THE RETURN OF PUBLIC RELIGION?
A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF A POPULAR CLAIM

Abstract

This article tries to solve a puzzle concerning the notion of public religion. The aim is to understand why contradictory claims are heard in Britain about the place of religion in the public sphere. On the one hand are claims that religion is resurgent. On the other hand are counter-claims that religion is systematically excluded from public life. The solution proposed by this article begins by recognising that Britain lacks the kind of sharp distinction between the state, political society and civil society that Casanova regards as a condition of modernity. The second part of the solution takes into account the strategies of British governments between 1997 and 2010 for deliberately blurring the boundary between state and civil society by summoning the ‘faith sector’ to enter into partnership with the state. And the final part of the solution argues that the apparent resurgence of religion in the British public sphere is largely a product of the government’s ‘interpellation’ of the faith sector within a broader attempt to manage religious and ethnic diversity.

Key words: Britain, state, interpellation, public, faith sector

Introduction

This article tries to solve a puzzle that has been bothering me for about ten years. I keep hearing contradictory voices. On the one hand, I hear fulsome assurances from the British government that it has been working hard to forge partnerships with faith communities. And there are triumphalist claims – especially from so-called post-secularists – that public religion is somehow resurgent or thriving. On the other hand, I hear anguished protests that the British government tries unfairly to exclude faith groups, especially Christians, from public life. There are also claims that the government wants to turn Britain into an officially secular state.

I want to try to solve this puzzle of the contradictory claims about public religions by examining the terms in which the arguments are framed. My aim will be to show that the notion of ‘public religions’ as free agents in civil society is problematic in the case of Britain because the boundary between state and civil society is unclear.
My plan is to begin with a critical discussion of José Casanova’s argument about public religions in civil society and the closely associated notions of the privatisation and de-privatisation of religion. The central section of my article will focus narrowly on the type of partnership that New Labour governments in Britain tried to forge with what they called ‘the faith sector’. My main argument will be that government policies effectively constructed the idea of a faith sector by a process of interpellation. The final section will try to make the case that claims about a resurgence of religion in the British public sphere and about vicarious religion have to be understood in the context of government policies for partnership between religions and the state – and of the resistance to these policies.

The idea of ‘public religions’

The starting place for any discussion of ‘public religion’ has to be José Casanova’s influential book *Public Religions in the Modern World*. It was first published in 1994 and was a response to events that had taken place mainly in the 1980s. Some of his more recent publications have clarified his thinking about public religion in various parts of the world and at the global level (Casanova 2002, 2003, 2006, 2008), but it was his 1994 book which did most to focus attention on the growing salience religion in the political life of Spain, Poland, Brazil and the USA; it also called in question some widespread assumptions about secularisation.

Casanova’s (1994) opening gambit is as follows:

Religion in the 1980s «went public» in a dual sense. It entered the «public sphere» and gained, thereby, «publicity». Various «publics» – the mass media, social scientists, professional politicians, and the «public at large» – suddenly began to pay attention to religion. The unexpected public interest derived from the fact that religion, leaving its assigned place in the private sphere, had thrust itself into the public arena of moral and political contestation (1994:3).

What caused this shift from the private to the public? Casanova identifies four main causes in the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the rise of Solidarity in Poland, the role of Catholicism in political conflicts in Latin America, and the emergence of Protestant fundamentalism in American politics.

There is no question that these events were extremely important in themselves and in their longer-term implications for world politics. But I want to raise two preliminary questions about the assumptions underlying Casanova’s way of framing them. First, it seems doubtful to me that the public ‘suddenly began to pay attention to religion’ as a result of these events. My recollection is that journalists and programme makers in the UK at least emphasised the political aspects of the events, relegating the religious aspects to a mixed category of phenomena that conveyed a mixture of surprise, exoticism and, in part, bemusement. Second, I doubt whether the British public had previously assigned religion to a place in the private sphere. Religion was still highly visible in such public institutions as schools, hospitals, civic assemblies, the military and Parliament. But what surprised many people was the direct engagement of religious forces
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and interests in the day-to-day politics of countries such as Poland and Spain. The issue
was not about religion entering the public sphere; it was about religion taking political
action.

The central thesis of Casanova’s book is that ‘we are witnessing the «deprivatiza-
tion» of religion’ (1994: 5) in which the private sphere becomes re-politicised and the
spheres of economics and politics become ‘re-normativised’. It is a fascinating thesis;
and it has sparked a wealth of commentary and research. Indeed, deprivatisation is a
good device for thinking about the world that we live in. But I also think it’s a selective
exaggeration which overlooks two crucial points. They are, on the one hand, the con-
tinuing privatisation of religion and, on the other, the role played by governments and
states in using or managing religions for their own purposes. My article is not going to
say much about continuing trends of privatisation. A lot of material on this topic is
already available. Instead, I shall concentrate on the second point: the ways in which
public authorities in Britain in particular have been using religion since 1997 when the
New Labour Party came to power.

The aim of my article is to challenge the idea that public – or politicised – religion
necessarily eclipses privatised forms of religion. They are not mutually exclusive. I
shall argue that the relationship between public and private forms of religion is actually
more complex and paradoxical (Furseth and Repstad 2006). My suggestion will be that
we need to keep our eyes simultaneously on developments in both the private and the
public forms of religion because they are interrelated. And we also need to consider the
contribution that states make towards the recognition of religions as public resources.

Privatisation

The trend towards increasingly subjective and privatised forms of religion has been
documented by so many authorities that it is hardly necessary to summarise them here.
I have in mind such things as the tendency for individuals to pay less and less attention
to external sources of religious authority and more and more attention to their own intu-
itions and feelings (Luhmann 1985); the tendency for individuals to create their own
collages of religious ideas and symbols drawn from widely differing traditions; the tend-
ency for individuals to cultivate a religiosity that does not require them to participate
actively in worshipping communities (Davie 1990); the tendency for individuals to
give priority to the process of seeking personal authenticity rather than ‘dwelling’ in
any particular faith tradition (Wuthnow 1998) – to be pilgrims and converts rather than
regular attenders (Hervieu-Léger 1999); and so on. The list could be much longer; and
I should perhaps distinguish between individualisation and subjectification. But the
main point is that sociologists have documented these tendencies towards privatisation
in detail through qualitative and quantitative investigations.

The latest confirmation of all this comes from the results of British Social Attitudes
surveys, as interpreted by David Voas and Rodney Ling (2010). About two-thirds of
the nationally representative sample agreed that religion helped people to find inner
peace and happiness or to make friends, for example. Previously, Voas (2009) had ana-
lysed data from the European Social Survey of 22 countries in 2002–03 to show the rise of a pattern that he called ‘fuzzy fidelity’, characterised as follows:

Many people remain interested in church weddings and funerals, Christmas services, and local festivals. They believe in ‘something out there’, pay at least lip service to Christian values, and may be willing to identify with a denomination (2009: 161).

But these same people also espouse either a ‘popular heterodoxy’ (combining astrology, reincarnation, divination, magic and folk religion) or varieties of self-spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). What Voas (2009: 164) found most surprising, however, was ‘how little religion seems to matter to most fuzzy Christians’. This led him to speculate that fuzzy fidelity is a ‘staging post on the road from religious to secular hegemony’ (2009: 167).

Yet, privatisation is only one part of the picture. It undoubtedly takes place; but it takes place against a background of continuing vitality in religious organisations that demand – and receive – obedience to objective and external sources of authority. Moreover, many of the privatised beliefs and practices are variants or copies of traditions. And, most importantly, privatisation can be a fashion or trend that is marketed and consumed by large numbers of people in relatively standardised forms (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beckford 2003: 193–215). This is paradoxical; and it serves as a warning against any temptation to equate privatisation with atomisation or fragmentation. By this, I mean that privatised beliefs and practices can be misleading if they are taken to be solely the free choice of individuals in isolation. Indeed, research has shown that ‘selling spirituality’ has become big business and that it is methodically organised (Carrette and King 2005). The result is that the apparently free choices of individuals to practise, for example, Tai Chi, aromatherapy, reiki or kabbalah, are partly the product of commercial forces which work towards a high degree of standardisation or, at least, marginal differentiation. Rather than indicating a fragmentation of religion and spirituality, then, privatized beliefs and practices can be evidence of a new consolidation of trends and markets that transcend individuals. However, the thrust of Paul Heelas’s (2008) recent work goes in a different direction. He insists on the autonomy of individuals practising ‘self-actualization’ within the culture of ‘spiritualities of life’.

Deprivatisation

But, what about claims of ‘deprivatisation’? Casanova (1994) clearly wants to deny that privatisation is a necessary concomitant of secularisation in the sense of institutional differentiation. For him, privatisation ‘is not a modern structural trend’ but only an ‘historical option’, albeit a ‘preferred option’ (1994: 215). The main structural trend of the modern world, he claims, is towards the separation of the state from religions, leaving civil society as a public sphere in which religions can freely intervene. He therefore interprets privatised religion as an irrelevance to his theory of the transformative potential of religions that are prepared to participate in civil society. Indeed, Casanova goes even further by arguing that ‘only public religions at the level of civil
society are consistent with modern universalistic principles and with modern differentiated structures’ (1994: 219). He excludes public religions at the level of the state or political society from his understanding of modern democracies.

One of the questions that come to mind concerns societies in which the state maintains a close relationship with one or more religions. Readers from Britain and Scandinavia may be surprised that Casanova reduces ‘the caesaropapist British monarch and the established Scandinavian churches’ to no more than ‘rather residual anachronisms’ (1994: 219). British and Scandinavian societies are judged incapable, therefore, of nurturing the kind of civil society in which public religions should be free to exercise their political influence. But this argument – which smacks to me of rational choice theorising – does not do justice to the complexity, subtlety and variety of church-state relations in many European countries.

Casanova’s (1994) categorisation of public religions seems to borrow heavily from Jürgen Habermas’s rather romantic notion of the public sphere as a space for rational debate that is controlled neither by the state nor by the economy. It assumes that only those religions that cease being ‘state-oriented’ and become ‘society-oriented’ institutions are capable of entering or re-entering the public sphere of civil society (Casanova 1994: 220). The distinction between state and society has long been a central dogma of sociology and political science; and it was loudly celebrated in the transition from communist to relatively liberal democratic states in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. But transnational and global forces have subsequently raised doubts about the practicability of the Habermasian scheme – and not only in the countries that Casanova considers to be residual anachronisms.

In view of recent publications by Jürgen Habermas (2006, 2008, 2010), the question now arises of whether his notion of ‘post-secularity’ helps to improve our understanding of public religions in our globalised world. In fact, I am deeply sceptical about Habermas’s claim that Western European societies have somehow become post-secular just because public authorities now have to acknowledge that religions are still able to make important contributions to public debate (Beckford 2010). This strikes me as a patronising perspective. This is because Habermas insists that religious contributions to public debate must be translatable into the supposedly neutral language of secular reason. He wants to exclude direct or untranslated religious voices from legislatures, courts of law and public bureaucracies. He accepts that public religions are enjoying a resurgence but he would also like to prevent them from exercising power where it really matters. This represents an emasculation of the public sphere.

In other words, deprivatisation for Casanova can only succeed if civil society is able to flourish independently of the state and the markets. This is an ideal shared by many liberal political theorists. But I shall show how, in practice, the state can and does interfere in civil society. Habermas goes further in order to ensure that religious arguments must not be heard in state institutions unless they are translated into neutral, i.e. secular, terms.

I shall now examine recent developments in the relations between the state and religions in the UK as a case that demonstrates the need for a more subtle and critical approach to the notion of public religions.
Public religion and ‘partnership’

Neither the Church of England nor the Church of Scotland is really a ‘state church’ controlled by government. There is no constitutional statement that they are the religions of their states. Instead, they aspire to be ‘national’ churches with close, but different, links to the state. This gives them certain privileges and responsibilities. They participate in some affairs of state; and the most senior bishops of the Church of England sit in the upper house of Parliament. This helps to make these churches ‘public religions’ at the level of the state and political society – to use Casanova’s terms. But they also operate at the level of civil society in Britain – alongside other religious organisations as part of a much wider category of voluntary, community and charitable associations.

Public religions at the level of civil society in the UK are numerous, diverse and rarely in full agreement with each other. There is competition and conflict as well as co-operation between them as they seek to exercise their influence in public debate. Their situation is quite unlike that of the virtually monopolistic Catholic Church in Spain, Brazil or Poland.

A second and more important problem with Casanova’s depiction of public religions at the level of civil society is that the conceptual neatness of his scheme tends to hide the practical ways in which the state, political society and civil society are inter-related in many European societies. In practice, the British state intervenes in the other two levels of society. This is clearly demonstrated in one of the long-term policy objectives of the New Labour administrations that governed the country between 1997 and 2010. This objective was to forge partnership between the state and organisations in civil society. The notion of partnership, which has come to dominate the understanding of public religion in the UK in a way which is quite incompatible with Casanova’s scheme, now requires careful examination.

There is a long history of co-operation between the British state and mainstream Christian and Jewish organisations in respect of education, social welfare and chaplaincies in healthcare, prisons and the military. It makes sense to talk of a mixed economy in the provision of these services in so far as religious organisations have long been able to work alongside non-religious organisations and agencies of the state. But in the late 1990s the British government’s strategy underwent a subtle but significant change. Without ceasing to treat religious organisations as separate entities it introduced a discourse of ‘faith’, ‘faith traditions’, ‘faith communities’ and ‘faith-based’ activities. This discursive move shifted the focus of public attention away from the differences between religions and, instead, emphasised their common properties as faiths. It is no accident, for example, that the government’s Inner Cities Religious Council, created by a Conservative government in 1991, was replaced in 2006 by a new body called the Faith Communities Consultative Council.

The connotations that the term ‘religion’ has with organisation, membership, authority, doctrine, regulation, obedience, etc. gave way to a softer focus on supposedly shared values, tolerance and a generic willingness to contribute towards the public good.
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At the same time, government support increased for the Inter-Faith Network for the UK\(^1\) – a voluntary association that had been quietly forging links between faith communities at local and national levels since the late 1980s. As the twentieth century drew to a close, government increasingly framed its relations with religions in terms of an overarching support for ‘faith’ as a unitary and potentially unifying force that was capable of enhancing public – as well as private – life. Representative religious groups or organisations that were not content to fit into the emerging category of faiths were not included in the Inter-Faith Network’s categorisation of the UK’s nine faith communities. Only those which shared the same values and were prepared to respect any outstanding differences with other communities qualified for, or sought, membership. They are sometimes labelled the five major faiths of Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and Sikhism – plus the so-called four minor faiths of the Baha’i, Buddhism, Jainism and Zoroastrianism.

The New Labour government of 1997 inherited complex and questionable plans for schemes to mark the year 2000, but one of its first decisions was to form a Millennium Co-Ordinating Group and, within it, a Church and Other Faiths sub-group (Home Office 2004). Under the co-chairmanship of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s domestic chaplain and a senior official in the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, the sub-group issued guidelines for the religious aspects of millennial celebrations and it planned the Faith Zone inside the Millennium Dome in London (Gilliat-Ray 2004). The sub-group brought together Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs in collaboration with government departments, the royal households and the commercial company responsible for running the Dome. In subsequently reviewing its work, the sub-group recommended that a similarly constituted Working Group should conduct a review of the more wide-ranging issue of how government could most effectively consult faith communities about the organisation of major state events in future. Eventually, the Race Equality Unit in the Home Office was charged with considering the merits of such a review and of implementing the Labour Party’s 2001 election manifesto promise ‘to look at Government’s interface with faith communities’. This presumption of a close connection between questions of ‘race’ and religion gives a clue to the government’s reasons for raising the profile of ‘faith’ in its policy debates.

In the first decade of the current century the British government deployed the category of ‘faiths’ in numerous policy documents and programmes of action. Six examples will give a flavour of the wholly positive and welcoming tone of the discourse about faith communities and their relations with government in a wide range of policy domains. It would take too long to consider the British government’s support for faith-based schools alongside my chosen examples, but expenditure of public funds on all schools of a religious character is much greater than expenditure on all other activities related to religion.

(a) In 2004 the Home Office published ‘Working together’, an extensive report on what the Home Secretary called ‘the growing record of partnership between public agencies and faith communities in the delivery of services’. He added that ‘There has never been a more pressing need for productive and respectful engagement between public authorities and faith communities’. A follow-up report published by the Office
of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2005 acknowledged that the government’s Interdepartmental Group on Faith had achieved considerable progress in implementing the report’s recommendations in matters as diverse as consultations between government and faith communities on the staging of major public events, improvements to the capacity of regional and local authorities to work with faith communities, monitoring of the extent to which faith communities are able to benefit from major funding programmes, examining the overall coherence of government’s many engagements with faith communities, and building up the capacity of faith communities to participate in civil society and government programmes.

(b) A consultation document published in 2007 by the National Offender Management Service – an agency of the Ministry of Justice – sought ‘to promote the work of faith-based organisations with both adult and young offenders, and explore further actions that Government can take working in partnership to strengthen engagement with the faith-based sector as well as its role in service delivery’ (NOMS 2007: 1).

(c) Between 2004 and 2008 the government disbursed close to £11 million on a wide range of projects under the Faith Communities Capacity Building programme. The main objective was to support faith communities’ efforts to enhance their capacity to engage with each other and with the wider society. The cultivation of inter-faith understanding and co-operation was at the centre of the programme.

(d) In 2007 the Charity Commission, which holds the official register of bodies permitted to benefit from fiscal advantages, set up a Faith and Social Cohesion Unit in order to encourage and assist faith-based groups to obtain charitable status and to run charities (Charity Commission 2007). A further aim was to improve public understanding of faith-based charities. More than six hundred people attended the seminars that the Charity Commission organised in various parts of Britain for the purpose of explaining the purposes and advantages of charitable status for minority faith communities.

(e) A progress report published in 2007 on the government’s strategy for ‘race’ equality and community cohesion included a list of the ways in which ‘partnership working with faith communities’ could be developed. The range of planned activities is extremely wide, including the following:

- increasing faith communities’ contribution to active citizenship and community cohesion, their role as agents of change within communities, and provision of services as part of the voluntary and community sector;
- drawing in the other faiths to work alongside, and support, Muslim communities in addressing radicalisation and extremism;
- developing the role of faith communities in wider social action and regeneration; and
- developing local and regional interfaith forums and structures (Department for Communities and Local Government 2007: 91).

(f) The most comprehensive statement of the British government’s policies for development ‘partnership’ with faith communities is the report ‘Face to Face and Side by Side’. It was published by the Department for Communities and Local Government in 2008 as
the ‘framework for partnership in our multi faith society’. Its first principle is ‘partnership’ in the sense of ‘valuing the contributions made by partners and working together to increase their impact’ (2008: 9). In support of partnership, the framework seeks to identify ways in which ‘faith communities and government and wider society can work together, at all levels, to encourage and enable greater local activity which brings people with different religions and beliefs together’ (2008: 14). This partnership programme was backed by proposals to spend more than £7.5 million over three years on supporting such things as local inter-faith activities, regional faith forums and the Inter Faith Network for the UK, culminating in the production of a ‘charter for excellence in public service delivery by faith communities’ (2008: 11).

What these examples show is that the thirteen years of New Labour governments between 1997 and 2010 produced massive investments in faith-based activities and groups. At the heart of these investments was the key notion of partnership – of government and faith-based groups working together to pursue shared objectives. But my main point is this: it was government that took the initiative to invite faith-based groups to join the partnerships; it was government that funded the partnerships; and the relationship between them was assumed to be more consensual than contractual, although power clearly lay unequally with government. Especially in the wake of the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the USA and the July 2005 attacks in London, the focus of partnership was explicitly on the creation or consolidation of community cohesion as defined by government.

The aim of these government schemes for engaging faith communities in partnerships was, in part, to induce faith-based groups to take an active role in civil society or to strengthen their existing commitments. And this is the point that I want to emphasise: the British government went to considerable lengths to shape activities in civil society. Partnership is not a ‘hands off’ type of relationship. It requires active engagement from all partners in such practical strategies as Local Strategic Partnerships, the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, and the New Deal for Communities (Finneron 2007). It is doubtful, therefore, whether it makes sense to use theoretical models – like Casanova’s – that categorically distinguish between the state and civil society in the UK. In fact, many religions are ‘public’ at the level of civil society in relation to the UK precisely because the British state has ‘summoned’, ‘wooed’ (Weller 2009: 71) or ‘interpellated’ them. Of course, religious organisations also responded either positively or negatively to this interpellation, in some cases by helping the government to refine and to legitimate its offers of partnership. The process is far from being entirely one-sided or unidirectional.

I doubt whether the British government is unique in its attempts to evoke or summon faith communities as partners in the delivery of its policy objectives, but this is an aspect of public religion that does not fit into existing conceptual frameworks which categorically separate the state from political and civil society. This process of interpellation amounts to much more than merely inviting faith-based groups to enter into contracts with the state. In effect, the process involves inducing, enabling and equipping faith-based organisations to identify themselves as agents or mediators of government policies. This is certainly different from ostensibly similar schemes such
What is most distinctive about developments in the UK is the government’s evocation of a ‘faith sector’ of civil society. Admittedly, agencies of the state have to deal with individual religious organisations and with their representative bodies, but current discourse also assumes the existence of a more abstract sector of British society populated by the kind of faith-based groups that are associated with the Inter Faith Network for the UK. It is a specialist sector of the wider civil society which is reserved for faith-based groups that agree to balance their particular beliefs against respect for groups with different beliefs. The faith sector therefore includes groups that can accept the priority that government assigns to community cohesion but it also excludes groups that continue to assert other values and priorities.

In this sense, the British government’s evocation or interpellation of a faith sector is a continuation of a much longer running strategy of multiculturalism. This is not the multiculturalism that anti-racists have often derided as the celebration of ‘saris, samosas and steel bands’ (Troyna and Williams 1986). It has much more in common with the multiculturalism that Will Kymlicka (2010: 37) recently characterised as a set of policies designed to promote democratic citizenship grounded in human rights ideals. But in so far as this kind of multiculturalism requires liberal states to promote ‘respect and recognition’ for particular categories of citizens, Christian Joppke (2009) argues that it is already failing in the UK. His argument is that this is because the British government’s energetic pursuit of respect and recognition for Muslims in particular has paradoxically resulted in rising levels of alienation among them. Joppke’s argument is about the ‘ever-more-radical and extreme acts of claims-making on the part of minorities’ (2009: 469). This supposedly follows from their disappointed expectations of growing respect and recognition. This is an argument about the vicious cycle that the government has allegedly set in motion by raising Muslims’ expectations to unrealistic levels.

In short, New Labour governments constructed the notion of a ‘faith sector’ in order to manage ethnic and religious diversity by inducing and equipping faith groups to enter into partnerships with the state. This strategy cuts across the theoretical boundary between state and civil society by ‘recognising’ religions – but only on the state’s terms.

The return of religion to the public sphere?

What implications do my arguments have for the frequently heard claim that religion has returned to the public sphere in recent decades? To begin with, my response is that religion has always been a feature of British public life. It never went away. And in this sense Grace Davie (2007) is right to insist on the continuing significance of ‘vicarious religion’. On the other hand, Steve Bruce and David Voas (2010) have good reasons to doubt whether this is the best term for the phenomena that Davie described. And Martha Middlemiss Lé Mon’s (2010) research on the Church of England in a northern
town uncovered considerable ambiguity about the performance of its role in relation to welfare services. Nevertheless, there is still an expectation that the mainstream churches – with support on a growing number of occasions from minority faith traditions – will perform important functions on behalf of the nation at moments of national or local disaster and celebration. However, I argue that even this form of religious ‘public utility’ has been gradually incorporated into governmental plans for rational responses to major public emergencies and large-scale celebratory events.

My second comment on the idea of vicarious religion is that it has to be taken in conjunction with the fact that New Labour governments considered it expedient to make use of faith communities not only for the purposes of discussing or implementing public policies but also as partners in the organisation and delivery of specific services. Moreover, the government’s preference was for interpellating and working exclusively with the kind of religious organisations that subscribed to an inter-faith outlook. Its use of the ‘faith sector’ was therefore selective and strategic – albeit significant in so far as it facilitated the achievement of policy objectives in relation to community cohesion and the delivery of welfare services to such ‘hard to reach’ constituencies as refugees, asylum seekers, ‘rough sleepers’ and released prisoners. Indeed, even Religious Education in state schools was adjusted to fit the government’s requirements. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 requires the governing bodies of all state maintained schools to ‘promote community cohesion’; and the framework for Religious Education in these schools recommends the study of inter faith issues (Inter Faith Network 2010: i).

But there is another twist in this story, which adds further complexity. In the face of all the evidence about vicarious religion and the expediency of partnership between government and the faith sector, there is also evidence of resistance from some religious quarters. One argument is that ‘the faith sector is not necessarily willing or able to fulfil the role expected of it by government rhetoric’ (Baker and Skinner 2003: 57–8). Other concerns are about the risk that competition among faith groups for the resources available to the government’s chosen partners might develop into conflicts between them (Farnell 2007: 15). There is another suspicion in some places that the government’s partners may be faith groups that are ‘highly pernicious in their influence, siding with elites against the interests of the poor and marginalised, stirring ethnic and religious divisions, and maintaining patriarchal social structures which oppress women and homosexuals’ (Jochum et al. 2007: 26).

Other critical reactions to the New Labour governments’ partnerships with faith groups include the objection that, although various pieces of equalities legislation refer to ‘religion and belief’, in practice groups with well developed beliefs that happen to be non-religious are not regarded as suitable partners (British Humanist Association 2007). From a diametrically opposed position comes the criticism that, as British culture is predominantly Christian, government should not ‘accept the beliefs of all religions as of equal value’ (Trigg 2007: 3). This argument feeds into a broader claim that religion should be active in the public sphere but that it really matters which religion or religions are permitted to do this. There are suggestions that government has marginalised Christians in favour of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.
But the most recent development in these arguments that are critical of the unequal partnerships between selected religions and the British state is that the state needs to make it possible for *enterprising* faith groups to operate either independently of the state or, at least, as independent contractors to it. This argument resonates well with the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government’s strategy for creating the ‘big society’ in Britain because it suggests that religions – especially the major Christian churches – are uniquely well placed to inspire and run ‘social enterprises’. These are profit-seeking businesses that aim to invest their profits for the benefit of society rather than for the benefit of their owners or investors. Social enterprises are supposedly driven by moral or religious motives; and they can operate in any sector of the economy. ‘Putting something back into the community’ is often at the heart of their mission. A report on the Church of England, in particular, has identified its allegedly huge potential for organising and delivering welfare services by means of social enterprises (Davis et al. 2008). The report complains, however, that ‘the government, with notable exceptions, has consistently failed to pay more than enthusiastic lip service to [the Anglican Church’s] role in society generally and in the third sector in particular’ (2008: 100). Nevertheless, faith-based Christian social enterprise has flourished in such cases as Faithworks (2010), the Bromley-by-Bow Centre (2010) and First Fruit (2010).

Finally, there is evidence from the latest *British Social Attitudes Survey* that ‘People in Britain are … reluctant to see matters of faith intrude into the public sphere’ (Voas and Ling 2010: 73). This finding might surprise enthusiasts for public religion, but two-thirds of the sample did not want religious leaders to try to influence government decision making; and three-quarters of them objected to religious leaders trying to influence how people vote in elections. In other words, British public opinion is actually hostile to many normative aspirations for religions in the public sphere.

This raises the interesting question of how successful the New Labour strategy was of forging partnerships with the ‘faith sector’. It is still too early to make a well-founded judgement about the strategy’s long-term success, but there is no doubt that many mainstream religious organisations were willing to enter into partnership with the British state and that large sums of money were invested in programmes designed to achieve government policies with the assistance of the faith sector. My impression is that this strategy has helped to raise the public profile of (selected) religions but that public opinion is deeply divided about the partnership strategy.

In short, religion has never been absent from the public sphere in the UK; vicarious religion can be identified but, taken in isolation, this idea runs the risk of concealing the government’s instrumental and expedient attitude towards partnership with faith groups; and the government’s attempts to co-opt faith groups for the sake of delivering its policy objectives encounter criticism and resistance from various quarters. This all suggests that claims of a return or resurgence of public religion are ambiguous and must be treated with scepticism. The higher profile that New Labour governments accorded to ‘faith’ is not a reliable indicator of the significance of religion as an independent force in public life.
Conclusions

This article has tried to make three main points. The first was about José Casanova’s way of conceptualising public religions as agents of the de-privatisation of religion at the civil society level of the public sphere. This was a theoretical and normative project that could not have anticipated the sharply rising levels of religious and ethnic diversity which have forced many western European governments to intervene in the management of diversity – in some cases by trying to shape civil society.

The second point was that the New Labour governments in the UK between 1997 and 2010 tried hard to manage the social implications of increasing levels of religious diversity. They did so by implementing policies which interpellated – or summoned – faith groups as partners with the state. This strategy reproduced a distinctive form of British multiculturalism which promoted both respect for, and control over, minorities.

The third main point was that the many signs of religious activity in the British public sphere do not necessarily indicate a religious resurgence. Instead, they are evidence of government policies designed to make use of faith communities and inter-faith cooperation for the purpose of promoting social cohesion and public security. There is resistance to this strategy from various quarters. But let me be clear: I am not denying that religions are active in the British public sphere. My point is that the level and manner of this religious activity are strongly conditioned by government policy and state structures.

Two big questions remain to be asked: Is the UK simply an exception to European exceptionalism? And, after the terrorist attacks in the USA, Spain and Britain – to say nothing of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – can any western government take the risk of not trying to shape public religions? Casanova depicted Britain and Scandinavian states as ‘residual anachronisms’ in the modern world because they retained close relations between church and state. But perhaps it is better to think of them as following a distinctive route towards modernity which is different from the route taken by states with a clear separation from religions. Indeed, the modernity of North Western Europe may be only one of the multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000) in which religion currently enjoys relatively high visibility. The reasons for this high visibility show wide variations between different countries and regions of the world.

Notes

1 ‘The Inter Faith Network for the UK was founded in 1987 to promote good relations between people of different faiths in this country. Its member organisations include representative bodies from the Baha’i; Buddhist; Christian; Hindu; Jain; Jewish; Muslim; Sikh; and Zoroastrian communities; national and local inter faith bodies; and academic institutions and educational bodies concerned with inter faith issues’ (http://www.interfaith.org.uk/index.htm).

2 In the eyes of Darlington’s public officials, ‘the church commands little attention in the day-to-day planning of welfare provision. In the words of one public authority representative, «I have to say that the church, and religion in general, is almost never mentioned»’ (Middlemiss Lé Mon 2010: 122).
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