

Workshop 1: Moral values, cultural change, and post-materialism in Europe and north America

Abstract

Much has been said about the abandonment of traditional moral norms, “post-materialism” and the secularization process. Although there are significant variations between countries and the clusters of countries that have been constructed on the basis of data from the World Values Survey, few have challenged the conclusion that there has been “a systematic erosion of religious practices, values and beliefs” rooted in growing material security and the systematic elimination of the “physical, societal and personal risks” that formerly laid the basis for faith and adherence to strict and unyielding moral codes, (see, for example, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). From this perspective the United States is an outlier insofar as industrialisation and material progress seem to have done relatively little to shake religious faith or moral traditionalism. Indeed, despite the constitutional separation of church and state in the US, faith-based organizations campaign directly in the political arena so as to promote explicit value agendas.

This workshop has a threefold purpose. Firstly, it will consider the degree to which calls for moral orthodoxy and “family values” and faith-based agendas play a part in shaping the political process, mass opinion and cultural perceptions within the individual countries of Europe and north America. Secondly, the workshop will seek to draw cross-national comparisons so as to identify the relative importance of particular variables in determining the extent to which moral values play a part in structuring the political and cultural life of a country. Thirdly, the workshop will, on the basis of this, seek to throw critical light on theoretical constructs such as post-materialism and the secularization thesis as well as the assumptions that underpin them.

Much has been said about the secularization process, the abandonment of traditional moral norms, and the concept of “post-materialism”. There has been a particular emphasis on European “Godlessness”. Despite generational differences, periodic religious resurgences and some outlier societies, there has been, as Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart argue, a systematic erosion of religious practices and values. (Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 5). Indeed, within many European countries, deep religious faith, particularly adherence to Islam, is represented as evidence that particular groupings have failed to assimilate and hold beliefs that are backward-looking and hence out of step with the wider, more enlightened, environment.

In many accounts, secularization has led to a shift in the character of moral codes. Absolutist and unyielding strictures have been increasingly displaced by relativist notions of morality based upon “lifestyle choices” by both individuals and groups. According to Wayne E. Baker, figures from the World Values Survey suggest that more than 70 per cent of people in Denmark, Sweden the Netherlands (and Japan) can now be regarded as

relativists (Wayne E. Baker, "Is America Really Facing a Crisis of Values?", *Intellectual Capital*, <http://webuser.bus.umich.edu/wayneb/FacingCrisis.pdf>).

The shift from absolutist to relativist notions of morality is reflected in the changing character of political discourse. In many European countries, debate is now structured around the institutional forms that civic tolerance should take rather than the need for tolerance itself. Registered partnerships or same-sex marriage are now, for example, offered to gay and lesbian couples across much of Europe and insofar as there is controversy it extends instead to issues such as gay and lesbian adoption rights. Even some populist parties associated with the ideological right have embraced cultural relativism and have represented the values that are tied to it as an expression of western enlightenment that can be contrasted with the reactionary authoritarianism of immigrant communities and traditions.

Why has there been secularisation? For some, Europe's contemporary lack of theological and moral purpose builds upon established and entrenched characteristics of European society. Others point to a more recent crisis in the established churches (whether Anglican, Lutheran, or Roman Catholic) and their failure to retain or win across adherents. From this perspective, religious faith only remains vibrant and therefore politically significant in societies such as the US where there is a more open and competitive spiritual marketplace.

"Post-materialism", however, offers a more developed and systematised form of critique. As Ronald Inglehart and his co-authors have argued, religious faith and adherence to strict moral codes were rooted in an understanding of the "physical, societal and personal risks" that characterised both pre-industrial society and nations in the early stages of the industrial process. Growing material security and the progressive elimination of such risks laid the basis for less absolutist and more relativist perceptions of moral issues as well as a decline in deference towards most forms of authority. (Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 24-25 and 53-54). Economic development thereby lays the basis for self-expression and liberal, post-modern values. Having said this, those who talk in these terms acknowledge that this is not a straightforward or linear process. There is, for example, a significant time-lag between changes in society and the economy and subsequent shifts in the character of the value system and much depends upon the character of the early socialization process. (Oddbjørn Knutsen, "Materialist and Postmaterialist Values and Social Structure in the Nordic Countries: A Comparative Study", *Comparative Politics*, 23:1, October 1990, 85-104).

Having said all of this, there is a case for qualifying the claims associated with the secularisation paradigm and questioning the “post-materialism” thesis. Although some of the post-communist nations (such as Protestant East Germany or the Czech Republic) are characterised by low levels of religious commitment, 92 per cent of Poles have affirmed their continuing faith in God. There are other reasons to question the secularisation thesis. Religious rites of passage continue to play a pivotal role in many seemingly secular societies. Voluntary church taxes are still routinely paid in European countries where church attendance is low. Indeed, it has been argued that the seeming secularism of the Scandinavian countries can be attributed to the way in which the Christian ethos has been socially embedded through the social democratic state:

“.. Christian practice has declined there not because it is irrelevant but precisely because the norms and values of the faith have become so inextricably part of social consciousness. Living in a society that tries to achieve the Christian social vision – through a generous welfare state, care for the poor, and wide-ranging humanitarian ventures overseas – one no longer needs to participate in public rituals.” (Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 65.)

At the same time, while the liberal or “mainstream” denominations may have lost adherents, the charismatic churches have won followers. Polls suggest that even in the most secular nations there is a search for “meaning” and relatively small numbers consider themselves to be atheists. Furthermore, religious faith is a defining feature of life in many immigrant and minority communities.

In the light of these developments, observers have asked how, or in what ways, the ‘post materialist’ thesis applies to US politics and society. Despite European “Godlessness” the high levels of religious belief in the US appear to have continued unabated and may have increased in recent years. According to the 1998 International Social Survey Program (ISSP) studies, while 85.6 per cent of Americans stated that “I believe in God now and I always have”, the comparable figure in Denmark was 45 percent, 34.5 per cent in Russia, and just 18.5 per cent in the former East Germany (International Social Survey Program, *V38 ISSP 98 – Religion II*, www.issp.org) Although there is an ongoing debate within academic circles about the extent to which US politics are structured by the so-called ‘culture wars’, it is evident that over the last thirty years religious organizations have become increasingly engaged in the political process in an effort to shift the locus of politics more towards ‘moral questions’ and promote conservative policy responses. According to James

Morone the efforts of contemporary religious organizations to influence the shape of American politics is simply the latest manifestation of the constant presence of religion in American public life. In contrast with those who have emphasised the importance of secularisation, Morone reflects, "The nation develops not from religious to secular but from revival to revival" (James Morone, *Hellfire Nation: the Politics of Sin in American History*, Yale University Press, 2003,3).

In parts of eastern and southern Europe, faith remains entrenched and traditionalist attitudes are endorsed much more widely than in the north and west. (See Loek Halman, Ruud Luijkx, and Marga van Zundert (2005), *Atlas of European Values*, Tilburg University – Centre for Science and Values, 66 – 67 and 108.) There has been a series of mobilizations against homosexuality in Poland. Opposition to abortion remains at a high level particularly in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. When asked in the 1998 poll about a woman having an abortion if there was "...a strong chance of a serious defect in the baby", 25.6 per cent (Northern Ireland) and 41.2 per cent (Republic of Ireland) said that it was "always wrong." The figures were 8.2 per cent and 4.9 per cent in Britain and Denmark respectively (International Social Survey Program, *V38 ISSP 98 – Religion II*, www.issp.org.)

There are even some, albeit limited, signs of a shift back towards more traditionalist moral norms and mores. In western Europe. Abortion rates have, for example, fallen significantly over the past two decades, (UNECE, *Trends in Europe and North America: The Statistical Yearbook of the Economic Commission for Europe 2003*, Abortion rates, 1980-2000, <http://www.unece.org/stats/trends/ch2/2.12.xls>). In 2006, a survey of British sexual behaviour conducted by *MORI* suggested that young people were waiting longer before having sexual intercourse for the first time. In 2002, the average age at which a teenager lost his or her virginity was 17.13 years. Just four years later, in 2006, the figure was 17.44 years for girls and 18.06 for boys. In 2002, 32 per cent of young people had sex before they were 16. In 2006 it was 20 per cent. (Denis Campbell, "No sex please until we're at least 17 years old, we're British", *The Observer*, January 22 2006, http://observer.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,,1692307,00.html)

Furthermore, adherence to the norms and values associated with moral traditionalism should not be regarded as only a function of religious faith. Social conservatives and others who subscribe to such views often base

their arguments on consequentialist reasoning. The forms of public policy associated with moral relativism have, they suggest, socially dysfunctional results. From this perspective, programmes designed to protect single parents and their children from economic hardship have served to undermine the importance of marriage and strong parental role models. These programmes thereby contribute to educational underachievement, criminality and social fragmentation. In this way ideas grounded in religious belief influence political debates about social and economic policy. In the US, for example, the debates about welfare policy and levels of teenage pregnancy were informed by moral as well as material concerns (Ron Haskins and Cassie Satatuto Bevan, "Abstinence Education under Welfare Reform," *Children and Youth Services Review*, 19, 1997, 465-84).

At the same time, some of the structural underpinnings of the "post-materialism" critique can be questioned. Post-materialist arguments have been said to rest on a crude quasi-Marxian form of economic determinism. For their part, Raymond M. Duch and Michael A. Taylor suggest that the overall level of socioeconomic development is less important than other variables. They argue that ".. education and economic conditions at the time of the survey are much more important explanations for variations in the postmaterialist measure." (Raymond M. Duch and Michael A. Taylor, "Postmaterialism and the Economic Condition", *American Journal of Political Science*, 37:3, August 1993, 747.)

The workshop and papers

The workshop will survey these issues and consider the extent to which values and cultural concerns shape mass opinion as well as electoral and public policy processes in Europe and the United States. We will seek to attract three types of paper. Firstly, there will be single-country studies. We wish to consider the degree to which calls for moral orthodoxy, "family values" and faith play a part in shaping political events and processes within the individual countries of Europe and north America. Secondly, we want to encourage comparative studies. The workshop will seek to draw cross-national comparisons so as to identify the relative importance of particular variables in determining the extent to which moral values play a part in structuring and shaping political culture in different countries. Thirdly, we expect that there will be contributions which, on the basis of single-country studies and comparative work, adopt a more theoretical approach and seek to throw critical light on the post-materialism and secularization theses, the assumptions that underpin them, and the political implications that flow from them.

Participants

We intend to adopt a very open approach and structure. We hope to attract participants from both Europe and north America and strike a balance between established scholars and those who are newer to the profession. The workshop will seek to involve participants from political sociology as well as those who adopt more institutional approaches to the study of politics.

Funding

There may be some funding opportunities for scholars within individual countries. For example, the Danish Social Science Research Council (<http://fist.dk/site/english/councils-commissions-committees/scientific-research-councils/the-danish-social-science-research-council>) offers some assistance for networks. In the UK, applications can be made to the British Academy when papers are presented at conferences in other countries.

Biographical notes

Edward Ashbee is an associate professor at the Center for the Study of the Americas, Copenhagen Business School. His recent publications include *The Bush Administration, Sex and the Moral Agenda* (Manchester University Press, 2007) and a volume that he has co-edited (*The Politics, Economics and Culture of Mexican-US Migration: Both Sides of the Border*, Palgrave Macmillan) will appear in December 2007. He has also written about the political implications of long-term cultural shifts, minor parties, elections, and American conservatism.

Alex Waddan is a senior lecturer in American politics and American foreign policy and a member of the Centre for American Studies at the University of Leicester (UK). He is the author of *The Politics of Welfare* (Edward Elgar, 1997) and *Clinton's Legacy? A New Democrat in Governance* (Palgrave, 2002). He has published several refereed articles and book chapters examining specific aspects of US social policy and also the influence of ideology on both the Clinton and Bush administrations.