

Hearing the Bible today

Understanding the Western
European Context

The factors to take into account

There are five:

- cultural heritage
- vicarious religion
- a shift from obligation to consumption
- new arrivals
- secular alternatives

Drawing these together to ask questions about the context in which the Bible is heard today

Questions/ tensions to keep in mind

A parallel theme

Thinking about the nature of religion in modern Europe:

- growth or decline/ more or less?
- obligation and/or choice
- public and private
- the religious and the secular; mutually constituted or diametrically opposed?
- long-term trajectories/ recent change

Cultural heritage

Religion – one factor amongst others

Time and space – think about calendars, seasons, festivals, holidays, weeks and weekends

The physical and cultural environment

Some examples from different parts of Europe – a familiar, taken-for-granted skyline

State churches or their successors







The Bible as cultural heritage

The relationship with language

- especially in the parts of Europe most effected by the Reformation

The King James Version – hugely influential in the development of the English language; a *public* text

- any number of everyday examples
- to what extent are these still recognised?

The implications of language for the factors that follow

But first, some examples

The Sun says Aston Villa 'refused to give up the ghost'

Wendy Richard calls her EastEnders character Pauline Fowler 'the salt of the earth'

The England cricket coach tells reporters, 'You can't put words in my mouth'

Daily Mirror fashion pages call Tilda Swinton 'a law unto herself'

The historical legacy: churches are there at the point of need

Sociological approaches:

- believing without belonging (GD 1990 on)
- vicarious religion (GD 2000 on)

A modern illustration: Jade Goody

- what happened at the end of her life?
- why did she turn to the church?
- how did the church respond?

Believing without belonging

A first attempt . . . (GD 1990 on)

- where did the phrase comes from?
- when did it emerge?
- what does it mean?
- what does it not mean?
- why was it so popular?

Implications for knowledge, including Bible knowledge

Vicarious religion 1

A more profitable approach . . . (GD 2000)

A definition of vicarious:

By vicarious, I mean 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, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing.

Think of an iceberg – what is under the water?

Vicarious religion 2

How does religion can operate vicariously? How is it expressed?

- by performing ritual on behalf of others
- by believing on behalf of others
- by embodying moral codes on behalf of others
- by offering space for the vicarious debate of unresolved issues (understanding sexualities, bio-ethical issues)

Who cares?

Researching vicarious religion

Can it be counted?

- if so, how and how not to do it

Imaginative sociology

- absence as well as presence
- what happens if you take something away
- revealing the 'implicit'
- death and disasters
- buildings and liturgy

Jade Goody

From obligation to consumption 1

The church goes:

What until moderately recently was simply imposed (with all the negative connotations of this word), or inherited (a rather more positive spin) becomes instead a matter of personal choice.

Good news or bad?

The example of infant baptism – no longer a sign of Englishness (or whatever), but of commitment to a particular faith community.

- the implications for liturgy and language

From obligation to consumption 2

The popular choices:

- the charismatic evangelical church
- the cathedral or city-centre church

Examples from Exeter – or wherever
European equivalents

The common factor?

- the importance of experience: Durkheim was right!
- but differently expressed in each case

Secular equivalents

The welfare state:

- its development in different parts of Europe
- the mirror image of the dominant religious tradition
- 'replacing' religion
- state funded welfare begins to erode – internal/ external pressures
- renewed attention to the market, to the voluntary sector, and to religious providers within this
- new questions and new research fields

New arrivals 1

Who, why and where from? Two waves:

- 1960s/1970s – expanding economies
- 1990s – demographic change

A primarily economic movement with considerable implications for religion

Importance of accurate facts and figures

- popular /media misconceptions

New arrivals 2

Christians from the global South – ‘formed in their faith’

The movement of people

Early mistakes

‘Reverse’ mission

Some examples

- Afro-Caribbean churches in London
- London as post-secular (a tricky term)
- using the UK Census
- religion and/or ethnicity

Afro-Caribbean churches

Matthew Ashimolowo
Hackney



Styles of worship



New arrivals 3

The significance of Islam

The public/private distinction

France versus Britain

Dutch (il)liberalism; the Danish cartoons

Shari'ah law – the Archbishop of Canterbury and a Swedish
doctoral thesis

Specific histories – different reactions, national and other

The importance of knowledge

A symbol of oppression?



A British compromise



European reactions

Political/popular – all over Europe more or less secularized populations are obliged to address complex religious issues on a regular basis, doing so within the parameters of their own history

Intellectual – new forms of theorizing are emerging in different areas of the social sciences in order to accommodate the religious factor

- one example – Jürgen Habermas

Policy making

What is to be done?

- accurate information
- the role of (religious) education
- the quality of the debate
- look for the positive
- examples of good practice
- awareness of locality

Over to you . . .

A rather different reaction: militant atheism

How to understand this?

Reactive

‘Normal’?

- Europe v. America

Fundamentalist

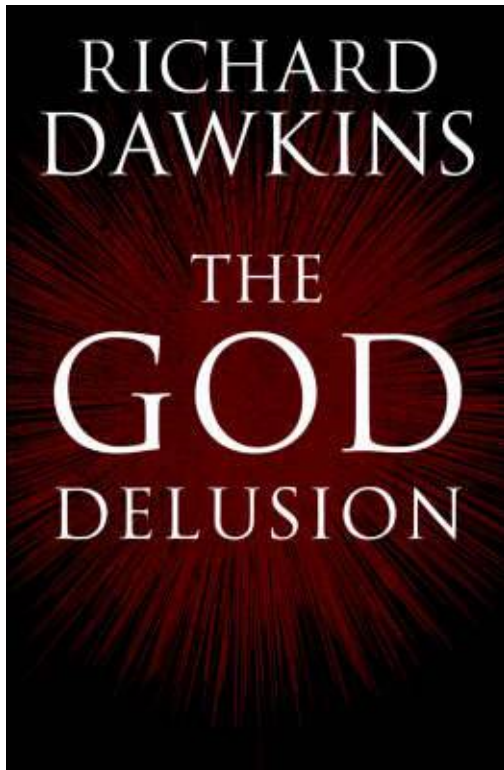
Unreasonable

Intolerant

Some examples

- Richard Dawkins
- Christopher Hitchens
- Polly Toynbee
- Daniel Dennett
- Sam Mason
- Michel Onfray

Images of unbelief



But . . .

Richard Dawkins contributed a reading of a chapter from the Song of Solomon to the King James Bible Trust's YouTube Bible project

- ‘we come from a Christian culture and not to know the King James Bible, is to be in some small way, barbarian’
- ‘it is important that religion should not be allowed to hijack this cultural resource’

For more information, see

<http://www.kingjamesbibletrust.org/news/2010/02/19/richard-dawkins-lends-his-support-to-the-king-james-bible-trust>

Winding up

The five factors and one more:

- cultural heritage
- vicarious religion
- a shift from obligation to consumption
- new arrivals
- secular alternatives

Europe as an exceptional case

Large part of the world as 'as furiously religious as ever'

Questions/ tensions to keep in mind

Thinking about:

- growth or decline/ more or less?
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- public and private
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A tentative conclusion . . .

A continuing/remorseless process of secularization (a worrying loss of religious literacy), offset by growth in some areas

The increasing salience of religion in public as well as private debate, a tendency encouraged by the ever more obvious presence of religion in the modern world order

A challenging combination

Key reading(s)

G. Davie 'Religion in Europe in the 21st century: the factors to take into account', *European Journal of Sociology*, 65, 2006

P. Berger, G. Davie and E. Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe: A Theme and Variations*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2008

A. Bäckström, G. Davie, N. Edgardh and P. Pettersson (eds) *Welfare and Religion in 21st century Europe: Volumes 1 and 2*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2010