

Reports from ASSA Workshop

Religion and the State: Regional and Global Perspectives

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On 17th-18th July, the workshop on religion and the state was held at the University of Western Sydney (Parramatta Campus) in the heritage building, the Female Orphan School: the oldest three-storey brick building in Australia, and the nation's oldest public building. It was open by the Dean of the College of Arts at UWS (another sponsor of this workshop): Prof. Wayne McKenna.

The workshop addressed the formational relationship between religion and the state through investigation of historical cases and recent developments. The political dimension of religions and their necessary relations with the political state in terms of both competition and sponsorship has been frequently ignored by sociologies of religion which have instead attempted to analyse religions through the social and organizational sources of transcendental aspirations inherent in religious doctrines. Such tensions within religion, between organizational imperatives and political interests on the one hand and spiritual experience and sacred symbolism on the other, needed to be also explored in the workshop.

Social Scientists are beginning to grasp the significance of political interests within religions and relations of religions with the political state, as these vectors have impact on such contrasting cases as the United States and Iran, for instance, as well as in several European and Asian societies. To this end, the workshop brought together established and emerging scholar from various disciplines (history, politics, religious studies, sociology, social work, theology) to analyse the links between Religion and the State from a global perspective, both historically and in the 21st century.

The workshop was divided into 8 sessions with 3 of them focusing on the relation between religion and specific States such as Australia (Stephen Chavura), China (Jack Barbalet), Israel (Gal Levy), Singapore (Michael Hill), and the United States (Doug Porpora). Broader regions such as Eastern Europe (Sinisa Zrinscak) and Muslim countries (Riaz Hassan and Kevin McDonald) were also covered. Other papers looked at the tension between the state and religion through specific case studies of consumerism (Bryan Turner), of the prison system (Jim Beckford), of popular religion (Adam Possamai) and of New Religious Movements such as ISKCON (Brian Salter). Another session looked at the past (Graham Maddox) and the present (Patrick Michel) (re)composition of religion and politics.

The workshop was international in terms of its participants. Jim Beckford travelled from the University of Warwick (UK), Michael Hill from the National University of Singapore, Gal Levy from the Open University of Israel, Kevin McDonald from Goldsmiths (University of London), Patrick Michel from *l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* (Paris), Doug Porpora from the University of Drexel, Bryan Turner from Wellesley College (USA) and UWS, and Sinisa Zrinscak from the University of Zagreb. It is unfortunate that two presenters were not able to attend this event due to swine flue in Hong Kong and to a personal tragedy. The workshop was international also in so far as it discussed Abrahamic as well as Chinese and Indian religions. Treatment of the political elements of religion did permit consideration of local as well as global sources and influences on religious developments.

This approach to the study of religions addressed socio-political trends for the twenty-first century by making many insightful discoveries. For example, while Australia, Britain and the United States have similar policies to manage religion, their approach will probably remain primarily minimal and liberal. Liberal post-secular consumer societies may be prevented from adopting an explicit policy of management and are more likely to continue to treat religion as a life-style option. In short, they will probably attempt to resist the ‘deprivatization’ of religion by simply ignoring it. The liberal legacy suggests that we must always examine policies towards religion against the background of different forms of citizenship. However, even liberal societies may be forced, perhaps reluctantly, to take an interest in the ‘quality’ of religious products on the market. Just as states intervene in issues to do with secular consumerism – for example testing the quality of food and the cleanliness of restaurants through various agencies charged with oversight of public health and hygiene – so we can expect states in liberal societies to manage religions through testing the quality of their products, for example in terms of ‘brain-washing’ and their treatment of minors. States frequently intervene to monitor, regulate or eliminate so-called ‘cults’ - the case of Scientology in contemporary France is a case in point. There is therefore a strange and possibly ironic relationship between the emergence of passive consumer citizenship and the growth of religious markets on which individuals may ‘mix n match’ religious products as spiritual consumers.

Governance is clearly more problematic in pluralistic environments where there is plenty of scope for religious competition and conflicts. Because virtually all modern societies are multicultural and multiracial, the ‘management of religion’ is an inevitable component of modern government. In other words, there is a paradox that precisely because religion is important in modern life as the carrier of identity, it has to be controlled by the state to minimize the costs of government in reducing friction between competing groups.

In liberal democracies the active citizen shows signs of becoming increasingly a passive consumer in which work, public service and reproduction are no longer the fundamental bases of citizenship entitlement. This erosion of citizenship was dramatically illustrated by the recent credit crunch in which citizens in Britain, Australia and the United States were admonished by their governments to shop in order to save both the economy and the society. The new duty of the citizen is to consume and paradoxically at the same time to save. States increasingly treat citizens as an audience that must be managed by sales techniques (focus groups, opinion polls, marketing strategies, national identity as branding) and the quality of political leadership is tested by their rating in opinion polls. The new spirituality in the West and commodified religions in Asia may also fit into a pattern of citizenship as consumerism. Modern spirituality is post-institutional, subject and privatised.

Another insightful discovery was the fact that the debate about deprivatisation and secularization is not only closely associated with the impact of fundamentalism but also by the threat of terrorism. To understand religion in the modern world, we need also to look at the issues of securitization. While the state and religion were held to be separate in liberal theory, the security issue has meant that states interfere more and more into the role and organization of religion. When we talk about the management of religions or the crisis of multiculturalism or the problems of secularism, we are essentially talking about how modern liberal states respond to the revival of global Islam or more generally to ‘pietization’ or more crudely to ‘fundamentalism’. Nevertheless the particular issues surrounding Muslim minorities in non-Muslim secular states can be seen as simply one instance of the more general issue of state and religion in modern complex societies. There is increasingly an awareness of the limitations of the Westphalian

solution to religious wars, the Hobbesian social contract and Lockean liberalism as political strategies to manage conflicting religious and ethnic interests. In the modern world, there is manifestly the need to think seriously about what Habermas and others are now calling 'post-secular society'.

From this workshop, two paradoxes were identified: (1) as religion (re)enters the public domain (deprivatisation) the state moves in to manage it (securitization), and (2) as religious life styles become more pious, they can also become more dominated by consumerism. This will be explored more at length in one of the two publications from this workshop.

All presentations had policy relevance in so far as they discussed the relations between states and religions. Some particular papers had an explicit policy focus. One designated outcome for discussion in the concluding session of the conference had been concerned with policy implications of social scientific research on the relationships between the political state and religious organizations and movements. This discussion will be extended in the two publications arising from this workshop.

As this workshop generated much more than an intellectual exchange between international social scientists, as it led to the discussion and debate on new findings, a decision has been made to ensure that all papers and discussion be available to the public at large. Following the usual refereeing process, all the papers will thus be aimed to be published in either a book (a contract with a major publisher is currently under way) or a forthcoming special issue of the *Australian Religion Studies Review* (an agreement has already been made with the editor of the journal and its publication will be in 2010-2011). Both volumes will be edited by the three workshop convenors.