**Where Next for Religion in the Public Sphere? Conference of the Religion and Society Programme with Faiths and Civil Society Unit, Goldsmiths college, University of London, held at the British Library, London, 1st July 2010**

Gurharpal Singh, Deputy Director of RaD, attended this one-day conference, which explored the rapidly changing relations between faith and policy in the UK. It asked ‘where next?’ for the policy rhetoric of the last decade - community, cohesion, and social capital; prevention of violent extremism/’radicalisation’; and the ‘sectoralisation’ and ‘mainstreaming’ of faith-based work.

Linda Woodhead (Director of the Religions and Society research programme, Lancaster) and Adam Dinham (Head of the Faiths and Civil Society Unit, Goldsmiths) highlighted the key issues for discussion, arising out of research, including that undertaken within the Religion and Society programme itself, on policy initiatives taken by the previous Labour administration, and their implications for the new coalition. The issues raised included ideas of faith organisations as ‘repositories’ of information vital for policy makers and faith institutions as possible contributors to social cohesion; the role of faith within the ‘prevent agenda’ intended to prevent Muslim radicalisation; the role of ‘faith’ in the public sector since the Faith in the City report in 1985 (including its pivotal role after race riots in 2001, 9/11 and the London bombings of 7/7); and the question of whether faith organisations and the churches have become ‘instruments of the state’, affecting their right to or role in criticising state policy.

Vivien Lowndes and Grace Davie focused specifically on the role of ‘public religion’ in the UK. Vivien Lowndes gave an overview of the role of religion since the mid-1990s and reported findings from her team’s current research on public sector perceptions of faith actors. She identified three distinct narratives: a ‘resources narrative’ which takes an ‘instrumentalist’ view of faith groups and their assets, a ‘religious narrative’ which sees faith leaders and organisations as two-way conduits between faith communities and central/local government, and a ‘representation narrative’ which noted that faith communities are represented in the advisory structures utilised by government.

Grace Davie followed with a brief history of faith representation in public life, noting significant world events that have brought ‘religion’ into the public sphere, including the Iranian revolution, the collapse of the USSR in 1989 (and the subsequent ‘re-discovery’ of public faith in Eastern Europe) and 9/11. In the UK, the growth and overall dominance of secularism, ‘public religion’ has always existed in a variety of forms, disquieting elements of society (mainly secularists and, in the light of recent demographic change, conservative Christians).

Comments highlighted the historically central role of the Christian churches in both sectarian conflicts and their resolution in Scotland and Northern Ireland and the increasing focus of government since the election of New Labour in 1997 on using faith-based organisations because of a belief that they can increase social cohesion through participation.

The themes of community cohesion and social capital were introduced by Richard Farnell (Coventry) and Francis Davis (author). Richard Farnell began by exploring the post-2001 political consensus regarding social cohesion following the riots in cities in northern England early in the year. He discussed whether the subsequent New Labour rhetoric and policy drive focusing on ‘community cohesion’ had been successful, and posed questions for debate including the significance of the UK’s highly unequal distribution of wealth, the government domination of the public sphere and use of the ‘faith sector’ to promote its own agenda, whether faith schools discourage social cohesion, and whether Muslim communities resist integration.
Francis Davis asserted that over the previous decade, the analysis of religion adopted by the UK government has been ineffective in fostering cohesion, stating that the state has attempted to codify ‘religion’ while promoting its own agenda.

Adam Dinham, the session chair, asked who the ‘actors’ are in social cohesion policy initiatives, and questioned whether young people and women are adequately represented in faith organisations. He critiqued the utilisation of faith to foster social cohesion, highlighting the ‘romantic’ view of faith groups held by government and pointing out that the use of faith groups by government may constrain their ability to operate outside government control, turning them into government rather than community tools. Participants suggested that the concept of ‘social capital’ should be discarded for faith organisations and communities and replaced it with the group-centric concept of ‘religious capital’ and the individual-centric concept ‘spiritual capital’, the meaning of secularism needs to be clarified, and the negative view of faith involvement in public policy held by many.

Doreen Finneron (Faith-Based Regeneration Network) and Luke Bretherton (King’s College, London) examined ideas about active citizens and communities. Doreen Finneron started by inspecting citizens’ expectations of public policy, namely the need to regenerate poorer areas, create a ‘safe’ society and ensure that society is governable. She noted the importance given to communities and citizens by government and its increasing reliance on faith communities to assist in urban renewal, despite evidence that its expectations exceed their capacity to create new networks. Luke Bretherton noted that the new coalition’s idea of a ‘big society’ has existed in a variety of forms for decades, especially since the end of the cold war. He discussed the roles of citizens, as individualistic voters and volunteers, but also as ‘vow keepers’, which links individuals with the wider society, including engagement in ‘public services’.

A debate on the prevention of violent extremism was initiated by Philip Lewis (Bradford) and Arun Kundnani (Author). Philip Lewis discussed perceptions of the government’s Prevent agenda amongst practitioners and the communities towards which it is targeted, as well as its impact. He began by suggesting that many Muslim communities regard Prevent as synonymous with a ‘big brother’ state, suggesting that government should link Prevent with attempts to improve community cohesion and develop a better understanding of Islam, including engaging with ‘non-violent’ Islamist groups. Arun Kundnani questioned the targeted action towards Muslim communities that the Prevent agenda advocates, concluding that it is an ill-thought through policy that instrumentalises elements of the community it is targeting for counter-terrorism, reframing community cohesion policy within a policing framework and leading many, both Muslims and non-Muslims, to see the cultural divide in this way, regardless of whether this is beneficial for a cohesive society.

The belief that faith communities and organisations can be ‘mainstreamed’ through ideas about social enterprise and volunteering was discussed by Margaret Harris (Aston) and Francis Davis (author). The former began by discussing whether the government and the ‘faith sector’ understand the differences in their goals. For example, she questioned whether FBOs understand the likely impact of the targets and constraints that are likely to be imposed on them if they collaborate with government and noted that government attitudes towards FBOs generally focus on the supposed financial resources on which they can draw upon. Francis Davis summarised the role of the Christian church in launching social enterprise schemes to support communities in the decades prior to the millennium, noting that this was done at arm’s length from the state to escape from bureaucracy and state constraints, although some earlier initiatives (such as meals for the elderly) were subsequently endorsed by government. He argued that there needs to be an overhaul of government programmes regarding faith organisations and urban renewal.

The final debate focused specifically on the key theme of the conference: should the ‘faith sector’ be regarded as an instrumental arm of government or a more critical element of society? Andrew Brown (author and journalist and chair of the session) started by stressing the difference between
the belief that it is desirable to mainstream faith communities in governance and normative secularism, which often perceives faith involvement as interference in public policy. Haleh Afshar (House of Lords) focused on the identity of women in Islam, especially when they are identified by government schemes and policy. She believes that under New Labour, despite the increased attention paid to religious communities, Muslim women were as alienated from public policy as ever, with stereotypical biases about their identity overruling notions of a different identity that have been revealed by research. She asserted that women in Islam are constrained by the images held of them by both their own communities and wider society: as repressed and disinterested in affairs outside their own sphere of influence and, when they display an interest in feminism and/or their political identity, as misguided or even ‘dangerous’. She stressed that Islam itself is subject to erroneous descriptions as singular, when in practice there are several identities within Islam as there are within Christianity.

Bhikhu Parekh (House of Lords) focused on the relationship between secularism and religion in UK politics. Firstly, he asserted that secularism in the UK in its current form is not neutral, arguing instead that it is inherently pro-Islamic and anti-Christian. He alleged that the secular consensus that religion should not have a role in the public sphere has led to disproportionate attention being paid to minority religions such as Islam which is, in his view, unfair to the majority religion of Christianity. This linked to his second point, in which he argued that secularism takes no account of the history or culture of a society, again producing an inherent bias against Christianity in the UK, which he compared with other states (such as India) which, despite being secular, take into account the main religious beliefs in the country. Finally, he questioned the aggressive stance of secularism towards religious rights and beliefs, citing legislation within UK equalities law that has led to discrimination against religious organisations, for example the requirement that adoption agencies should accept gay people as adoptive parents, which led to the closure of Catholic adoption agencies opposed to this on religious grounds. Participants’ challenges to his arguments included a rebuttal of his theory that secularism depends on state neutrality and criticism of the increasing tendency of religious groups and organisations to portray themselves as victims of the status quo in order to secure state funding.

An account of the event, including podcasts of the presentations, are available on http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/