

Religion in the public sphere can provide opportunities for social capital

*Today's discourse about religion in the public sphere is dominated by debates around radicalisation, narrow sectarian schooling, regression in women's rights and illiberalism. This distorts the reality of what religion can offer the public sphere, **Rvd Dr James Walters** argues. The vast majority of religious life provides social capital, helping us to see beyond self-interest and the destructive excesses of an individualistic society.*

I recently asked a class of boys in a leading Australian church grammar school if they thought religion was declining in today's world. Every hand in the class was raised. In Australia, as in most Western countries, the dominant Christian affiliation has progressively declined as people have abandoned conventional religious belief and practice. To Australian schoolboys, religion feels to be of ever decreasing significance in the public sphere.

So they were shocked to learn that they were all wrong. The trends they experience locally are far from universal. The **Pew Research Center** based in Washington DC has **shown** that, globally, those with no religious affiliation will decrease from 16% to 13% between now and 2050. Demographic change and the fall of communism are both conspiring to produce **dramatic growth in religiosity** in some of the most rapidly developing parts of the world.

It's not just Australian schoolboys who are confused. Their assumption of diminishing religious significance has long been the dominant one in Western societies. Since the nineteenth century the elite consensus was that secularization would go hand in hand with economic development and religion would continue on its European course of relegation to ever more private interest. Its public role has therefore been largely ignored by academics, politicians and policy makers.

But ask the same question in a London secondary school and you can guarantee that not all the hands will go up. Far higher levels of immigration than Australia have generated a complex, sometimes fractious, interaction between a Western world that appears to continue secularizing and a non-Western world that appears to be desecularizing. In the **2011 census** London had the highest proportion of non-Christian religions of any UK region and the lowest growth of non-religious affiliation. Minority religions have **grown** to significant constituent communities. So for the London school children asked this question, within their own school, questions will have been raised about the provision of prayer facilities, about religious food requirements and, quite probably, about challenges to cohesion fed by the interreligious conflicts of the wider world.

But the crucial question for this changing religious landscape is whether apparent religious resurgence will only be interpreted through the default secularist lens of anxiety and suspicion. Radicalisation, terrorism, narrow sectarian schooling, regression in women's rights, illiberalism: these all appear to dominate today's discourse about religion in the public sphere. And they are clearly important issues to discuss. But they distort the reality of the vast majority of religious life and what it can bring to the public sphere. To borrow phrases from Robert Putnam and Charles Taylor, these might be identified as social capital and social imaginaries.

Underlying a lot of the public discourse about religion is a political struggle between the ideologies of individualism and communitarianism. Those who are concerned about religion point to the violations of an individual's rights from the practice of circumcision or the involuntary baptism of babies to the generally negative view of LGBTi rights. Yet the destructive excesses of the individualistic society are also well documented. We suffer from an **epidemic of loneliness and depression**. We have seen a breakdown of many organisations that used to hold communities together and reduce isolation. Today religious community offers many in that context both a **sense**

of belonging and of common purpose. This social capital of religion is expressed in myriad forms of community service that faith groups undertake from homeless shelters to debt advice surgeries. And organisations like **London Citizens** demonstrate very clearly that this social capital can be harnessed across community divides to further the common good for those of all faiths and none. It is no exaggeration to say that, in some quarters of British society, faith communities represent a new communitarian politics that sees beyond self-interest and individual rights to a common vision of society.



Members of London Citizens at a “refugees welcome” demonstration in London. Image: Citizens UK (used with permission)

This points to the far less well considered potential of religion to contribute to our imaginative renewal of the public sphere. Far from being anachronistic myths for a non-scientific age, it may be that religious narratives are a powerful resource in addressing the problems we face today. What might Islamic banking be able to tell us about why our financial system crashed so spectacularly in 2008? What might Buddhist philosophy be able to tell us about the high levels of mental illness in Western society? A good example of the potential of religion as social imaginary is how the Papal encyclical *Laudato Si* is feeding into current public discussion about climate change. A flagging discourse about environmental responsibility is being resourced by a religious vision of the world as a created gift for which humanity has responsibilities as steward.

So school children around the world, and particularly in Britain, are needing to learn about a changing religious landscape, one where secular assumptions are being undermined. But I hope this **series** of public events at the LSE can move our thinking beyond the common fearful and defensive response towards a consideration of the new opportunities for social capital and social imagination that the new prominence of religion in the public sphere might present.

About the author



James Walters is chaplain to the London School of Economics and head of the LSE Faith Centre. He has a doctorate from Cambridge University in systematic theology and philosophy of religion and he is the author of *Baudrillard and Theology* (Continuum 2012). Before coming to LSE, James was a parish priest in North London and prior to ordination he worked for a Member of Parliament. He is now a member of the advisory board to LSE’s Programme for the Study of Religion and Non-Religion and his areas of research include the theology of money and religion in the public sphere.



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