

## **Religion in Britain: A persistent paradox**

GRACE DAVIE, 2015

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The first edition of Grace Davie's sociological account of religion in Britain since 1945 was published more than twenty years ago. A great deal has changed since then, and this edition has been restructured, comprehensively rewritten, and rechristened to reflect this. The 'persistent paradox' of the new subtitle encapsulates the issue at the heart of Davie's analysis. On the one hand, the process of secularization has continued and the Christian churches have found themselves in even sharper numerical decline. On the other hand, far from irrelevant, the place of religion and the significance of faith within the public sphere have never been more visible, hotly debated, and politically important.

Anyone in need of a whistle-stop tour of the state of religion in Britain today could do worse than simply read the first part of the introductory chapter, which succinctly sets out six distinguishing features of this religious landscape. In the space of less than ten pages (pp 3-12), Davie provides a masterly summary of each: the nation's Christian cultural heritage; the role and meaning that religion plays in the lives of British people generally; the shift from a predominant sense of duty and obligation in matters of religion, to one more of consumer choice; the significance of cultural diversification as a result of immigration; the rise of what Davie calls Britain's secular elites, and in particular, the so-called new atheists; and the extent to which the pattern of religious life across Europe ought to be considered atypical in global terms – an 'exceptional case'. The book's third chapter also provides an excellent statistical overview: facts and figures related to the religious constituencies that make up modern Britain.

Much has been made over the past two decades of Davie's conceptual catchphrase 'believing without belonging' (the subtitle of the first edition) as a way of explaining the incongruity between numbers of those professing religious belief, and declining participation in their religious institutions. Davie's ideas have evolved, and in the intervening years, she has come to prefer the term *vicarious* religion: 'the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but appear to approve of what the minority are doing' (p.6). Churches and church leaders perform this vicarious role, according to Davie, by believing, embodying moral codes, and performing rituals on others' behalf. Vicarious religion is certainly a useful tool to help to understand British attitudes towards the nations' religious institutions (and their established churches in particular), but as she acknowledges, it is likely to become less useful as lingering church affiliation becomes increasingly distant with each succeeding generation.

Another important development since the first edition of this book is that one of the outcomes of the new visibility of religion has been an explosion of publically funded research activity. This has included a £12 million initiative called the Religion and Society Research Programme, which ran between 2007 and 2013.

Despite it having come about for largely negative reasons (ie. the consequence of religion being perceived of as a social problem), the resultant corpus of work not only sheds new light on many aspect of contemporary religion in Britain, but has provided the opportunity for links and comparisons with other areas of Europe and elsewhere. Davie knows this material (indeed, has played a significant part in its realization) and navigates it easily to demonstrate how this additional data has significantly broadened and boosted what has long been a fairly marginalized area of social science.

The book's section on the shift from obligation to consumption in matters of religion is particularly instructive. Britain (and Europe more broadly) has been institutionally quite different from the USA, where religious denominations have always been an aggregate of individual congregations that have not had privileged legal status. In Britain, as in much of the rest of Europe, the legacy of the established churches, and in particular their territorial structure and parish system, has retained some of the features of the public utility – rather like the National Health Service, their special place comes with the expectation that they be universally accessible at the point of need. Of course there has always been a mixed economy of established and free churches, but the balance is shifting, and the free market model has come to dominate. As in any market, there are winners and losers. The winners, according to Davie, are the charismatic evangelical churches on the one hand, and cathedrals (or cathedral-like, large urban churches) on the other. Although dissimilar in many respects, they share an emphasis on the experiential, and eschew the merely cerebral.

A single volume on a subject as vast as this one is bound to be selective. Some readers may find the consequent brevity of certain themes frustrating. Take for example, the book's discussion of the teaching of Religious Education (RE) in British schools. The obfuscation and muddle around RE, particularly since the institution of a National Curriculum (first introduced in England in 1988), is hugely significant as both a symptom and a cause of the poor quality of public discussion about religion in Britain. In addition to ongoing confusion in the distinctions between education, catechesis, and 'school worship', RE was not included by the then government as either a 'core' or a 'foundation' subject (the two subject categories determined by the National Curriculum), but instead, relegated to being an additional 'basic' subject, exempt from many of the rigors of the new system with a syllabus determined entirely at local authority level. Davie acknowledges the considerable importance of this theme, but is able to devote less than three pages to it (pp.123-125).

Inevitably, Davie plays to her own strengths and research interests. A case study on chaplaincy (within health care, the prison service, the armed forces and higher education) identifies a fascinating range of complex contemporary issues and questions (constituting the content of Chapter 6). The level of insight exhibited here (and displayed frequently elsewhere throughout the book) necessarily requires an interior knowledge of the subject. Davie demonstrates the benefit of understanding her subject from the inside out. In this respect, she stands within something of an academic tradition at Exeter University where she is professor emeritus in the Sociology of Religion. This has been reflected in her own field (pioneered by the redoubtable Margaret Hewitt), as well as in the Department of Theology & Religion, and the School of Education. It simply isn't possible, however, to have this depth of understanding across the board in a

subject as broad and fast changing as this one, and inevitably her account feels uneven at times. For example, whilst acknowledging that Muslims form the largest, and growing, non-Christian minority in Britain, Davie confines much of her discussion of this new reality to broad issues raised by the presence of minority religion. Matters of discrimination, multiculturalism and secularism are sensitively dealt with in Part IV of the book, and in a chapter entitled 'Managing diversity' the two conflicting 'freedoms' at the heart of the emblematic 'Rushdie affair' are examined in detail: freedom of religion, and freedom of speech. But what are not sufficiently examined are the enormous changes that have occurred for British Muslims since the first edition of this book (and particularly since the central London bombings of 7 July 2005). There is insufficient analysis of the rise in religious revivalism and activism among second and third generation Muslim Britons through the outreach work of organizations like The Young Muslims UK, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and JIMAS, or the impact of day-to-day scrutiny to which British Muslims in general, and young people in particular, are now subject. Yet the (much scaled-down) 'arts, faith and justice festival', Greenbelt, is afforded more than a page as part of a detailed and nuanced account of developments in Christian evangelicalism.

In her final chapter, Davie attempts to draw together the book's various themes. Her argument is that we are wrong to see the new visibility of religion as a religious resurgence (as it is often framed). Rather we should recognize an aspect of society that, although changing, has always been there, and too often is given insufficient attention. This raises a series of questions: '...if twenty-first century Britain is no longer Christian in any meaningful sense, what is it? Is it secular? Is it diverse? Or is it simply indifferent? And in what direction is it heading?' (p.223). Davie favors the notion of 'post-secular' popularized by Jürgen Habermas. It is a term that she believes needs refinement to be effective, but that nevertheless may at least begin to capture the two things that are happening simultaneously in Britain: 'the decrease in religious activity measured over a wide range of variables, alongside the growing significance of religion in public debate' (p.232) - the persistent paradox.

The book's concluding remarks echo a theme that, for readers of this journal, may be a familiar critique having appeared elsewhere, including in Davie's own earlier work: a rebuke to sociologists and other social scientists who are ideologically fixated on the idea that modernity and religion are incompatible. The disciplines of the social sciences, she argues, have emerged more or less directly from the European Enlightenment 'implying that they are underpinned by a markedly secular philosophy of social science' (p.234). A new approach is required, 'driven by data, and the critical thinking that surround this, not by the overly secular assumptions of "traditional" paradigms' (p.234).

Davie is not only an incisive scholar, she is an effective communicator. Social scientists sometimes like to use big words in imprecise ways in the mistaken belief that creating distance from common assumptions associated with the meanings of ordinary words can trigger particular insight. Davie does precisely the opposite. Her prose is lucid and precise, and she has a knack for the accessible turn of phrase. Indeed, the book's accessibility is one of its great strengths. It is an essential read for anyone seriously wanting to engage with the development of religion in Britain, and also with clear relevance for those outside the academy – particularly policy-makers. Moreover, Davie's is a welcome, wise, and measured voice within

what over recent years has been a generally impoverished level of public discussion about religion. As she herself writes in the book's preface:

At precisely the moment when they are most needed, British people are losing the vocabulary, tools and concepts that they require in order to have a constructive conversation about faith. The result is all too often an ill-informed and ill-mannered debate about issues of extreme importance to the democratic future of this country. (xiii)

This book provides a first-rate example of precisely what's needed. As such, it is an important contribution to both the sociology of religion, and the broader conversation about faith in Britain in the twenty-first century.

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