is not a secular country. However, it also provides a real hope for the future. For all the data shows that if this spirituality can be tapped by congregations, then civic society can be transformed. So the ‘religion’ part of this Institute captures these organizations –
these congregations that can make a difference. The ‘public life’ aspect describes the ways in which the world can be changed.

If this argument is only half right, then perhaps the work of the Institute is one of the most important aspects of this university. It is on the cusp of documenting and perhaps aiding one of the most important aspects of British life. The goal should be a renewal of social capital in the United Kingdom. This is a challenging goal, but a vitally important one.