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Doing God

Reading the UK General Election Campaign (November 6 – December 12, 2019) through the Lens of Religion

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Abstract

This study evaluates the relationship between political engagement and religious interest in British society. The paper examines this relationship through the lens of the general election campaign in December 2019 in which religious leaders, religious identity, and religious intolerance were part of the assessment of electability in relation to parties and their leaders. Analyzing specific interventions of the Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis and the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby it is asked whether 2019's UK general election evidences the continuing role of senior religious leaders within political debate and whether this is continuous with a particular form of religious establishment.

Keywords: general election, politics, electoral campaign, UK parliament, establishment

An Essay

Contemporary society operates as if affective-neutrality were a sufficient value-orientation for things to work; it may yet discover that there are other necessities, the virtues nurtured essentially in local communities, in religious contexts, which in the long run will be shown to be as indispensable to the society of the future as they were to the communities of the past (Wilson: 52).

Recalling Alistair Campbell's well known adage of the New Labour governments (1997–2010) that “we don't do God” (Brown) in the light of the United Kingdom's 2019 general election introduces a tone of bitter irony. The statement raised in its own time the question of

state interference in religious affairs, however ill-defined those affairs were. Specifically, Campbell's intervention, as *The Telegraph* reports, sought to direct and distract the then Prime Minister Tony Blair from continuing to respond to a question about Christianity. Yet, if applied to 2019's winter campaign (November 6 – December 12, 2019), in which accusations of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia were directed to the main political parties, including party members, local council and parliamentary candidates, and even leaders, there is no doubt that parties were publicly committed to "doing God" or, at the very least, engaging with the question of protecting citizens in their religious identity and expression.

The contemporary leaders of the two main British political parties, Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn (the latter until April 2020), were not interrupted in answering the God question in the context of 2019's election. Indeed, I contend that questioning the leaders' attitudes towards religious groups became an informative frame for evaluating their trustworthiness and, ultimately, electability. Rather than being cut short and re-directed, political intervention on the question of religion as a public good and as an identity was invited as a matter of concern among the electorate.

In this essay I do two things. First, I describe and evaluate the broader relationship between the British State and religion in order to contextualize the 2019 election. Defining the type of structural religious affiliation at a national and political level provides the coordinates for the subsequent analysis. Second, I analyze the church-state model in the UK using examples of religious intervention during December 2019's election campaign to evidence the ways in which the church-state model is operative and functional in public discourse.

I am not claiming that a religious reading of 2019's election is the sole reading possible because multiple factors are at play. Furthermore, I maintain that reading electoral voting merely in terms of religious identity is to miss the point in a context where religion was not only relevant to the reportedly religious themselves, but to the electorate more generally. After all, religious concern extended beyond the religiously professed in a heightened period of political and electoral scrutiny. For the sake of clarity, I am not examining Northern Ireland's election campaign because the religious and political contexts are particular to that jurisdiction and worthy of a separate study.

Setting the Scene: The British State and Religion

The essay begins with Wilson's seemingly dated statement about the value of religion as integral to the advancement of society, contrasting to an ambiguous position of value-neutrality. Over thirty years later and religious values, values towards religious groups particularly, (re)emerge and remain crucial to debates around public leadership and societal development. The difficulty is, however, that religion is seen through a problematic lens, rather than being recognized for its collaborative role in societal flourishing. To appreciate the impact of religion within the 2019 election it is important to outline the relationship between religion and state operating in the UK.

It is widely acknowledged that Britain retains a formal, public, and institutional relationship to religion through the established Church of England. While within the UK there are different legal geographies and formal relationships to religion across Scotland, Northern Ireland, with England and Wales, the Queen remains Head of the British State as well as

Supreme Governor of the Church of England. This has ritual and political implications. For instance, the monarch is crowned in Westminster Abbey by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the monarch's appointment of bishops is upon the Prime Minister's advice. For all the structural and ritual continuity between church and state it remains the case that the "Church of England is not considered to be a public authority for the purposes of the Human Rights Act 1998 or the ECHR [European Court of Human Rights]" (Cranmer: 41) and the public role of religion in the British State is rightly questioned.

Bader's concise statement captures the dynamic of religion and state in the UK, describing the model as:

characterised by medium religious pluralism, fairly low anticlericalism, fairly low cultic participation, high stability of democracy, centre-left political orientation of Catholicism, religiously toned civil religion, retained church-state nexus, religious and then semi-secular school system and non-existent religious parties (53).

Bader's phrase "retained church-state nexus" is insightful in that a formally public connection to the Church of England has been "retained" even as affiliation and practice of that formal, institutional, and public religion has been in significant decline. For example, Voas and Crockett note that "[i]t is universally accepted that churchgoing has been declining for at least four decades, and longer time series show a slow but relentless fall since the 1851 census of religious worship" (17). More recently, Field reports how in "England and Wales, there was a decline of 11 percent between 2001 and 2011 in the number professing to be Christians and an increase of 83 percent in those declaring no religion" (369). Retention is understood, in this trend of decline, in terms of institutional affiliation as opposed to practice and the implication of Bader's comment is that establishment is not dependent upon practice. Such a public-political model confirms Casanova's observation that "the historical churches . . . although emptied of active membership, still function, vicariously as it were, as public carriers of the national religion" (14), but – with the essential caveat – without particular threat to democratic freedoms that protect religious minorities (21). Such a position is seemingly peculiar whereby an established religion also safeguards and guarantees religious plurality and religious freedom.

On the one hand, as Nimni maintains, the "state supports one particular religious faith," which aligns the UK along with Denmark and Greece as "religious democracies" within Europe (202). On the other hand, Bader's "nexus" might be misleading, as Cranmer, Lucas, and Morris contend given that the "government is not the state any more than it is the nation" (10). Simply put, just as the government cannot be confused with the state or nation, neither can the religious demographics of a population be a means of challenging the relevance of an established church.

How, then, are we to conceive of the formal relationship between church and state in the British context? In what way does the Church of England impact upon the functioning of democracy? Bader is clear that the UK model represents a "[w]eak establishment" in which there is a "constitutional or legal establishment of one State-Church, and *de jure* and *de facto* religious freedom and pluralism" (54). Defining the establishment as "weak" is, again, not determined or contextualized by quantitative measures of affiliated religious practice but the legal implications of the formal contractual relationship. There is weakness in that an

establishment is practiced within a context of religious and non-religious plurality, whereby a stronger establishment would negatively affect the development of religious plurality. An establishment is weak, therefore, in acknowledging religious pluralism without constitutional, democratic, or existential challenge.

Hichy et al. use an alternative term to describe the same reality, observing a “[s]oft secularism” in which a “‘live and let live’ attitude toward religion” prevails (71). In their view, “the relationship between the church and state is purely formal, and the governance is relatively secular” (71), suggesting that a formal, public-political, and symbolic relationship, even when it is not reflected by demographics, permits a religious plurality and indifference simultaneously.

Challenges to the UK’s Church-State Model

The presence of twenty-six Bishops in the House of Lords is one of the most visible manifestations of the church-state model. Such visibility is under question not only in terms of increased religious pluralism (which the type of establishment permits), leading some to propose that other faiths should have such official representation through a demographically proportionate allocation of seats, but also in terms of impact. White, to cite one example, reports that “[b]etween the 2005–06 and 2016–17 sessions, the Bishops’ attendance averaged 18 percent, compared to the whole house average of 58.5 percent,” perhaps a sign of difficulty in dividing duties between church and state, if indeed those duties are separate. Whichever way the presence (or absence) of the twenty-six Lords Spiritual is regarded there is a wider existential debate surrounding the House of Lords, with the Green Party and Liberal Democrats Party seeking to fully democratize the House, while the Labour Party calls to “abolish the House of Lords in favour of . . . an elected Senate of the Nations and Regions” (Labour Party: 81).

Although the decline of affiliation, belief, and practice of the established religion in the UK frames discussions around the church-state model, the growth of plural and non-religious populations must also be considered. For Lee, the UK makes for a fascinating case because “religious and non-religious populations in the UK are quite evenly balanced and both cultures have elite representatives that work closely with government and other powerful authorities” (192). Echoing earlier views of a soft and weak establishment there is a balance of power where the government acts with relatively little interference from the established church.

Further, a more refined study of non-religious populations would reveal “that these societies [UK included] are, in a sense, a lot less secular than we have imagined, with secularist arrangements reflecting these cultural commitments as well as religious and spiritual cultures much more than they do some kind of secular restraint” (Lee: 191). Here, the church-state model continues because of, rather than in spite of, a vision of secularism in which religion functions publicly. Such a view confirms Siedentop’s definition of a secularism that “identifies the conditions in which authentic beliefs should be formed and defended. It provides the gateway to beliefs properly so called, making it possible to distinguish inner conviction from mere external conformity” (361).

Doing God: The 2019 General Election

Oldfield is explicit that “[r]eligion has been discussed during this election more than any in living memory.” The election campaign of 2019 not only witnessed the re-introduction of religious questions, but the specific problem of religious pluralism and the manifestation of religious intolerance, with the Labour Party being currently investigated for perceived anti-Semitism by the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Muslim Council of Britain calling for an investigation of the Conservative Party for perceived Islamophobia. Claims of religious intolerance challenge the premise of the church-state model outlined earlier in which a pluralism and even indifference are permitted to develop without un-coupling church and state, particularly as political leaders are personally criticized.

The church-state model was, in effect, brought into the public electoral debate as the Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, published an article deploring the “way in which the leadership of the Labour Party has dealt with anti-Jewish racism,” deeming the Party “incompatible with the British values of which we are so proud – of dignity and respect for all people.” Mirvis’ intervention acted as a watershed moment during the campaign because it stimulated debate on leadership trust, especially as his comments were seemingly endorsed by the Archbishop of Canterbury through a Twitter statement, claiming that “I would reiterate that ‘no individual or community in our shared society should have reason to lack confidence in their belonging or security . . .’” (Welby). This public sharing of the Chief Rabbi’s concerns helped center the election campaign on the issue of trust in political leaders, not primarily in terms of the economy or national defense, but explicitly on religious tolerance. In this way, the Archbishop demonstrates how the established church acts, at times, as protector of religious pluralism within religious establishment, which Queen Elizabeth articulated in 2012 stating that “[t]he concept of our established Church is occasionally misunderstood and, I believe, commonly under-appreciated. Its role is not to defend Anglicanism to the exclusion of other religions. Instead, the Church has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country.”

For Pat Browne, Roman Catholic Duty Priest to the Houses of Parliament interviewed for this essay, Mirvis’ intervention and that of Welby are problematic because while there “was anti-Semitic discrimination to be called out and named in one party,” it must be acknowledged also that “there are reports of anti-Islamic discrimination in another party.” Browne is not lamenting the interventions by religious leaders per se but regards their interventions as limited in scope and content. As Browne continues, “[i]f any criticism was to be made by Faith leaders – both forms of discrimination should have been called out.” Browne’s comments are insightful especially as the denouncing of religious intolerance risked becoming a partisan position, whereas all political parties, it is claimed, are involved.

However Mirvis’ publication is institutionally received, a poll in the immediate aftermath indicates that 44% (of N=1,329) judged Mirvis’ intervention to be right during an election campaign, while 27% considered the intervention as wrong, and 29% were undecided (YouGov). A study (N=507) of Finchley and Golders Green constituency, with the highest proportion of Jewish voters in the UK, reveals that 64% of Jewish voters were not intending to vote Labour because of anti-Semitism, with 25% of the total constituency not intending to vote Labour for the same reason (The Jewish Chronicle).

The implication of such data is that perceived anti-Semitism becomes a determining factor for the electorate generally rather than among a specific religious group. Certainly, this is a position shared by Gregory Pope, Assistant General Secretary of Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales and Director of the Department for Social Justice. Responding to a set of questions for this essay, Pope suggests that where a letter from the Bishops' Conference or the Church of England have "only a limited effect on the election itself," Mirvis' statement might be an "exception" because:

[o]pinion polling showed that very few Jewish people were going to vote Labour, which in itself is a remarkable turnaround. Perhaps more importantly, anti-Semitism was often cited among wider concerns regarding the leadership as reason for traditional non-Jewish Labour voters not voting Labour in 2019.

Religious intolerance, be that perceived or proven, is regarded as a threat to the healthy functioning of a democracy and becomes a determining factor in how the electorate votes, crossing over religious identity and defying party allegiance. Religious issues, then, can have a broad appeal where religious liberty and tolerance are concerned.

The Muslim Council of Britain similarly intervened, but without additional endorsement by the Archbishop of Canterbury or Chief Rabbi, decrying reported Islamophobia within the Conservative Party as "systemic and institutional, rife in every level in the party, including: the Prime Minister Boris Johnson, members of the Cabinet . . . MPs, councillors and ordinary party members." Both party leaders, therefore, faced public questions on their attitudes towards the problem of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia during TV campaign debates, confronting religious intolerance but without further exploring the positive religious contribution within society. Significantly, as this essay asserts, the question of religion in the UK was a) asked within public-political debate, b) of general concern across (non-)religious demographics, and c) an influential factor in assessing leaders' electability.

For example, a *Savanta ComRes* poll (N=2,025) suggests that 34% agreed that anti-Semitism will increase if Jeremy Corbyn wins the general election, with 51% perceiving the Labour Party to have a particular problem with anti-Semitism. Further, among the same observed population, 29% agreed that Islamophobia will increase if Boris Johnson wins the election, with 32% agreeing that the Conservative Party have a particular problem with Islamophobia. These figures, however limited, suggest that the role of religion within election campaigning has returned in a problematized manner. It is not the leaders' adherence to a religion that is of interest to an electorate but rather political party members and leaders' apparent (in)tolerance of religions other than the established religion that is of concern.

Conclusion

The essay began with a different kind of intervention: with an advisor quick to ensure that the Prime Minister avoids the God question. In the UK's 2019 election no such advice could have been given or heeded. As has been demonstrated, questions of religion and religious tolerance were a measure of credibility for parliamentary candidates. Reviewing the church-state model in the light of this election, with interventions by the Chief Rabbi, Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Muslim Council of Britain, among others, reveals how an

established religion can be a safeguard for the protection of other religious communities and practices.

Indeed, this study recalls Casanova's premise that the church-state model, in which he includes the UK, functions well precisely when there is a "relatively commendable record of democratic freedoms and of protection of the rights of minorities, including religious ones" (21). An election in which religious intolerance has been nominated as one of several determining factors among the electorate in deciding upon candidates is to be expected within the church-state model the UK adopts. Perhaps, in this sense, the 2019 election confirms the health and strength of the UK church-state model because the established religion is effectively "weak" enough and sufficiently "soft" for these serious questions of religious tolerance to emerge as central to public political debate.

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