

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 January 2018

The Political Relevance of the Sociology of Religion



Podcast with **Bryan Turner** (15 January 2018).

Interviewed by **Sammy Bishop**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-political-relevance-of-the-sociology-of-religion/>

Sammy Bishop (SB): I'm [Sammy Bishop](#), I'm here at the [SocRel Conference, 2017](#). And I have with me a man who needs very little introduction, thanks to the huge influence that he's had on the field. I'm with [Professor Bryan Turner](#). So, welcome. And thank you for being involved with the Religious Studies Project.

Bryan Turner (BT): It's a pleasure.

SB: OK, so today we're going to talk a little bit about teaching and Religious Studies, and some of the differences between the British, European and American context as well. So could we start off, perhaps, with just a little about how you became interested in this topic?

BT: Well, I was converted to Methodism when I was about 17 and I was on holiday in Greece with a group of Methodists. In the following year I went to East Germany, Moscow and through Russia by train, and became very interested in Sociology. So, if you put the two together, I was a kind of Methodist with an interest in Communism and Marxism, although the main influence on my work has been Max Weber. I came here, to the University of Leeds, to do a PhD. I was in the Methodist Society. I was the President of the Student Christian Movement, so I had those kind of involvements. And I was taught by a famous comparative religion expert, Trevor Ling, who was a Buddhist Scholar. And through him became very interested in comparative religion. I was appointed to the University of Aberdeen to teach the Sociology of Religion in 1970, I think it was, but very few students were interested in doing religion, so I had very few students! So I retrained as a medical sociologist, which partly explains my interest in the sociology of the body and how medicine and religion connect with each other. To be honest, the Sociology of Religion dropped out of my career a bit, for those sorts of

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reasons. I became very much interested in Max Weber so, at that level, religion was part of my agenda. But it was also mixed up with all the other things that I was interested in and doing work on. And, to sort-of finish this little biographical sketch, after 9/11 just about anybody with an interest in Islam was suddenly employable. And I had all these kind-of requests to revisit stuff that I'd done. Because my first book was 1974: [Weber and Islam](#). I went to live in America in 2006, I think it was. And I spent a year at Wiley College and then ended up at the Graduate Centre at the City University of New York, where I've been teaching the Sociology of Comparative Religion. So perhaps I'd better say something about the teaching method, if you'd like?

SB: Yes, please do.

BT: Well, I try to make religions kind-of relevant to the world they're living in. So, for example, during the Mitt Romney/Barack Obama presidential race there was a lot of material to work with. Mitt Romney was a Mormon. There was this huge debate in the Media about whether Mormonism was a religion. So that was an easy way in to talking about what we mean by religion, or Mormonism, or Christianity. And the other, of course, was the allegation that Obama was really a secret Muslim of some sort – we had all of those debates. And then, in 2016 when the Clinton/Trump confrontation started, there seemed to be almost nothing to get into. Because I kind-of listened to every debate and read all of the stuff I could possibly get hold of. But I think Clinton mentioned religion only like once, when she read a passage from the New Testament. Bernie Sanders once talked about his Jewish legacy in an interview, but it wasn't really part of his campaign. And then we had Trump. How does Trump relate to religion? Because we all know – American exceptionalism – religion is prominent in the public sphere. Just about every textbook starts with [de Tocqueville](#)'s commentary on civil religion and so on, and so forth. And it seemed very difficult to actually believe that Trump could win the election, given the fact of these disclosures of his attitudes towards women, his groping of women. And Trump, of course, changed his position on just about everything. So, at one stage, Trump was pro-life – very much committed to that kind of agenda. (5:00) And then, of course, during the campaign it comes out that he's actually totally opposed to [Roe Vs Wade](#) which was the legislation that made abortion possible for women. He came out very strongly in favour of removing that legislation to make abortion either impossible or increasingly difficult. But what sort-of emerged after the election is that he has quite strong support from the Evangelical Churches. And one reason is that within the Evangelical Churches there is a kind of crisis around masculinity. A lot of the Evangelical literature has been developing the idea of the “tender warrior”. This is the kind of dominant male who is in charge of the family. He is in charge of the family. The idea is that women's role is domestic. And that women really

kind-of prefer to be subordinated to men, rather than to be liberated. And that part of the crisis in

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America is connected with: the acceptance of gays in the military; the legislation that made possible same-sex marriage in some states; the general kind of reception of alternative forms of sexuality, particularly on the East Coast. So, some of this election was about the East Coast, versus the Southern States, and so forth. So [Jerry Falwell](#) has come about very much in favour of Trump. Trump visited Liberty University which is run by Falwell, one of the founders of the Moral Majority. And so, my puzzlement about how Trump can possibly get support from religious groups has been partly answered by this idea that there is a kind-of deep anxiety, in conservative America, about the status of men, connected to: the rise of women into pink collar occupations; the better performance of women in education; the growth, or the presence of influential women in leadership positions. You know – Merkel in Germany, the head of the IMF, the Fed and so forth – you see women in very powerful political positions. And, insofar as populism and Trump are connected to the erosion of the blue collar male white working class, you can kind-of understand, partly, why Trump is getting support from Evangelicals. But I would point out a couple of things. I mean, Trump and Clinton were the least-attractive, least-supported presidential candidates in the whole of American history. Clinton did win the popular vote, despite Trump's claims that it was all fake. Trump has huge support from his base, but he's still a very problematic figure in American culture, I think. And he has divided society right down the middle. And so one never knows what is going to happen next, really, in America.

SB: Could you say more about the idea of Populism itself, and how that concept has become more relevant, perhaps, at the moment?

BT: Yes. Well, people have been studying populism for a long time. And there are arguments that populism has been present in American politics for long time, such as the [People's Party](#) and so forth. “Agrarian populism” has been a notion around for some time. But I agree with you that in the last twelve months populism has been everywhere: conferences, journal articles, books and so on, and so forth. And I mean, it looked at one stage as if the populist parties would swing through Europe with the [Northern League](#) and [Golden Dawn](#), and the [Freedom Party](#) in Austria and so forth. And then we've had this pause, if you like, in which Macron in France has won the election and to some extent the popular vote for extreme positions on foreigners has been slowed down a bit. And then, I think, with Brexit which again . . . I mean UKIP, having had some electoral success, has virtually disappeared as a party. And it looks as though the complexity of Brexit may grind it into the ground eventually, who knows? But a lot of the populist literature has been saying that Britain is slightly different from other societies, in that the populist vote is weaker than you'll find in, say, Italy, and so forth. **(10:00)** I mean, one issue is to what extent Thatcherism was an earlier form of populism. She did want to change everything. She had these structural views about an inside and an outside. I mean, **Citation Info:** Turner, Bryan and Sammy Bishop. 2018. “The Political Relevance of the Sociology of Religion”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 15 January 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 12 January 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-political-relevance-of-the-sociology-of-religion/>

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one of the defining characteristics of populism is that it divides the world into “us” and “them”. And then you've got the people on the one side and their enemies on the other. I mean, as we've heard in this conference, the enemies seem to be connecting to Muslim refugees in Europe and so forth. But again, looking at this from the outside – that is, from America – what struck me was the antagonism towards East Europeans. So, Polish people were being criticised by Conservative people who wanted to argue that the welfare state was being exploited by free-riders from other countries. So I don't think it's just Islam, there's all sorts of other things going on about the insider and the outsider.

SB: Where do you see it going in the future?

BT: Well I was reminiscing In the 1960s and 1970s and really into the '80s, I suppose, we had the three day week, we had the miners' strike and we had the poll tax strikes. And whilst Thatcher was hugely popular – again amongst her base – and while she was, in many ways, the most successful Prime Minister we've had – she won three elections, etc. – living through that period, I mean, Britain did seem amazingly unstable. I mean, just visually, we had piles of rubbish piled up in the streets; electricity was very limited; I remember having to teach with no heating in the university, so we all wore hats and gloves to work, sitting in classrooms. And the current period feels like that as well. Because, I think, if Brexit fails the people that voted to leave will be deeply frustrated. I mean Nigel Farage has threatened to comeback into politics if that happened! The legislative mess – it's horrendous. And then, looking at the broader picture, we've got what you might call “strong man politics” in the Philippines, in China, in Russia and so forth. And, to some extent, some of these figures at least are mobilising religion to bolster their position. I think very interesting is Putin, who allegedly has an Orthodox Priest – an Eastern Orthodox Priest – as a counsellor. He's obviously appealing to Orthodoxy as a way of defining what it is to be Russian. It's a fairly complicated picture, I think. Again, I suppose I should have said about Trump that Trump's foreign policy is deeply worrying, because he seems to want to undermine many of the institutions that have bolstered European peace for 70 years or so. And there is this figure, [Steve Bannon](#), who's a conservative Catholic with an Irish background, who I think is mobilising Trump's foreign policy. And I think that's very problematic. So, from an academic point of view, I think religion is going to be very central to all of these debates, whether it's conflicts between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East, or Buddhists and Muslims in Asia, or Catholic and Pentecostals and Protestants elsewhere.

SB: How do you think scholars of religion or sociologists of religion are best approaching it?

BT: Well, in the talk I'm going to give this evening, I think sociology of religion kind-of bifurcates

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into those that have gone into spirituality and post-institutional churches, and those who follow people like [José Casanova](#) who are interested in public religion. My question is how we make the Sociology of Religion central to the sociological enterprise, as a whole. And I think the public religions debate pushes the sociology of religion into political theory, into international relations, into race relations and creates a kind of agenda where Sociology of Religion is once more part of the mainstream rather than a minority interest on the margins. This conference- I'm going to get the title of the conference wrong, but "On the Edge": are we part of the periphery or part of the mainstream? I think it's an important question. And I, personally, don't want to be on the periphery. Sociology of Religion is central to the modern world. (15:00) If you look at everywhere, basically: Israel, Brazil, America, Germany, France – it's difficult to find a country that doesn't have some kind of religious issue going on. And I think it's something we need to address, really.

SB: When you speak about the political aspects of, for example, race relations as well, do you think that there's a certain amount of activism that could be involved in the Sociology of Religion?

BT: Well, I certainly think Sociology needs to contribute to a solution. And whether that's social policy or becoming engaged in activism, I think is something we can't sort-of predict in advance, so to speak. But I think sociologists can't describe the mess we're in without taking some responsibility for suggesting ways we might get out of this mess. Otherwise we might all bathe in misery and melancholy, and what would be the point of having a conference like this? We might as stay at home and be miserable! And this is too big a topic for this interview, but I tend to think sociologists are always looking at failure: failed institutions, failed constitutions, failed social movements, failed this, that and the other. And I think we need to turn this around a bit and say: well, ok, can we find any successful institutions, or successful social movements, or successful philosophies or whatever, that have improved the human condition – even if it's for a short time? My argument is that no institution lasts for ever. They all have fluctuating histories – I mean of success and failure. But the idea that all institutions are failing is an impossible position to take. I tend to say that there's no such thing as consistent pessimism, because we wouldn't be having this interview if you and I were consistently pessimistic, I don't think. You know, we'd be getting drunk or something!

SB: (Laughs).

BT: So I think, I mean I haven't been an activist in that traditional sort of sense. But I've edited the journal [Citizenship Studies](#) for about 20 years, which I see as making a contribution to understanding the kind-of erosion of social rights over the last 30 years or so. And that citizenship, revitalised would

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be some kind of answer to questions about social solidarity and so forth. I'm beginning to lose my voice. I don't know if we can keep this interview to a limited period, because I have to speak in a while?

SB: Yes. Just one more question?

BT: Yes, sure.

SB: Do you see, when you speak about citizenship, do you see any role for religion in that idea?

BT: Well, I mean there are arguments that a lot of our notions of rights come out of Some people would argue that a lot of our notions of rights come out of the Protestant Methodist tradition. But, more recently, the Catholic Church was to some extent responsible for developing the concept of human dignity, which was the underpinning to the [Declaration of Human Rights](#). And then, I think, the Christian Democratic tradition was part of this sort-of development. But I think the Sociology of Religion could contribute a more sophisticated understanding of what Judaism is or Islam, or other religions, what Sikhism is about and so on. So as a basic educational role, to undermine false assumptions about – you know – what happens to Muslim women, what Judaism has been about.

SB: Professor Bryan Turner, thank you very much for your time.

BT: Thank you.

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