

The need for secularism in a superdiverse society

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The Westminster faith debates concluded last week with a debate on religious trends. According to the research presented, religion in the UK is changing, but not disappearing.

Summing up the findings from the £12m Religion and Society research programme, Professor Linda Woodhead said what we call 'religion' has changed dramatically in Britain over recent years with religious identities becoming more individualised and idiosyncratic.

As Professor Woodhead points out, between 1950 and 1980 Sunday church attendance halved, and between 1980 and 2005 it halved again – now down to just 6.3% of the population. 72% declared themselves Christian in the 2001 Census, yet fewer and fewer claim to belong to a religion, and the number declaring 'no religion' has grown from 31% in 1983 to 51% in 2009.

Woodhead however does not see this as evidence of a secularization of society. In fact she believes the opposite is true. For Woodhead, real religion – which she defines as "everyday, lived religion", is thriving and evolving, it's just the hierarchical, dogmatic forms of religion that are being left behind.

In order to make her case, she conflates a vague spirituality and superstition with religion, citing the rise of the 'mind-body-spirit' industry, belief in a non-specific afterlife and in a 'spirit or life-force' with reiki among other things.

The thesis that religious belief is thriving even if churchgoing is declining has been comprehensively rebuked by Professor David Voas of Manchester University's Institute for Social Change. While he acknowledges that there is a large middle ground of people who are neither regular churchgoers nor self-consciously non-religious, he says religion usually plays only a minor role in their lives. For Voas, Britain's "fuzzy faith" is just a staging post on the road to non-religion.

But Woodhead says the assumption that declining church attendance and membership means that we are becoming 'more secular' is an ill conceived assumption which could lead to a range of policy errors.

She isn't clear about precisely which policy decisions should take into consideration the personal religious and spiritual beliefs of the nation's citizens. But even if that were desirable, how do you accommodate such a vast array of religious identities outside of a secular framework?

She is right to point out that claims by male religious leaders to represent 'religious communities' are more tenuous than ever. This is why there can be no justification for granting the Church of England privileged access to our Parliament. Any serious proposals to reform the Lords must remove the all-male Archbishops and Bishops who sit there as of right.

In a 'superdiverse' society such as ours, there is a real need for our political structures reflected the reality of changing times by separating religion from the state. The state, to truly be everyone's state, must remain neutral on matters of religion and belief. No established church, no bishops in

the Lords, no prayers as part of civic business, and most of all no more state funded faith schools.

The Church of England runs a quarter of our primary schools and the Archbishop of Canterbury predicts that the Church of England will become the largest sponsor and provider of secondary education in this country. This is something he himself admits is "a rather startling and breathtaking proposal".

Whether secularization theory holds true or not, one thing is crystal clear. The established hierarchical, dogmatic Church is terminal decline. This is why its demands for yet more power and privilege must be challenged.

Stephen Evans

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