Has secularism had its day and how can faith charities react?

Pat Finlow *examines the evidence that a renewed interest in faith means that secularism's grip has started to loosen, and what this may mean for charities*

"THE OFT-REPEATED NARRATIVE THAT SOCIETY IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY SECULAR, IS ITSELF A BIT OLD HAT"

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TOWARDS THE end of his barnstorming headline act at the Glastonbury Music Festival in June 2019, rapper Stormzy said to the crowd: "OK Glasto, we're going to church!"

Rather than being offended, thousands of festival-goers followed, joining him and a gospel choir in a beautiful rendition of Blinded by Your Grace.

But how does this square with the persistent and stubborn narrative of "living in an increasingly secular world?" This notion, in one form or another, is regularly repeated in journalism, academic writing and even charitable fundraising material.

Or perhaps it's just Stormzy? After all, he has "form" in this God stuff: on collecting his Brit Award for Best Male Solo Artist in 2018, the first thing he said was that it was all thanks to God. Maybe he is one of the few remaining God botherers in this "increasingly secular world" we keep hearing about?

Or maybe, just maybe, the oft-repeated narrative that society is becoming increasingly secular, is itself a bit old hat, an out of date map that no longer helps us navigate our way through the social landscape of 2020.

Undoubtedly from the 1960s onwards, society did become more secular, with one scholar, Elizabeth Hurd, describing the resulting secular frame of reference as "the invisible scaffolding of our thoughts". Secularism became a pervasive backdrop to policy-making and shaped how British society conducted its affairs, both at home and overseas.

But this "invisible scaffolding" soon morphed into a permanent structure, becoming so accepted as the basis for public discourse that its efficacy was rarely challenged and so continued to shape public debate and inform policy-making for over three decades.

But during the last 10 years or so, there has been an emerging curiosity about religion in many different areas of society.

> "Secularism became a pervasive backdrop to policy-making"

To be clear, this is not to suggest we are living, as some suggest, in a post-secular world. That would be misleading and, to be frank, a bit preposterous. Secularism is still alive and kicking, but there is now a new kid on the block, or rather, one that has come out of 40+ years of hibernation and is finding its voice once again.

A more accurate term may be that secularism has "had its day" in the sense that is no longer the unchallenged all-pervasive framer of public discourse.

EMERGING CURIOSITY

First, let's test out the "emerging curiosity" theory, picking up where we began in the realm of arts and entertainment with Stormzy.

If this facet of society was becoming increasingly secular, we would not expect to find a proliferation of religiously themed musicals, plays, exhibitions, TV series and theatre productions, unless of course they were designed to undermine or ridicule faith.

On the contrary, the sell-out 2019 Christmas production at London's Bridge Theatre was the critically acclaimed The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe, based on CS Lewis's book which is widely regarded as an allegory of the Christian faith. This production followed a season at Leeds Playhouse in 2017 where it broke box office records and a UK tour for the winter of 2020/21 is planned.

Prince of Egypt, a musical based on the life of Moses in the Old Testament, opened at London's Dominion Theatre in February 2020, and as theatres come out of lockdown, the first open-air production at Regents Park is Jesus Christ Superstar, reprising sell-out seasons in 2016 and 2017 at Regents Park and another at the Barbican in 2019. A revival of Godspell is being streamed online in August 2020 and a new production of Joseph and His Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat, originally planned for 2020, has been rescheduled for the London Palladium in Summer 2021.

Highly popular TV dramas such as Call the Midwife, Broken and Grantchester all feature religious characters and storylines that reflect the challenges of living out faith when faced with complex moral and ethical issues.

A continuing discussion about applying faith in the modern world is a central feature in The Two Popes, an Oscar and BAFTA-nominated film which centres around imagined conversations between Pope Benedict

XVI and Pope Francis while the latter was still Archbishop of Argentina.

But how can we understand this appetite? Helpfully, a major review of the BBC's coverage of religion and ethics provides some answers. A key finding of the BBC Religion and Ethics Review, which was published in December 2017 and is available online, was that today's audiences, of all faiths and none, want to know more about religion as they realise that to make sense of the world, they need to understand the systems of belief that underpin it. Specifically, audiences want to understand the role that religion plays in everyday life.

But is this curiosity about religion limited to popular entertainment? What of other public institutions, "highbrow" culture, elite decision-makers and academia?

In 2017/18 the British Museum held a major exhibition entitled Living with Gods, which used a wide range of exhibits to illustrate how religious faith has shaped societies throughout the centuries. The exhibition posed the question: are we humans really "Homo sapiens" or "Homo religious": distinguished by a capacity to think, or because we believe and search to connect with the transcendent?

BBC Radio 4 partnered with the museum to produce an awarding-winning 30-part series drawing from the exhibition, accompanied by a website with animated videos. An emerging curiosity about religion, as opposed to an increase in secularism, is demonstrated by the 3.5 million weekly listeners to the radio series and over a million podcast downloads.

Another illustration of this developing interest in faith comes from Prospect Magazine, which aims to showcase "the big ideas that are shaping our world". A regular feature is The Duel where a proposition is debated by two opposing protagonists. In October 2019 the subject was "Is Praying a Waste of Time?". Following the practice of debating societies the world over, the readership was invited to vote, and in November 2019, it was revealed that 78% believed that prayer was not a waste of time.

While not a scientific analysis, this is not a resounding affirmation of an increasing secular worldview. Nor was the invitation by the TUC to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, to make a keynote speech at its annual conference in 2018.

Similarly, as the work of faith groups is increasingly recognised in international development and humanitarianism, government departments, international institutions and international NGOs have been commissioning research, attending conferences and producing reports on how to partner most effectively with faith groups to improve outcomes for the world's most vulnerable people.

> "The work of faith groups is increasingly recognised"

RESURGENT INTEREST

This plethora of research into religion and society brings me to academia, where many scholars now speak of a "resurgent interest" in religion, based on a recognition, albeit reluctant in many quarters, that religion has not gone away and is often a key factor in shaping how people live their lives.

This is illustrated by the vision of the Faith Centre, established in 2014 at the London School of Economics (LSE): "Religion continues to be present in the public sphere today in ways that many had not anticipated, shaping lives, communities and nations in dramatic ways all around our world". Further insight is provided in a section entitled Religion and Global Society, where it explains: "As LSE's mission is 'to know the causes of things', the work of each LSE department must, at some stage, meet with the reality of religion."

These sentiments are echoed in many universities and are evidenced through numerous academic research programmes. For example, explorations into the role of religious groups in humanitarianism; policy-making for international development; tackling human trafficking & modern-day slavery and the role of religions in achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Unsurprisingly, in recent months, attention has shifted to religious responses to Covid-19.

For example, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society has commissioned Goldsmith University's Faiths and Civil Society Unit to conduct research into the changing relationships between local authorities and faith groups, as anecdotal evidence suggests that new collaborations between them have developed in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The cumulative effect of this emerging curiosity about religion, which cuts across all spheres of society, is that secularism has indeed had its day.

Nevertheless, the stubbornness of a secular paradigm co-existing with a revived and increasingly confident religious voice is a common theme in scholarly writing.

But what does all this mean for the charity sector, especially now, as strategies are being developed for addressing the long-term implications of the coronavirus pandemic?

First and foremost, we have to ditch the outdated narrative of "the world becoming more secular", as it acts as a straightjacket for many faith groups who may fear they are still not welcome to participate in joint ventures or policy-making fora.

Unfortunately, considering the benefit of faith groups to social progress is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the increasing curiosity and openness to religion point to the possibility of new and creative partnerships between civic institutions and faith groups.

But this new world of collaboration will also require a great deal of cultural competence: the mutual understanding of the perspectives of partners. There may need to be consideration of terminology used, and a rejection of unhelpful stereotypes and assumptions.

But like it or lump it, secular and religious perspectives will be jostling along together within civil society for some time to come.

Perhaps we can consider them rubbing shoulders, like the rival athletes in the film Chariots of Fire, who bring out the best in the other, bringing stretch and challenge, but all the while valuing the distinctive contribution of each.

Is this too much to hope for? ●