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Author(s): Steven Kettell

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# On the Public Discourse of Religion: An Analysis of Christianity in the United Kingdom

Steve Kettell

*University of Warwick*

**Abstract:** Debates over the involvement of religion in the public sphere look set to be one of the defining themes of the 21st century. But while religious issues have attracted a large degree of scholarly attention, the public discourse of religion itself, in terms of the effort to assert and legitimize a role for faith in the public realm, has remained notably under-researched. This article marks an initial step to address this deficiency by deconstructing the public discourse of Christianity in the United Kingdom. It argues that, while appealing for representation on the grounds of liberal equality, the overall goal of this discourse is to establish a role for itself as a principal source of moral authority, and to exempt itself from the evidentially-based standards and criteria that govern public life.

## INTRODUCTION

Politics and religion may form two of the three great conversational taboos, but their inter-relationship forms one of the most potent and contentious issues of modern times. In particular, the debate over the role of religion in the public sphere looks set to be one of the defining themes of the 21st century. Yet, for all the scholarly attention that has been devoted to religious matters, the discourses that are deployed by religious actors in their efforts to gain, exert, and legitimize public influence remain an area that is notably under-researched. This article marks an initial attempt to address this deficit by deconstructing the public discourse of

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Address correspondence and reprint requests to: Steve Kettell, Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, United Kingdom. E-mail: stevekettell@gmail.com

41 Christianity in the United Kingdom (UK). Based on an extensive analysis  
42 of speeches, sermons, interviews, and texts from senior Church represen-  
43 tatives, as well as from prominent public figures and other organizations  
44 engaged in the debate, it sets out to map the internal architecture of this  
45 discourse, and to show how its various nodes combine to form an over-  
46 arching structure of argumentation. The article contends that, while  
47 asserting the legitimacy of public influence on the grounds of liberal  
48 equality and fairness, the public discourse of Christianity in the UK ulti-  
49 mately seeks to establish a role for itself as a principal arbiter on moral  
50 issues, and to exempt itself from the evidentially-based standards and cri-  
51 teria that govern public life. In so doing, this highlights the clear tensions  
52 that exist between secular and religious arguments for the representation  
53 of faith in the public sphere.

## 54 55 56 **RELIGION AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE**

57  
58 Debates over the role of religion in the public sphere, look certain to be  
59 one of the central and defining areas of political life in the 21st century.  
60 At the present time there are few countries in the world that can claim to  
61 possess a fully secular separation between the state and religion (Fox  
62 2006), and the influence of the latter in the public realm is one that con-  
63 tinues to grow (Philpott 2007). Indeed, that the multifarious and abundant  
64 intersections of politics and religion in the modern world need no intro-  
65 duction, and that highlighting them would be a conspicuous and mundane  
66 task, it aptly demonstrates the salience of the issue. As an obvious field  
67 for scholarly endeavor, the topic of religion is one that has also attracted  
68 an intense amount of academic attention, traversing a variety of disci-  
69 plines, often with interdisciplinary overlap between them, including  
70 anthropology (Hann 2007; Saler 2008), history (Morris 2003; Mancini  
71 2007), sociology (Davie 2000, 2006; Coleman, Ivani-Challian and  
72 Robinson 2004; Crockett and Voas 2006), law (Greenawalt 1998;  
73 Danchin 2008); philosophy (Macdonald 2005; Habermas 2006), psychol-  
74 ogy (Green and Rubin 1991; Barrett 2000; Boyer 2003; Rossano 2006);  
75 economics (Lipford and Tollinson 2003; Fase 2005), and political science  
76 (Keddie 1998; Kotler-Berkowitz 2001; Philpott 2007). Within this highly  
77 congested scholarly sphere, however, the issue of religious discourse has  
78 been something of a neglected area. Moreover, even when this has been  
79 touched upon, studies remain problematic, often focusing on internal  
80 theological issues and on promoting the role of faith in the public

81 realm, rather than seeking to unpack the internal structures of religious  
82 discourse itself (Elliot 2007; Bedford-Strohm 2008), or focusing on  
83 aspects of religious discourse that are limited to particular issues or to  
84 specific denominations within a particular faith (Laermans 1995;  
85 Dillon 1996; Wuthnow 1988; Karaflogka 2002; Leonard 2003).

86 But while the public discourse of religion remains overlooked as a  
87 topic of study, an understanding of its internal dynamics is of crucial  
88 importance for understanding the intersection between religion and poli-  
89 tics in the modern world. As the principal means by which those advocat-  
90 ing a public role for a particular faith seek to promote and legitimize this  
91 end, a public discourse of religion is necessarily based on a mutually  
92 shared interpretation of the main problems and challenges that such  
93 objectives face, as well as the most appropriate and effective method  
94 of dealing with them. Emerging, on this basis, through a process of deliber-  
95 ation and debate, the resultant discourse (which exists only as a fluid  
96 societal relation, and which is independent of those from whose efforts  
97 it arose) denotes an attempt to shape, mould and frame both the terms  
98 and content of public debate. In essence, this involves marshalling and  
99 deploying various lines of argument, emphasizing and de-emphasizing  
100 certain aspects, principles, and values rather than others, in an effort to  
101 explain, persuade and mobilize support. In so doing, the overarching  
102 structure of a public discourse comprises a range of specific argumentum  
103 nodes, or components, each of which serves a specific and limited  
104 purpose, but all of which, when combined, form a holistic, strategically  
105 constructed and purposeful narrative (Fairclough 2000; Finlayson  
106 2007). Indeed, as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams  
107 (2007b, 43), himself explains, the language of public life “is more than  
108 just “mere words.” It is “rhetoric” in the classic sense of that term . . .  
109 rhetoric as language meant to persuade others.”

110 The aim of this article, then, is to establish a marker in the attempt to  
111 understand the public discourse of religion in terms of the manner in  
112 which it seeks to secure and legitimize a role for faith in the public  
113 sphere. The core objective in this regard is to deconstruct the arguments  
114 that are presented by those in favor of this form of religious influence and  
115 to map out the main features of its internal structure; to outline the way in  
116 which its various elements combine to form an interrelated seam of argu-  
117 mentation. In so doing, the focus here is on the public discourse of  
118 Christianity in the UK. For this, there are two main reasons. First, restricting  
119 the focus to a limited and specialized case, as opposed to a broader analysis  
120 of religious discourse in general is useful in several important respects.

121 In this particular instance, the sufficiently entrenched, although sufficiently  
122 declining, nature of Christianity in the UK provides fertile conditions for the  
123 emergence of a pro-actively argumentative discourse; namely one that is  
124 compelled to justify, legitimize, and account for its public role, and one  
125 that is therefore more likely to contain a heightened emphasis on the core dis-  
126 cursive elements of the public case for religion, than one derived from a reli-  
127 gion whose public role was assured, without challenge, and taken-for-granted.  
128 Determining these core elements is also more likely to be achieved in the case  
129 examined here since the arguments deployed by those seeking a greater public  
130 role for Christianity are unlikely to be diluted by the incorporation of  
131 “extraneous” elements, such as would in all probability be required by  
132 those seeking a greater role in UK public life for Islam or Judaism, for  
133 instance, where the discourses in play would invariably be shaped by their  
134 minority and, certainly in the case of Islam, by their “culturally alien”  
135 status. This is not to say that understanding such extremities and the  
136 extent of their divergence from more linear modes of religious discourse is  
137 unimportant, merely that it is necessary, as a first step, to try and establish  
138 the base-lines that more straightforward discursive strategies might take,  
139 before broadening the analysis to include more complex cases and varieties.

140 A second reason why it may be instructive to study the public dis-  
141 course of Christianity in the UK concerns its diversity. Indeed, one argu-  
142 ment that could be made against the study of religious discourse *per se*  
143 might naturally be that the sheer diversity of religious groups and  
144 beliefs precludes the possibility of a single coherent discourse emerging.  
145 And, certainly, Christianity in the UK is nothing if not eclectic; consist-  
146 ing of multiple denominations ranging from Anglican, Catholic,  
147 Methodist, Baptist, Mormon, Evangelical, and Christadelphian, along  
148 with a wide range of Christian organizations seeking to influence the  
149 public sphere, notable examples of which include Theos, Ekklesia, and  
150 the Christian Institute. Nevertheless, an extensive reading of texts,  
151 sermons, speeches, interviews, commentaries, and documents from  
152 leading figures and agencies involved in the public promotion of the  
153 Christian faith in the UK reveals that, while divergent views clearly  
154 exist on theological and other matters, most of those involved do, in  
155 fact, share a broad set of common positions on the means of securing a  
156 role for Christianity within the public sphere. These are based on both  
157 a common interpretation of the broader socio-cultural position of  
158 Christianity in the UK, and a common view of the best means of  
159 dealing with the challenges that it faces. While Christian groups and  
160 actors may well have different interests and objectives concerning the

161 particular use to which Christian influence within the public realm should  
162 be put (although, as shall be seen, common elements abide here also), the  
163 discursive efforts to establish and legitimize admittance into the public  
164 realm in the first instance are markedly similar. To this extent, therefore,  
165 there are clear grounds for asserting that a coherent public discourse  
166 for Christianity in the UK does exist. Indeed, that the same discursive  
167 elements (arguments, emphases, assertions, and so on) are advanced by  
168 a wide range of Christian groups and individuals (although this is not,  
169 of course, to say that each and every group, still less, each and every indi-  
170 vidual within them, will subscribe to every single aspect) indicates that  
171 the nature of these discursive forms is far from superficial. As Bartley  
172 (2007a), co-director of the Christian think-tank, *Ekklesia*, notes, while  
173 it may seem as if “the Church’s political perspective is so diverse that  
174 it can hardly be considered a movement at all,” there is, at the same  
175 time, “a growing recognition that where Christians are divided over theol-  
176 ogy they can be united around a political viewpoint.”

177 The rest of this paper outlines the core elements of Christian public  
178 discourse in the UK. These nodal points, which together constitute the  
179 broader narrative for Christianity in the public sphere, are as follows:  
180 (1) that religion in general (and Christianity in particular) faces marginaliza-  
181 tion and exclusion from the public sphere by an intolerant form of secular-  
182 ism. (2) That secular critics have, willfully or otherwise, misrepresented  
183 religion as being irrational and dogmatic. (3) That the ontological and epis-  
184 temological claims of secular Enlightenment thought are not universal, but  
185 are merely one of a number of equally valid world-views. (4) That religion  
186 (and therefore Christianity) is an equally valid world-view to that of the  
187 Enlightenment, and thus has a right to be represented in the public sphere.  
188 (5) That religion (and, again, Christianity in particular) is a principal  
189 source of, and authority on, human morality (which Enlightenment  
190 thought is unable to provide). (6) That any attempt to exclude religion  
191 from the public sphere will have adverse social consequences. And  
192 (7), that the claims of religion are not amenable to scientific, evidentially-  
193 based modes of inquiry, and, as such, should not be subject to the usual,  
194 evidentially-based rules and norms of the public sphere.

## 195 196 197 **PERIPHERAL VISIONS**

198  
199 The broader social context shaping the public discourse of Christianity in  
200 the UK is characterized by four main processes: the progressively waning

201 influence of Christianity throughout the postwar period, the concomitant  
 202 rise of secularism over the same duration, the spread of other faiths (most  
 203 notably Islam) over the past three decades, and recurrent internal tensions  
 204 within Christianity over issues such as homosexuality, abortion, and the  
 205 ordination of women priests and bishops. Here, the steady decline in  
 206 church membership (with the Church of England now at a third of its  
 207 1930s levels) as well as the numbers of people whom regularly attend  
 208 church services (falling persistently from the 1960s) provides the most  
 209 apparent and often cited indicators of decline (National Secular Society  
 210 2006; also see Morris 2003). While 71.6% of the population declared  
 211 themselves Christian in the last census during 2001, this is considered  
 212 by many to be an inflated figure,<sup>1</sup> and according to a more recent esti-  
 213 mate, the scale of erosion is such that Christianity in the UK is now on  
 214 course to be superseded by Islam in terms of actively practicing  
 215 members by 2035 (Brierley 2008). Alongside this, a more general  
 216 decline in religious belief itself is also evident (Voas and Crockett  
 217 2005; Crockett and Voas 2006); a recent poll by the Joseph Rowntree  
 218 Foundation, for example, finding that faith is now regarded by many  
 219 people in the UK as intolerant, irrational, and divisive (Watts 2008).

220 This weakening socio-cultural position, manifest in concerns about the  
 221 decline in Christianity's position as the UK's dominant faith and the  
 222 erosion of the UK's Christian culture, forms one of the main themes in  
 223 Christian public discourse. The Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir-Ali,  
 224 for instance, has persistently warned of the "inherent tendency in  
 225 Anglicanism to capitulate," asserting that "all that is of worth in [Britain]  
 226 is based on Christianity" (Mackay 2008), a view that is shared, among  
 227 others, by the Bishop of Winchester, Michael Scott-Joynt (2003), who  
 228 states, given the long and deeply-entrenched role of Christianity in British  
 229 social, political, and cultural life, that "this society has some responsibility  
 230 to listen to Christians if it's going to understand itself and its formation."  
 231 A central motif in such concerns is a sense of marginalization, discrimi-  
 232 nation, and disempowerment in the face of an ever-more secular society,  
 233 and as those critical of religion (most prominently the so-called "New  
 234 Atheists" such as Harris 2004; Dawkins 2006; Dennett 2006; Hitchens  
 235 2007) have become increasingly emboldened in their attacks. Lynda  
 236 Barley (2006), the head of research at the Church of England, notes that **Q1**  
 237 Christianity is under assault from the "forces of secularization"; Cardinal  
 238 Cormac Murphy-O'Connor (2006b), the head of the Catholic Church in  
 239 England and Wales, observes a "new secular aggressiveness" marked by a  
 240 desire "to close off every voice and contribution other than their own";

241 the ex-Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey (2007), describes the chal-  
242 lenge as that of “a militant atheism that is determined to rubbish faith at all  
243 costs”; and Jonathan Chaplin (2007), director of the Kirby Laing Institute for **Q1**  
244 Christian Ethics, notes “a widely held and intensely felt prejudice against  
245 appealing to religious convictions in the public square.” The Christian  
246 view on this point is well summarized by the Evangelical Alliance (2006,  
247 22), who protest that “anti-religious secularist forces . . . have recently  
248 tended to push their way into dominance in the regulation of public life,”  
249 and that “secularist policies, far from being “neutral” . . . merely replicate  
250 discriminatory attitudes towards religion” (Evangelical Alliance 2006, 91).

251 From this sense of peripheralization comes the accompanying assertion  
252 that Christians in the UK need to counter these threats by becoming more  
253 politically active and by seeking a greater involvement in public affairs.  
254 As the Christian think-tank, *Theos* (2006), notes, Christians need to seek  
255 an “overall aim of putting God “back” into the public domain”, and that  
256 (despite acknowledging an “extreme nervousness” on the part of the  
257 general public “about any hint of the divine in public discourse”) it is now  
258 necessary “to demonstrate that religion in public debate . . . is crucial to  
259 enable such public debate to connect with the communities it seeks to  
260 serve.” Seconding this, the fellow Christian think-tank, *Ekklesia* (2006),  
261 similarly notes that “faith communities (not least the churches) are  
262 looking for a new role, new finance, and a new credibility in their battle  
263 against long-term decline and public indifference.” Indeed, the point is  
264 also put that Christians have, in fact, no other credible alternative to political  
265 activism. Nick Spencer (2008), Director of Studies at *Theos*, asserts that  
266 “[t]he Christian religion is a public one and no amount of theological wrig-  
267 gling or low-level secular bullying will change that,” while the Archbishop  
268 of Canterbury (Williams 2008a) maintains that “politics is inescapable for  
269 anyone in or out of the Church or any other religious community.”  
270 Arguments over the public influence of religion, he thus observes  
271 (Williams 2007a), are, in fact, the terrain of a much deeper conflict, one  
272 that “is not simply a matter of religious believers defending themselves,”  
273 but which is fundamentally “about the character of intellectual debate,  
274 about the politics, the power struggles.” A similar point on this is also  
275 made by Murphy-O’Connor (2008b), who, warning that Britain cannot be  
276 allowed to become “a God-free zone,” declares an urgent need “to reach a  
277 new consensus on how best the public role of religious organizations can  
278 be safeguarded and their rights upheld” (BBC News 2007).<sup>2</sup>

279 Whether intentional or otherwise, such calls-to-arms against perceived  
280 injustice have two important effects. On the one hand, these opening



281 claims may help to unify and galvanize members of the Christian faith,  
282 and, on the other, may elicit (at least potentially) a more sympathetic  
283 hearing from non-Christians and moderate secularists on the legitimacy  
284 of Christian involvement in public affairs. These effects, and the image  
285 of unfairness from which they derive, are also present in the second  
286 element of Christian public discourse in the UK; namely, a negation of  
287 the apparent way in which religion has been portrayed by secularists  
288 (and particularly by the “New Atheists”) as dogmatic, irrational, and  
289 the antithesis of the Enlightenment values of reason, rationality, and pro-  
290 gress. In short, the subsequent assertion is that religion has been misrepre-  
291 sented in secular discourse in a crude and one-dimensional fashion.  
292 McGrath (2005, 135), for example, professor of historical theology at  
293 Oxford university and a prominent public defender of Christianity,  
294 staunchly criticizes what he describes as the prevailing secular view of  
295 religious people as “dishonest, liars, fools and knaves,” of being “incap-  
296 able of responding honestly to the real world, and preferring to invent a  
297 false, pernicious and delusory world into which to entice the unwary, the  
298 young and the naïve.” Against such calumny, McGrath (2005, 112–123)  
299 contends that a key aim of Christian discourse should be to reject the  
300 “ludicrous definition” of faith as blind and irrational (a view designed  
301 “with the deliberate intention of making religious faith seem a piece of  
302 intellectual buffoonery”), and to assert instead a view of faith as “the con-  
303 viction of the mind based on adequate evidence.” This concern is also  
304 expressed by Tony Blair (2008), the ex-British Prime Minister, now  
305 head of his own Faith Foundation and another prominent advocate of  
306 Christianity in the public sphere, who maintains that politicians declaring  
307 themselves to be people of faith run the risk of being “considered weird,”  
308 as acting “at the promptings of an inscrutable deity, free from reason  
309 rather than in accordance with it.” The claim that secular critics of reli-  
310 gion have duplicitously attacked a false target for their own ends is  
311 also put up by Williams (2007a), who insists that “whatever the religion  
312 [that] is being attacked here it’s not actually what I believe in,” and by  
313 Murphy-O’Connor (2008a), who contends that “[f]aith for us is the flow-  
314 ering of reason, not its betrayal,” and that “I simply don’t recognise my  
315 faith in what is presented by these critics as Christian faith.”

316 By taking issue with the apparent secular critique of religion in this  
317 way, the claim that the core of the secularist case is no more than a  
318 crude misrepresentation plays a key role in Christian public discourse,  
319 helping to erode the view that Christian beliefs (or religious belief in  
320 general) might in any way be irrational and thus warrant exclusion

321 from the public sphere. Indeed, this point is taken further in its ensuing,  
322 third discursive element, which aims to undermine the dominant position  
323 of Enlightenment thought itself as the sole source of properly constituted  
324 knowledge claims about the world, to challenge its assumptions about  
325 human reason, the role of rationality and the inevitability of progress,  
326 and to present this as being simply one among a multitude of equivalent  
327 world views. By calling into question the epistemological claims of the  
328 Enlightenment on the grounds of their inherently unprovable and hermetically  
329 sealed nature, this seeks to establish an intellectual space into  
330 which can be inserted the claim that religion is an equally valid view  
331 of human reality, and thus has an equally valid claim to representation  
332 in the public realm. On this, for instance, Murphy-O'Connor (2008b)  
333 states that critical secularism “sees religious belief as mere prejudice  
334 while failing to recognise the doctrinaire nature of its own position; the  
335 Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu (2007a), contends that “dogmatic  
336 assumptions also underline non-religious worldviews — Marxism,  
337 Darwinism, Freudianism, capitalism, secularism, humanism and so on”;  
338 McGrath (2005, 116–117) notes that “[p]aradoxically, atheism itself  
339 emerges as a faith, possessed of a remarkable degree of conceptual iso-  
340 morphism to theism”; and Theos (2006, 64–68) claim that the  
341 Enlightenment belief in human progress is “little different from a reli-  
342 gious one . . . an article of faith just like the resurrection.” Indeed, as  
343 Williams (2008c) puts it, the secular-scientific world view “is itself  
344 deeply vulnerable to intellectual challenge and is so partly because, pre-  
345 cisely, it’s trying to be a “theology” (Williams 2008c) Enlightenment lib-  
346 eralism, he thus maintains, “now appears as simply one cultural and  
347 historical phenomenon among others.” (Williams 2005).

## 348 349 350 **AFFAIRS OF THE STATE**

351  
352 From this it is a short step to the claim that, since Enlightenment thought  
353 and faith are equally valid means of understanding reality, there can be no  
354 reason to preclude religious involvement in public affairs, and the more  
355 so in a pluralist liberal democratic society (and especially one in which  
356 Christianity remains numerically and culturally prominent). Yet beyond  
357 this there is no fixed political theology on the precise form that church-  
358 state relations should take. As Joel Edwards (2006), head of the  
359 Evangelical Alliance, explains, “[f]rom its very beginning Christian  
360 faith has been embroiled in the ambiguity between the state and the

361 individual,” and as Murphy-O’Connor (2007c) points out, “the diversity  
362 of ways in which the Church can and has conducted its public witness  
363 suggests that there is no blueprint for that witness, no model for how  
364 close to or distant from the public authorities the Church should  
365 operate.” Indeed, according to one particular variant, the so-called  
366 “Post-Christendom” perspective, the declining cultural dominance of  
367 Christianity is viewed in a positive light, as a force for change offering  
368 the prospect of a revitalization of the church and the pursuit of a more  
369 direct form of political engagement, rather than one which seeks to  
370 bolster traditional institutional links to the state. Here, Bartley (2007a),  
371 an advocate of this view point, describes “the ending of the churches” pri-  
372 vileged position in society as an exciting opportunity to recapture the  
373 radical social vision of the Gospel of Jesus,” and warns that excessively  
374 close relations with the state “runs the risk of buying into the state’s  
375 policy goals and targets rather than a vision of a different kind of  
376 social order” (Bartley 2007b). Simon Barrow (2008a), co-director of  
377 *Ekklesia*, adopts a similar position, calling for “a relocation of the  
378 church from the centre to the margins” in order to establish a more  
379 participatory mode of politics; a view expressed by *Ekklesia* (2006)  
380 itself, which hails the opportunity for “a shift in religious practice  
381 towards questioning power rather than colluding with it.”

382 This view, however, remains a minority one among Christians in the  
383 UK. For most, the objective is not to accelerate the process of de-linking  
384 the state and religion, but to secure the legitimate right for Christian  
385 groups and organizations to exert influence within the established politi-  
386 cal institutions of the British state. As far as the Christian Institute (2003)  
387 is concerned, the aim in this respect is clear: “Christians,” they proclaim,  
388 “are to work for the state to adopt Christian values and to implement  
389 godly laws.” This vision is also promoted by the Jubilee Centre, a  
390 Cambridge-based research organization seeking to promote social  
391 reform along Christian lines. As Michael Schluter (2007), the Centre’s  
392 founder and chairman, puts it: “wherever possible, Christians should  
393 seek to see God acknowledged in public life — in the constitution, the  
394 school curriculum, and the courts — and not accept a “secular state”  
395 where the Trinitarian God is excluded from the formal activities of the  
396 state.” Going further than this, the proclaimed *manifesto* of the Jubilee  
397 Centre calls for the explicit adoption of a theologically-inspired social  
398 order, stating that “Government has a divine purpose,” that “God is the  
399 ultimate source of all political authority,” and that “[t]he final goal of  
400 the political, economic and social system is “righteousness” . . . defined

401 throughout Scripture in terms of a set of values which are exemplified in  
402 the life of Jesus.” “Christians,” it exclaims, “should prioritise evangelism  
403 . . . to build the Christian community and to increase a right “fear of God”  
404 across society as a whole” (Schluter 2007).

405 The ground for assertions such as these typically rests on the normative  
406 basis of political pluralism; namely, that people of Christian faith  
407 have the same right as anybody else to make their case in the public  
408 sphere. The Evangelical Alliance, for example, state that “[o]ne of the  
409 most fundamental freedoms for Christians is liberty to proclaim the  
410 gospel,” to “go on asserting our right to proclaim Him freely as such  
411 in the public arena (Theos 2008); Chaplin (2007) declares that  
412 “Christians may in principle freely avail themselves of every available  
413 avenue of political influence afforded by a representative constitutional  
414 democracy”; Scott-Joynt (2003), insists that “from [the] point of view  
415 of the public arena in general . . . we have as much right as anybody  
416 and that includes as much right as people of other faiths and those  
417 from a number of secular philosophies”; while the Baptist Union of  
418 Great Britain states that “for the good of society, faith communities  
419 make their unique contribution . . . a partnership that must recognise  
420 the proper role of both Church and state, allowing the latter to exercise  
421 proper and legitimate power and releasing the former to be a truly prophe-  
422 tic voice” (Evangelical Alliance 2006).

423 This call for pluralism is combined with a disarming and seemingly  
424 innocuous assertion; namely, that the church has no desire to wield  
425 direct political power, and that it neither seeks nor desires an overly  
426 close relationship with the state. As Williams (2008b) puts it, the goal  
427 is not to establish a theocracy, but for “a crowded and argumentative  
428 public square” in which “religious convictions are granted a public  
429 hearing in debate; not necessarily one in which they are privileged or  
430 regarded as beyond criticism” (Williams 2006). While the church  
431 should not “be able to dictate what Parliament does and what the  
432 nation does,” he notes, it nonetheless “has a right and a duty to get  
433 into the argument and to try and persuade people” (Williams 2008b).  
434 The same point is also well made by Murphy-O’Connor (2006a), who  
435 calls for “respectful dialogue and co-operation between all interested  
436 parties, whether Christians or members of other faiths, agnostics or secu-  
437 larists, and who maintains that “[t]he Church claims only its legitimate  
438 part in the political process . . . not to propose technical solutions to ques-  
439 tions of governance or economic activity, but to help to form a social  
440 culture based on justice, solidarity and truth, for the common good”

441 (Williams 2007a). The aim, then, is for a situation in which Christianity  
 442 serves as the “metaphor of the leaven in the dough, the unseen agent that  
 443 enlivens and animates society from within . . . The Church understood as  
 444 leaven does not rule but serves.” On this basis, since “[t]he Church in a  
 445 plural society must shun every form of privilege and power and dedicate  
 446 herself to serving the common good,” it thereby follows that “[a] servant  
 447 Church poses no threat to anyone, so there are no good grounds for  
 448 excluding it” (Williams 2007b).

449 Indeed, a central notion in this aspect of Christian discourse is that the  
 450 wielding of direct political power, whether in the form of a church-state  
 451 or anything approximating a Christian theocracy, would be eminently  
 452 undesirable since this would delimit the freedom of Christians themselves  
 453 in matters of morality and conviction. In this sense, the pursuit of a fra-  
 454 mework in which Christian groups exert influence within a pluralist  
 455 public sphere, as opposed to wielding direct political control, thus  
 456 becomes more than a matter of political expediency, but, rather, provides  
 457 the best possible form of political arrangement. A key reason for this  
 458 stems from the conception of Christian identity, which, as Williams  
 459 (2005; also see Williams 2004) explains, contains “graded levels of  
 460 loyalty” to state and church. Thus:

461  
 462 The Church of Christ begins by defining itself as a community both along-  
 463 side political society and of a different order to political society . . . it does  
 464 not seek to set up another empire on the same level as the Roman imper-  
 465 ium. It has “citizens”, but their citizenship is not something that requires  
 466 them to set up societies in rivalry to the existing systems.

467  
 468 In this context, then, since direct religious rule would leave no space  
 469 for independent moral conviction (since all such matters would, by defi-  
 470 nition, be determined by the ruling authority), such a political form  
 471 would threaten this conception of a dual Christian identity. Put another  
 472 way, such an identity would become far harder to sustain if the legitimate  
 473 authority for such differentiation was itself the predominant force in the  
 474 political realm; a state of affairs, as Williams (2006) puts it, in which “the  
 475 Church’s administration [came to] look more and more like a rival kind  
 476 of state,” resembling the pre-Reformation “religious sanctioning of state  
 477 power as exercised by “godly princes.” In sum, therefore, “the churches  
 478 do not campaign for political control (which would undermine their  
 479 appeal to the value of personal freedom) but for public visibility — for  
 480 the capacity to argue for and defend their vision in the public sphere”

481 (Williams 2007b). This point is also emphasized by Murphy-O'Connor  
482 (2007a). As he maintains:

483  
484 The attempt by a state to proclaim a particular religion as true and to force  
485 its observance on people is inimical to Christianity itself. Truth and  
486 freedom need each other, which is why from its beginnings the  
487 Christian Church proclaimed the distinction between temporal and  
488 spiritual.

489 The call for equal participation in the public realm, for faith to be  
490 treated in an equivalent fashion as all other interests and view points,  
491 however, comes with an important qualification; namely, the right for  
492 Christians to reject the authority of the state when it acts in contravention  
493 of Christian teaching. As the Christian Institute (2006) declare: "There  
494 may be circumstances where the Christian cannot obey the state: if the  
495 state should command what God forbids or forbid what God commands  
496 then the duty of the Christian must be to obey God rather than man."  
497 Similarly, as Spencer (2008) puts it, the degree and nature of Church-  
498 state relations is, to a great extent, dependent on the nature of the govern-  
499 ing authorities. Thus:

501 If they do what the Gospel indicates they should do . . . then there is real  
502 opportunity for partnership. If, on the other hand, the authorities'  
503 concept of the good is in serious tension with what the Gospel proclaims  
504 it should be . . . the Church cannot but work against it.

506 A more extreme version of the same point is put by the Evangelical  
507 Alliance (2006). As they note: political action on a Christian basis  
508 "may, where necessary, take the form of active resistance to the state.  
509 This can take different forms and may encompass disobedience to law,  
510 civil disobedience, involving selective, non-violent resistance or  
511 protest, or ultimately violent revolution." On this, both mainstream and  
512 Post-Christendom streams of thought are at one. Barrow (2008b), for  
513 instance, contends that a Christian's relationship to the state and human  
514 authority is "necessarily conditional," that "good citizenship is a  
515 Christian virtue. But "the good" is very much the defining feature in  
516 this formula, and when it goes wrong . . . resistance is just as much a  
517 duty." In sum, he concludes, the idea that "religious commitments  
518 should always be secondary to civic ones" was "not a position many of  
519 us find remotely credible." Here, too, Williams (2008a) is also clear.  
520 "Christians," he explains, "have historically held to the right to resist

521 what is believed to be directly against God’s justice: to disobey, to fail to  
 522 obey a command — even from a legally appointed superior — which is in  
 523 conscience held to be against God’s justice.”

524 While these assertions to the limits of political authority may well be  
 525 honorable, or even dutiful (indeed, no serious democrat of any persuasion  
 526 could contend otherwise), there nevertheless remains an important point  
 527 to be made concerning the bases from which the legitimacy, or the right,  
 528 to assert such resistance is said to derive; namely, between the notion of  
 529 resistance based on an abstract, Enlightenment-based conception of  
 530 human rights, and that deriving from elements which are theologically  
 531 determined. While this distinction, for most intents and purposes, may  
 532 appear largely semantic, the principle it raises is one that is nevertheless  
 533 significant. Real ethical differences may, and frequently do arise, for  
 534 instance, on matters relating to sexuality, gender, reproduction, and free  
 535 speech, which may offend the “convictions” of those professing religious  
 536 faith while remaining an interwoven part of the secular tapestry of human  
 537 rights that are now central to many liberal democratic societies. In terms  
 538 of Christian public discourse, this differentiation between the secular  
 539 basis for human rights and that of the divine thus serves to establish a  
 540 key argumentative principle; namely, that the legitimate allegiance of  
 541 Christianity lies not with “pluralism,” “democracy,” or “human rights”  
 542 *per se*, but with a realm that separates itself from, and subjects itself  
 543 to, an altogether different set of criteria.

544

545

## 546 MORAL STANDARDS

547

548 The significance of this point is highlighted by the final components of  
 549 Christian public discourse in the UK. Here, a central theme is that contem-  
 550 porary British society is currently enduring a state of social, moral, and spiri-  
 551 tual decay as a direct result of modernity and its associated culture of  
 552 individualist consumerism, and that a greater role for Christianity in the  
 553 public sphere is essential if the situation is to be reversed. At this juncture,  
 554 Christian public discourse takes a crucial strategic turn, moving from  
 555 general and ostensibly neutral claims concerning equality of representation  
 556 in the public sphere, to particularist claims in which it is asserted that religion  
 557 provides a principal source of morality, and that Enlightenment-based secu-  
 558 larism has no foundational basis for the elaboration of human values and  
 559 ethics. This invokes a subtle discursive shift, from the apparently innocuous  
 560 request to be granted a seat at the public table on the grounds of fairness and

561 plurality, to a framing of the more general public narrative in terms of the  
562 problems of (post)modern society, the solution to which, it is argued, can  
563 only be found in a reassertion of religion through its unique abilities as a pro-  
564 vider of ethical virtue and social cohesion. Thus, while Christian discourse  
565 asserts the right to equal participation in the public sphere, the terms of its  
566 entry into the public sphere are shaped in such a way as to allow for  
567 unique and particularizing claims to be made about Christianity as a major  
568 source of morality and as an ethical guarantor of liberal society.

569 Representative of such claims, for example, are the views of Carey  
570 (2006). Pinning the blame for Britain's social atrophy squarely on "the  
571 shallow roots of a secular culture," the ex-Archbishop contends that  
572 this has led invariably to "more crime, broken families, acceptance of  
573 cohabitation instead of marriage, soaring numbers of teen-age pregnan-  
574 cies . . . and a general decline in moral values and standards." Carey's  
575 successor makes the point emphatically too, stating that the social pro-  
576 blems of modernity were "a predictable result of abandoning the belief  
577 that each person is the work of God" (Williams 2007b), that "moral per-  
578 spectives don't just derive from abstract civic principles," and that  
579 Enlightenment liberalism offers "a set of practices which may exhibit  
580 values and morality but doesn't generate them" (Williams 2008c). The  
581 involvement of faith, he duly concludes, is necessary in order to  
582 counter "the increasingly atomised and consumerist approach to civil  
583 participation" (Hansard 2006, Cl.501). The same point is made by **Q2**  
584 Murphy-O'Connor (2007b), who also attacks the culture of "mindless  
585 consumerism" as the root cause of today's social problems. This, he  
586 maintains, has helped to create a moral and spiritual vacuum in which  
587 people are experiencing "a sense of loss," but are being held back from  
588 addressing deeper spiritual questions by the strident nature of contem-  
589 porary secularism. "[T]here is a pervasive message," he laments, "that to  
590 commit yourself to God through a religious faith is to take a step back  
591 from being independent and mature" (Williams 2008b). Continuing the  
592 theme, the Archbishop of York also rounds on individualism, highlight-  
593 ing "consumption and the vaunting of individual economic status over  
594 our communal well being" as having "led to a politics which has given  
595 the market the role of moral guardian" (Sentamu 2008). As he explains:

597 if we push for the end of religion in the public arena, in our politics and the  
598 public square . . . moral responsibility will be displaced not by reason,  
599 science or ethics but by sheer consumerism. The moral imperative of  
600 doing the right thing is in danger of being replaced by the consumerist



601 imperative to buy the right thing. And to buy it now, whatever the cost  
602 (Sentamu 2008).

603  
604 Buttrressing the claim that religion, and more particularly Christianity,  
605 offers the proper repose to such decline, and indeed provides a mainstay  
606 for moral authority in the public sphere, is an assertion that excluding reli-  
607 gion from the public realm will lead to a far worse state of affairs. One  
608 reason that is frequently given for this, and one that again draws on the  
609 virtues of liberal pluralism, is that denying Christian groups access to the  
610 public sphere would undermine the very principles of liberalism and toler-  
611 ance on which Western society itself is based. As Murphy-O'Connor  
612 (2007b) puts it, “to banish religion from the public square in the name of  
613 freedom and democracy is to threaten freedom and democracy, and the  
614 very existence of that public square”; or, as Williams (2007b) explains,  
615 “the state will become a sterile and oppressive thing unless it is continually  
616 engaged in conversation with those who speak for the gospel,” and that  
617 “without a willingness to listen to the questions and challenges of the  
618 Church, liberal society is in danger of becoming illiberal” (Williams 2005).

619 Another reason that is often advanced for the necessity of inclusiveness,  
620 however, although one that sits uneasily with claims of moral virtue, is  
621 that denying religious groups access to the public sphere will only cause  
622 them to become more fundamentalist and more extreme in their beliefs  
623 and actions. As Williams (2005) puts it, allowing religious groups access  
624 to the public sphere “reduces the risk of open social conflict,” since confining  
625 moral and spiritual matters to the private sphere runs the risk that “they may  
626 be distorted into fanaticism and exclusion.” Or, as the Bishop of Derby,  
627 Alastair Redfern (2007), explains, ignoring the voice of the religious  
628 “would risk creating an open space ripe for the proselytising of far more  
629 radical operators of theology and nurture.” Still further, in the words of  
630 Theos (2006, 64): “If you exile religious communities to the margins, then  
631 they will start to speak words of fire among consenting adults, and the  
632 threat to public order and the public arena . . . will grow.”

633 Having shifted the terms of debate from the general to the particular in  
634 this way, the final aspect of Christian public discourse in the UK attempts  
635 to put its claims concerning the provision of morality beyond question by  
636 stating that religious argument should not be submitted to the same  
637 evidentially-based standards and criteria to which all other participants  
638 in the public sphere are held. Having initially appealed for a right to  
639 representation in the public realm on the basis of liberal equality, it is  
640 now asserted that religiously-based claims should not be bound by

641 what are considered by many to be the normal terms of public discourse.  
642 A crucial point here is a claim, not merely that no evidence need be sub-  
643 mitted in defense of religiously-based assertions, but, more fundamen-  
644 tally, that the very idea of evidence is itself an inappropriate form for  
645 adjudging the value of such propositions. Thus, McGrath (2005, 135),  
646 for example, asserts both that “the scientific method is incapable of adju-  
647 dicating the God-hypothesis, either positively or negatively,” and that  
648 “evidence takes us thus far, but then when it comes to deciding  
649 between a number of competing explanations, its extremely difficult to  
650 have an evidence-based argument for those final stages” (McGrath  
651 2007). Faith, from this perspective, is now defined not as the originally  
652 formulated “conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence”  
653 (McGrath 2005), but as the point “at which it goes beyond the evidence,”  
654 the need for which is circumvented by an assertion that God is “above,  
655 rather than within, the natural process” (McGrath 2007). This line is  
656 also advanced by, among others, the Archbishop of York, who explains  
657 that:

658  
659 We’ve gone into the logic, the reasoning, the explanation. Ultimately,  
660 when you have done all of that, there is something bigger than that  
661 which we call mystery . . . Not all things are explainable. Not all things  
662 are solvable. Some things really remain unresolved (Sentamu 2007b).

663 Or, as Murphy-O’Connor (2006c) maintains, “you don’t prove the doc-  
664 trine of the Resurrection just by reason. It comes as a gift of faith,” “the  
665 mystery of God” means “that proper talk about God is always difficult,  
666 always tentative . . . A God who can be spoken of comfortably and  
667 clearly by human beings cannot be the true God” (Murphy-O’Connor  
668 2008b). The view that religion offers a form of knowledge and experience  
669 that is not open to, and thus cannot be subjected to, rational scientific  
670 inquiry, is also offered by Rowan Williams. As he puts it, religious doc-  
671 trine should not be regarded as something akin to “a scientific system,”  
672 but is rather “an account of the context in which the whole of the universe  
673 exists — the context of God . . . a vision, an imagination, a commitment  
674 rather than a set of explanations” (Williams 2008b). Thus:

676 that very structure requires some comprehensive energy at another level  
677 that sustains it as what it is. And because that comprehensive energy at  
678 another level is not the product of other things, doesn’t have a history,  
679 isn’t the result of processes going on . . . we are not going to find successful  
680 or comprehensive words for it, but can only gaze into what is undoubtedly

681 mysterious, but not mysterious in a way which simply says this is a puzzle  
682 somebody one day might solve (Williams 2007a).

683  
684 In terms of the overall aims of Christian public discourse, such claims,  
685 which many secularists would regard as little more than obfuscation, are  
686 not simply a case of unreflective ambiguity, or evasion. Rather, they  
687 signify a definite strategic maneuver; a means of circumventing any  
688 thorny arguments about evidence by denying the validity of the very  
689 notion that “God,” and hence by extension claims made on the basis of  
690 faith, can be understood in rationalist and evidential terms. Moreover,  
691 reprising the theme of an aggressive secular assault, and of the theological  
692 and hermetically sealed nature of Enlightenment thought, it is also  
693 asserted that any attempt to take issue with the above formulation and  
694 to impose any uniformity of criteria on religious groups in the public  
695 sphere is itself a form of discrimination. As Theos (2006, 28) maintain,  
696 “religious participation within the public square must accommodate  
697 itself to public reason, but public reason must be willing to accommodate  
698 itself to religious participation.” Religious bodies and actors, then, should  
699 be willing to adjust their reasoning and language “to what is currently  
700 acknowledged as the norm in public discourse,” although, at the same  
701 time, “should also be willing to challenge that norm, questioning  
702 axioms, confronting arguments and asking all parties, irrespective of  
703 their public identities, to justify their faith-based positions.” Thus:

704  
705 there remains a wider question about who sets the terms of public dis-  
706 course. Who defines what public reason is? We deceive ourselves if we  
707 say that public reason can be truly neutral . . . and not just because  
708 certain people deem certain texts to be revelatory and others don’t . . .  
709 Who decides what constitutes a proper political reason?

710  
711 On this, Murphy-O’Connor (2007c) proposes a similar argument,  
712 rejecting any notion of “the establishment of norms that everyone must  
713 accept,” and asserting instead the need to provide “space in which this  
714 conviction can be respected in the public sector.” “[B]eing secular,” he  
715 asserts, “does not mean closing down the space in which religious con-  
716 viction and motivation can shape and contribute to the common good.”  
717 And so, too, is the point made by Williams. Despite claiming that “[r]eli-  
718 gious groups may organize themselves however they choose in private  
719 life, but they must enter public society accepting liberal principles”  
720 (Williams 2007b, 53), the reality is that the Archbishop remains critical

721 of the liberal secular world view, taking issue with “[t]he tempting idea  
722 that there is always an adequate definition of what everyone will recog-  
723 nise as public and reasonable argument” (Williams 2006).

## 724 725 726 **CONCLUSIONS**

727  
728 In their efforts to justify and legitimize a role for the Christian faith in the  
729 public sphere, Christian actors and organizations in the UK assert and  
730 adhere to a coherent public discourse. This is based on a common  
731 context of decline and secularization, and a common analysis of the  
732 most appropriate forms of argument to deploy in response. Outlining  
733 the core elements of this discourse, and the way in which its nodal  
734 points of argument combine to promote an overarching political objec-  
735 tive, offers a useful initial framework for building a deeper and broader  
736 understanding of the public discourse of religion more generally. The  
737 above analysis thus raises a number of important issues for further  
738 research. It would be particularly useful, for example, to establish  
739 whether or not there are any common elements in the challenges that  
740 are faced by Christianity in the UK and those that are faced by other reli-  
741 gious faiths, both in the UK and in other states; whether there are any  
742 common elements of discourse that exist between separate religions in  
743 different national contexts; and what factors might account for any simi-  
744 larities and differences that may be observed. Consideration of whether or  
745 not there are any grounds for establishing a common public discourse  
746 among religious faiths as a whole also remains a crucial question, as  
747 does the issue of whether there are any inherent compartmentalization  
748 between faiths and locales, and, if so, whether this leads instead to a  
749 patchwork of separate and mutually exclusive “islands” of religious dis-  
750 course. The answers to these questions, or at least research into attempt-  
751 ing to provide the answers, will go a long way to furthering our  
752 understanding of what is one of the most important dynamics of our time.

753 Although this Endeavour is not one that is likely to be completed with  
754 any degree of rapidity, the foregoing analysis of Christianity in the UK  
755 nevertheless has important implications for the ongoing debate over the  
756 involvement of religion in the public sphere. While consideration of  
757 the terms of religious participation has typically turned on issues such  
758 as “reason,” “fairness,” and “equality” (however they may be defined),  
759 and on questions of how a political framework based on these lines  
760 could be devised (e.g., Audi and Wolterstorff 1997; Rawls 1997;

Dworkin 2006; Habermas 2006), the above examination highlights the real tensions that exist between secular arguments for representation and those that are advanced by Christian public discourse based on claims of a unique epistemological status. Given the incompatible nature of these two positions, especially given the denial of evidentially-based norms by the latter, it is highly unlikely that these tensions will be simply or easily resolved any time soon. If they are found to be a feature of religious discourse beyond the confines of Christianity in the UK, then debates over the public role of faith are only likely to become more fractious as time goes on.

## NOTES

1. In a British Social Attitudes Survey conducted in the same year, 41% of the population declared they as having no religion (see <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/esds/variables/bsa/bsa4615/religion/>). Methodological flaws in the census, such as requiring all questions to be answered by the head of the household, are also thought to have skewed the results. See Voas and Bruce (2004); National Secular Society (2005).

2. On the tension between the claim that Christianity deserves a role in the public sphere due to its deeply entrenched position in British life, and the claim that it needs protecting from marginalization, see Bartley (2008).

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