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Cameron's Conservatism: Why God, Why Now?

In recent months David Cameron has emphasised both his personal religious faith and the ongoing importance of Christianity and religion in Britain. This article seeks to explain why Cameron has made increasing reference to religious themes, and examines the extent to which they have been reflected in the approach of the current *Coalition Government*. *It is argued that Cameron's references to religion have been indicative of still tentative attempts to reaffirm, and in respects redefine, the role of Christianity and faith in British public life in response to the pressures of greater secularisation, religious pluralism and vocal challenges to religious privilege.*

Introduction

In April 2014 David Cameron courted controversy when he described the UK as a 'Christian country' and stated that he wished to 'infuse politics' with Christian 'ideas and values'¹. He even chose to link his favoured theme of the 'Big Society' to the actions of Jesus Christ². These interventions surprised many commentators who had become accustomed to the idea that British political leaders usually make little reference to their personal religious beliefs whilst in office. Although Cameron's predecessors, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were both committed Christians, they did not discuss their faith at length during their periods in Downing Street. Cameron's remarks also angered campaigning secularists who argued that it was no longer viable to describe the UK as Christian given both the decline of traditional worship and the falling numbers of British citizens who identify themselves as Christian³. Yet for a number of years now Cameron's Conservative Party has maintained a commitment to 'do God', albeit in a relatively low-key way. This article seeks to explain why Cameron has recently made more regular references to Christianity and

faith, before examining to what extent this emphasis has been reflected in the approach of the Conservative Party to governing in partnership with the Liberal Democrats since May 2010. First the current controversy is placed in the context of long-term change in the relations between politics and religion. It is suggested that Cameron's comments reflect the paradoxical fact that whilst many traditional forms of religion are in decline, public discussion of religion has actually increased in recent years. Second, it is argued that Cameron's increasing emphasis on religion may be motivated by four important factors, including i) efforts to project Cameron's public persona and personal values; ii) attempts to redefine the role of the Church of England; iii) identity politics and efforts to define 'Britishness'; and iv) efforts to legitimise and support aspects of Cameron's approach to public policy. In conclusion it is proposed that although Cameron has multiple motivations for his comments on religion, these are linked by his apparent belief that the public role of religious groups ought to be defended and expanded at a time when secular attitudes are prevalent.

Context: secularisation, secularism and religious pluralism

Historically speaking at least, the Church of England and Christianity have been central to public life in England. In the middle ages the Church and State were synonymous. Religious wars in Europe, as well as innumerable religious schisms fostered desires for more secular political arrangements that would allow people of varying Christian faiths to be accommodated. Links between political movements and particular religions declined during the twentieth century as processes of economic, social and technological change shaped a decline in traditional religious practice. In the post-war period church attendance has declined markedly and evidence suggests that currently only 17% of the population attend ceremonies once a month or more⁴. A recent opinion poll found that three-quarters of the UK

population now describe themselves as non-religious, even though they may still sometimes participate in religious rituals such as church weddings⁵. However, despite such secularisation Britain has also become a more 'multifaith' nation in the post-war period. Processes of immigration and social change have produced a context in which the multiple forms of Christianity in the UK now coexist alongside types of Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Judaism. The emergence of a religiously plural society, alongside the growing number of people who have 'no faith', lead some to question why the Church of England should continue to have such a privileged place within the British constitution. The continued presence of twenty-six church bishops in the House of Lords is considered by many to be anachronistic. Also, the reluctance of some church leaders to appoint female bishops is often quoted to suggest that the church is out of touch with the social attitudes of the UK more generally. The current Deputy Prime Minister and Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, recently stated that he favours disestablishing the Church of England⁶. Yet this is not a popular view amongst political elites, least of all with Clegg's Conservative colleagues within the Coalition Government, and as matters stand there is no groundswell of public support for radical constitutional change of this sort. More generally there is evidence that British public generally continue to respect religious faith, even when they do not share it⁷. There is also acceptance of the idea that public figures are entitled to have their own personal faith, or indeed to lack religious belief. However, the prevailing expectation has been that politicians should not bring their religion into their political decision-making in any overt way.

Indeed those recent prime ministers who have been religious tended to make only fleeting references to their faith in public. Margaret Thatcher did make rare speeches that made connections between her economic philosophy and her Christian faith.

Her successors, John Major, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were even more sparing in their public discussion of religion. Blair's Director of Communications, Alistair Campbell, stated 'we don't do God', a phrase which is often taken to encapsulate the reluctance of modern politicians to engage on theological or religious matters. However, the situation has been complicated in recent years by a number of other trends. Whilst politics has tended to be conducted on largely secular terms, religion has been subject to more public debate in recent years, particularly following the terrorist attacks in North America on September 11th, 2001 and in London July 7th, 2005. The perceived threats of terrorism and Islamism have raised questions regarding the possible role of particular religious beliefs in shaping violence. Relatedly, there have been concerns that Muslims in the UK may be suffering greater prejudice as forms of Islam are regularly denounced or criticised. A recent YouGov/Times poll found that 47% of the UK population consider even the most moderate forms of Islam to be dangerous⁸. Meanwhile successive British governments have sought to give greater opportunities for religious groups to run schools or other public services. As political leaders have stressed the limits to what the 'top-down' state can do, so they have looked to enhance the role of the voluntary sector, including faith-based organisations.

It is in this context that Cameron sought to assert a religious dimension to his approach to governing. In so doing he was aided by ministers such as Baroness Warsi and Eric Pickles who both placed emphasis on the importance of faith. Both pledged to resist forms of secularism which they argued seek to undermine Christianity and faith within the UK. But how can we account for this turn to a more explicit embrace of religion within government? Was the move largely rhetorical, or does it reflect a shift in approach to governing? Addressing such questions first

requires an examination of Cameron's possible motivations for his more prominent use of pro-Christian language. Critics were quick to suggest that Cameron may have short-term political reasons for this new emphasis, and these are discussed below. However, it is first worth considering how far the rhetoric may have been shaped by Cameron's personal faith.

Public persona and guiding values

It is notable that Cameron now appears ready to affirm a clear Christian identity, when in the past he had spoken of how his faith was a 'bit like the reception for Magic FM in the Chilterns: it sort of comes and goes'. Of course it is possible that the political and personal pressures he has encountered in recent years have affected his religious outlook. Cameron has faced the challenges both of managing the Coalition Government and coping with the death of a son. He spoke of benefitting from the 'healing power' of the Church of England's pastoral care. However, although in opposition Cameron spoke of being 'racked with doubt' about his religion, this does not of itself mean that his religious beliefs were marginal to his character. Indeed 'doubt' is sometimes cited as a common and indeed often important feature of religious experience. Cameron claimed Christianity is important to him in endowing him both with a moral compass and a set of values to guide action. Indeed to the extent that Cameron's focus is on values and social action, this enables him to reach out from his own Anglicanism to emphasise the social benefits of other faiths. He was careful to argue that his affirmation of Christianity does not involve making judgements on people of other faiths, or indeed no faith. For Cameron, faith is not essential for good morals, yet he claimed 'it helps'. Aware that he has been accused

of lacking a clear ideological position or guiding set of principles, Cameron may have been seeking to demonstrate the ways in which he may be ethically anchored.

Of course in modern politics the 'personal' is often political, and the public persona of political leaders may matter more now to electoral success than it did in the past. Valence theories of electoral behaviour suggest that perceptions of leaders can often matter more in voter's decisions than the particular policies of political parties. Cameron's affirmation of his Christianity is unlikely to itself produce noticeable electoral gain within a society that is now highly secular. It may even carry some political risks if we recall that Tony Blair feared being labelled a 'nutter' if he spoke out too much about his religious views. However, Cameron's discussion of Christianity may form part of a wider effort to convey a deeper sense of his personality to the electorate. To the extent that there is a 'presidential' element to British politics, party leaders face the challenge of projecting gravitas to an often sceptical electorate. Cameron's use of Christian themes offers one avenue through which he can attempt to speak with seriousness on issues such as morality and personal responsibility. Both Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband are declared atheists, even though the latter maintains he is influenced by his Jewish heritage. As yet there are no indications that the religious affiliations of the respective political leaders will win or lose votes in any significant way. However, Cameron may believe that without expressing the importance of Christianity to his own worldview, the public may not be able to fully appreciate his distinctive characteristics. Interestingly, since leaving office Cameron's predecessor as prime minister, Gordon Brown, has expressed regret that he did not speak about his religious views more when in Downing Street. Indeed Cameron may be seeking to avoid dangers identified by Brown:

To expect us to leave our religious beliefs at the door of the House of Commons Chamber or of No. 10, and thus bring a diminished version of ourselves to the public square is an 'ask' which should be as intolerable to the true liberal as it is to the true believer. If the values that matters most are spoken least and you become what the great philosopher Michael Sandel calls 'the unencumbered self', then you bring less than your truest, your fullest, your most human self into the space you share with other human beings⁹.

Elite relations and the Church of England

At the same time we should not overlook the extent to which Cameron's recent Christian emphasis may also be motivated by shorter-term political issues. Indeed his comments could be interpreted as gestures of attempted reconciliation with both sections of his own political party and various faith groups. Many backbench Conservative MPs were very unhappy about Cameron's decision to endorse and legislate for same-sex marriage. Such anger was also reflected in large parts of the wider Conservative party membership. It was argued that the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act undermined the long-standing institution of marriage and stood in tension with conservative commitments to the traditional family. Cameron's internal opponents cited the change as further evidence of both Cameron's excessive social liberalism and indeed his disregard for wider conservative opinion. Equally, a range of Christian and other religious groups and leaders voiced opposition to same-sex marriage, sometimes citing theological objections, but more commonly arguing that government had no mandate for a radical change that they believed could damage existing social relations. Church of England leaders opposed the reform suggesting

that it would dilute the meaning of marriage, without enhancing the legal rights of gay people beyond what had been available to them through civil partnerships. However, both Cameron and other 'modernisers' within the Conservative Party have long argued that acceptance of gay rights was an important part of demonstrating that the Conservative party was in touch with modern values and attitudes. Cameron, along with many other Christians saw no contradiction between their faith and an acceptance of same-sex marriage. He also argued that his support for the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act is shaped by his conservatism, not in spite of it, as he believes it can encourage conservative values such as commitment, loyalty, stability and personal responsibility.

However, Cameron's relations with the Church of England have been further strained by the Coalition's austerity policies. In February 2014, twenty-seven bishops condemned the 'cutbacks and failures' of government welfare policies in a letter that was also signed by Methodist and Quaker leaders. The Churches were particularly concerned about growth in poverty and increased reliance on food-banks. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, also highlighted the 'destitution' created by government welfare policies. Cameron resisted such criticisms by arguing that welfare reforms were designed to encourage a greater sense of personal responsibility. However, these interventions were clearly embarrassing for ministers, particularly as the church appeared to be echoing the kinds of objections being raised by the Labour Party in opposition.

Yet, whatever misgivings Cameron may have had regarding the attitude of Bishops to some of his key policies, he clearly wishes to safeguard the national role of the Church of England. Despite the objections of campaigning secularists Cameron continued his push for new faith schools and also called on the church to play a

prominent role within his Big Society initiatives (see below). Moreover, Cameron has sought to affirm the Church of England's leadership role within the context of English religion, albeit a role that is being reformed in response to the pressures of secularisation and religious pluralism. Cameron appears to endorse what Norman Bonney has called an emerging state Anglican multifaithism¹⁰. This perspective suggests that the Church of England is no longer an exclusive state Protestant denomination which jealously protects its own uniqueness. Instead its role has been revised to present itself as the leader and protector of a range of different faith groups. Arguably the prominent role previously played by Baroness Warsi as Faith and Communities Minister symbolised this multifaithism, as although she is a practicing Muslim, she vigorously defends the status of Britain as a Christian country.

British values and identity politics

To some extent Cameron's recent comments on Christianity can be seen as contributions to ongoing debates concerning cultural identity, nationhood and indeed British values. He insisted people should be 'confident' about asserting the UK's Christian identity and drew attention to the historical importance of Christianity in shaping the institutions and values of the UK. A number of factors may have prompted such interventions. Certainly, the Conservatives have been worried by the political success of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), who have demanded that both politicians and the churches be 'more muscular in defence of Judeo Christian culture'¹¹. Debates concerning immigration and the perceived threats posed by Islamism have prompted some to raise the question of whether there are certain 'core' British values that all reasonable citizens of the UK should be expected to share. Before gaining office, Cameron distanced himself from what he

termed 'state multiculturalism' which he argued had resulted in many communities dividing according to ethnicity, language and religion. Such concerns have overlapped with the Conservatives security agenda and the perceived need to prevent young people being recruited or influenced by extremist groups. Cameron appeared concerned that a kind of moral relativism may have taken root:

We have been in danger of sending out a worrying message: that if you don't want to believe in democracy, that's fine, that is equality isn't your bag, don't worry about it that if you're completely intolerant of others, we will still tolerate you¹²

Cameron advocated 'muscular liberalism' to ensure that shared values are upheld across communities, including freedom of speech and respect for the law. Despite tensions over such issues within the Coalition government (with the Liberal Democrats continuing to champion multi-culturalism) senior Tories argued that 'political correctness' must not stand in the way of challenging groups whose values are perceived as illiberal. The so-called 'Trojan Horse' affair, highlighted in June 2014, raised the issue of whether a number of schools in Birmingham had come under the influence of rigid conservative versions of Islam. A leaked government report into the issue found a 'sustained, coordinated agenda to impose segregationist attitudes and practices of a hardline, politicised strain of Sunni Islam'¹³. The then Education secretary, Michael Gove, had earlier responded to the affair by stating that 'British values' would be put at the heart of the curriculum and that all schools would be required to actively promote them. Cameron himself made a commitment that all school pupils should be taught about the Magna Carta in advance of its 800th year anniversary in 2015. Some have suggested that Cameron has pandered to a far right and possibly anti-Muslim agenda through portraying

certain immigrant groups as a threat to national security. There have been tensions within the Conservative Party on such issues. 'Neoconservative' sympathisers such as Liam Fox and Michael Gove stressed that they believe Islamism to be a major security threat. In his 2006 book *Celsius 7/7*, Gove argued that there was 'a conveyor belt' between people embracing conservative versions of Islam and then moving on to Islamic extremism¹⁴. However, Baroness Warsi expressed scepticism towards this argument, stating 'I've yet to see definitive piece of evidence which shows that religiosity in any religion equates terrorism'¹⁵. Whilst in her post as Faith and Communities Minister she resisted the anti-extremist emphasis favoured by the neoconservatives, and spoke out against 'Islamophobia'. Cameron himself has been keen to stress that British values draw upon common religious notions of tolerance and that British identity is and should be 'open to all'.

It is in this context that leading Conservatives have also expressed concerns about what they see as excessive forms of political secularism. In this view religious people have too often been discouraged from publicly proclaiming their faith by highly vocal, but unrepresentative critics of religion. Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Eric Pickles, condemned what he considers to be forces of 'militant secularism'. Baroness Warsi attacked 'secular fundamentalists' for allegedly trying to drive faith groups out of public life. Ministers were here referring to organizations such as the National Secular Society (NSS) and the so called 'new atheists' who both argue against continued institutional privileges for religion¹⁶. Influential secularists, such as the scientist Richard Dawkins, were criticised by Warsi for their alleged intolerance of religion. The NSS won a court case against Bideford council after arguing that prayers should not form part of council business. Yet the High Court ruling was effectively overturned by minister Eric Pickles through the

conference of new powers of competence to local authorities. It is debatable whether such secularist groups are intolerant of religion, since they are content for religious activities such as prayers and worship to take place where people wish to engage with them. Rather the argument is that government institutions should not privilege religious beliefs or practices, or have religious activities as part of their business. However, Conservative ministers have arguably identified such campaigning secularists as something of a convenient 'folk devil' against which they can help justify their approach of encouraging religious organisations to play a bigger role in public life.

Approach to public policy

Indeed the belief that faith groups should be more centrally involved in shaping policies and delivering public services has had an impact on the approach of the Coalition government to both international and domestic affairs. Much to the annoyance of some of his Conservative backbench MPs, Cameron pledged to keep New Labour's commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on global development. The Coalition Government have retained the Department for International Development (DFID), and in 2012 launched new Faith Partnership Principles (FTP)¹⁷. These set out guidance for greater cooperation between the British government and faith-based international groups tackling developmental issues. The principles contain recognition of the difficulties which can arise when aid organisations, governments and faith-based organisations attempt to work together on sensitive developmental issues such as family planning and gay rights. This initiative can also be viewed as part of wider efforts by government to ensure than relations between secular

governmental institutions and religious groups are conducted through mutual understanding.

Though Cameron's promotion of the 'Big Society' has been widely criticised, he has persisted with it as an organising theme for explaining his approach to governance. Ideologically, the Big Society is contrasted with the alleged flaws of both 'Big Government' and excessive individualism. It is claimed that in the post-war period governments have been too inclined to rely on 'top-down' approaches to governing from Whitehall, or else that they have fostered a 'me first' culture in which people do not accept responsibilities to those around them. Thus community life is assumed to suffer as social bonds become eroded. In substantive terms the Big Society has involved a range of initiatives geared to promote voluntary, community and charitable work, as well as steps to make it easier for voluntary groups to run public services. Possibly the most controversial statement Cameron has yet made on Christianity is his claim that 'Jesus invented the Big Society'¹⁸. Here he suggested that the Big Society can be understood as part of long-standing traditions of self-sacrifice and of taking responsibility for oneself and others. It marked a rare, and possibly risky, attempt by a senior political figure to so directly equate a party-political approach to governance with religious themes. Yet, has religion played a significant role within the Big Society in a practical sense?

Indeed Cameron has called on religious groups to play a 'leading' role in the Big Society. The belief is that faith-based organisations are often exactly the kind of groups which have the knowledge of local communities necessary to be able to make positive contributions to dealing with social problems. A number of initiatives have sought to encourage action by faith groups as well as interfaith co-operation on projects. Church-led social action projects have been given funds through bodies

such as the Church Urban Fund and the Cinnamon Network. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has provided religious organisations with micro-grants to conduct interfaith and intercultural work. Many religious groups have welcomed the Big Society as a good opportunity for them to extend their work in communities, including organisations such as The Evangelical Alliance, the Jubilee Centre and the Church of England. At the same time there is some scepticism about whether religious groups have the capacity to meet Cameron's ambitious goals for 'cultural transformation', particularly in the context of austerity. Furthermore, some worry that the Big Society agenda can mean that religious groups end up working on behalf of the state and furthering a secular political agenda rather than simply performing religiously-inspired work in local areas¹⁹. The rather limited involvement thus far of non-Christian religious groups in Big Society initiatives may raise concerns for the inclusive multifaith approach that ministers appear to aspire to.

There have also been also doubts concerning the abilities of local authorities to engage with religious communities and organisations in the manner envisaged within the Big Society. Cuts in public funding have sometimes meant the closure of regional offices that had capacity for religious engagement. Also, there is evidence that local government officers can often have low levels of religious literacy and can feel discomfort in engaging effectively with religious groups²⁰.

Cameron also pushed for the creation of more faith schools in England and Wales. Like their New Labour predecessors, Coalition ministers justified expanding the number of faith schools through arguing that such schools obtain good exam results and provide pupils with an encouraging community atmosphere. More broadly, they have continued with the efforts of recent governments to provide greater choice and

diversity in the kinds of schools offered within the state sector. The Coalition has extended the academies school programme, meaning a significantly larger number of schools now operate outside of local government. They have also continued this trend in a radical way by making it easier for interested groups, including religious groups, to make proposals to establish independent 'free schools' who have extensive powers to create their own policies. Around a quarter of the early bids to establish new free schools came from religious organisations. The freedoms which academy and free schools obtain has worried campaigning secularists who argue it potentially leaves the door open to religious extremists to impose their views on schools and pupils. The government answered concerns that creationist groups could gain control of schools by issuing guidelines specifying that theories of creationism and intelligent design could not be taught as scientific theory. The 'Trojan-horse' affair in Birmingham schools (see above) brought tensions within the Cameron governments approach to religion and schooling into sharp focus. Critics suggested that an ideological over-emphasis on giving schools more autonomy meant some had become more vulnerable to the influence of hardline versions of religion of the sort which ministers most feared. Yet the rather dramatic postures adopted by ministers in response to the issue provoked criticism from some Muslim leaders who argued that Islam was again being singled out as a problem.

Conclusion

It is important not to overstate the significance of Cameron's recent Christian emphasis. Baroness Warsi argued that under New Labour 'faith was being sidelined, even dismissed...public policy was being secularised'. However, in fact the Blair and Brown governments did promote greater engagement of faith groups, notably through the expansion of faith schools and the creation of the Faith Communities

Unit in the Home Office. More generally the 'Big Society' focus on encouraging voluntary, community and religious groups to work in greater partnership with the public sector is in many ways continuous with new Labour's 'third way' search for alternatives to traditional top-down government. It should also be recognised that thus far the 'pro-Christian' discourse of the Coalition government has largely come from Cameron himself and two other government ministers, one of whom has now left office. Whilst there is certainly support for this within some wider sections of the Conservative Party, this rhetoric has not been embraced by all ministers. The secular-oriented Liberal Democrats have displayed little enthusiasm for the religious dimension of Cameron's leadership, even though Nick Clegg has formally endorsed the 'Big Society'. Yet the 'Big Society' itself remains rather unloved even within many Conservative circles and as a theme it will not necessarily survive beyond Cameron's own tenure as Prime Minister. It is too early to say whether the recent flurry of ministerial references to Christianity will form part a lasting development, or perhaps be considered a brief period of exception in the longer term trend of limited rhetorical engagements with religion. However, as matter stand, there have been efforts to affirm a positive role for religion in public affairs, both in terms of rhetoric and micro-level policies. Cameron's increased use of Christian references appears calibrated to try to secure political advantage, without being frequent or high-profile enough to potentially frighten voters who might recoil at excessive religious language. He may be hoping to improve relations with sections of his own party, or indeed with church leaders, but Cameron appears to have additional motivations. He has used Christian themes both to help define his own political persona and to highlight 'core' values which he argues are central to British identity more generally. Despite rhetorical efforts to be inclusive of other faiths, the government's anti-

extremism agenda has created tensions within government regarding the acceptability or otherwise of some forms of Islam. His call for Christians to be more 'evangelical' in promoting their faith was made in recognition of the prevalence of secular attitudes. In some respects ministers have attempted to use the attention gained by vocal secularists, or 'secular fundamentalists', as a foil through which they can present their own approach to state-religion relations as one which 'moderate' citizens ought to endorse. However, as yet there is little evidence that new policy initiatives have brought major change to the relationships between secular and religious institutions. Whilst many religious organisations have taken advantage of new opportunities to run public services, there is also much scepticism about the government's agenda. Some fear that Cameron's occasional references to faith matter little in the bigger contexts of austerity and the implementation of far-reaching socially liberal policies. Thus even if Cameron can win further support for the principle that people should 'do God' more in public life, there is still no clear consensus on how this should happen in practice.

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