Title
God's Agents: Biblical Publicity in Contemporary England

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5jt781m4

Journal
ARCHIVES EUROPEENNES DE SOCIOLOGIE, 55(3)

ISSN
0003-9756

Author
Evans, JH

Publication Date
2014-12-01

DOI
10.1017/S0003975614000356

Peer reviewed
1“Secularizing God Talk”

Review by John H. Evans, Department of Sociology, University of California, San Diego [jhevans@ucsd.edu]

1900 words

The appropriate role of religion in the public sphere – and politics in particular – has been a ongoing post-Enlightenment debate. Readers of this journal will recognize recent exchanges between theorists such as Charles Taylor, Jurgen Habermas and Craig Calhoun about issues such as whether believers must translate their theological beliefs into what John Rawls famously called “public reason” in order to legitimately speak in the public sphere. In spite of the large amount of theory written on this topic, there has been very little empirical study. Empirical study is critical because, for example, if religious people are incapable of accurately translating the theological to the secular, then creating a normative theory requiring them to do so may be pointless. Engelke’s book is one of the few empirical studies that engages the debate of the theorists, and the only such study of the UK. It engages with the empirical question of whether religion can be brought back to the public sphere by speaking in a secular register.

God's Agents: Biblical Publicity in Contemporary England is an excellent, multi-site ethnography of a British organization called the Bible Society and its experiment of attempting to make Christianity a legitimate form of discourse in the very secular UK public sphere. This secularism is exemplified by Tony Blair’s press secretary who responded to a question about the Prime Minister’s religious beliefs by saying “we don’t do God” and by Blair’s comment, after leaving office, that “it’s difficult if you talk about faith in our political system. . . .You talk about it in our system and, frankly, people do think you’re a nutter” (xix). In contrast, for a U.S. president to not talk about God would make him or her a nutter. The best example of this assumed secularism is Engelke’s report of a study that showed that the Bishops in the House of Lords do not “do God” either – “when they did speak, more often than not their arguments rested on some body of material easily accessible to public reason; they cited statistics, not Scripture” writes Engelke. “The Bishops, it would seem, have read their Rawls,” he concludes (p.156).

For our purposes, the central point of Rawls is that “comprehensive doctrines” (including religion) “cannot be used to justify an argument for political legitimacy” because they are not shared, and thus people cannot truly assent to the claim (p.142). What makes Engelke’s case particularly interesting is that the bulk of the organization’s attempts to reinsert God into the public sphere are by religious Rawlsians. For example, a project of the Bible Society called Theos, intended to make Christianity legitimate in elite British political debate, assumes “that Christians cannot rely upon God-talk in political debates. . . . It is incumbent upon the Christian to use a language that is open – in effect, to ‘endorse John Rawls’ idea that participation in the public square requires publicly accessible thinking’” (p.141). The contrast with the U.S. is clear because Rawls is the bête noire of Americans who want to re-insert God into the public square.

If the purpose of the organization was to legitimate religious participation in public life, why did they choose the tactics they did? What should the advocates of the Bible do in a culture where the “metanarrative once provided by Christianity is seen now to be provided by secular humanism?” (p.26) In the conclusion Engelke shows us some of the critics of the Bible
Society’s approach, and those show us some paths that were not taken. One approach could have been that of British theologian John Milbank and his followers who reject the secular assumptions of how religion is allowed into the public sphere and instead advocate for “radical orthodoxy” (p.234). The radical orthodox William Cavanaugh says that Christians “suffer from an ‘inability to break decisively with the Enlightenment story of secularism” (p.235) that is assumed by Rawls. In the U.S. similar impulses can be found of critics of the liberal public sphere. For example, rejecting the liberal theory tradition’s limits on using explicitly theological claims in the public sphere, philosopher of religion Jeffrey Stout writes Americans should “cultivate the virtues of democratic speech, love justice, and say what you please” 1.

Re-establishing Christianity as a legitimate public discourse in the UK seems fairly hopeless, and Engelke’s ethnography makes it clear that they were hoping for the mildest of impacts. So, why select the Rawlsian strategy? Two reasons come to mind. First, while Engelke’s activists call themselves “evangelicals,” in the U.S. they would be called mainline or liberal Protestants. Jay Demerath has argued that the American mainline willfully gave up its dominance of the public sphere to fulfill the tenets of its theology 2. The mainline, long time defender of the separation of church and state, is so concerned to not “coerce people to Christ” that they do not want their religious language to be the basis of laws. The people Engelke studied seem the same – they did not want to use God talk in politics, because of their theological beliefs.

The other reason the Rawlsian approach was chosen was that using a distinctive and non-pluralistic theological message was hopeless. Not only does a very low percentage of the British public participate in religious services, but by the time the book was being researched a very aggressive New Atheist movement had emerged that wanted to push religion even further back from the public sphere into actual oblivion. Members of the Bible Society team “did not think that open appeals to God would get very far in the public square” (p.142).

The organization’s goals were therefore extremely modest. They wanted to move the public from saying “[The Bible] is rubbish, this has nothing to do with me, it’s difficult, it’s irrelevant,’ . . . to somewhere different.” (P.12). “Somewhere different” is not theocratic rule, but mere relevance – to make sure all Christians were not thought of as “nutters.” Engelke describes the activities of the organization with a lively writing style. One attempt of the Bible Society to create an “ambient faith” in public spaces was to create a public art project based upon angels for a Christmas time shopping district. Angels were selected because of their supposed theological neutrality and for representing “spirituality” instead of religion – a sort of Rawlsian overlapping-consensus art. Another attempt was to have groups of Christians conduct Bible studies in coffee shops and pubs. There was no religious message in either of these attempts. In the first, the idea was to legitimate the idea of any spiritual thought. In the second, the public Bible studies are to show that religion can be discussed in a public space, and implicitly that religious people exist who are not embarrassed to be so.

Another activity was outreach to Parliament. The Christian members of Parliament where a diverse group from high church to low church backgrounds, from liberals to conservatives, but centered on (British) evangelicals. One reason there was no God talk was that members of the British Parliament had a British reticence – they did not want to actually talk about Jesus because that would be pushy and almost American (p.116). Better to testify to the

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faith through one’s actions, which of course does not involve mentioning God.

Another activity that Engelke focused a good amount of attention to was Theos, the think tank associated with the Bible Society. Again, the central message was not explicitly Christian, but rather that Christianity could be made relevant by creating media opportunities and reacting to events with a Rawlsian approach. This included a survey on patriotism and neighborliness and a debate about the role of chaplains in the National Health Service. Another project was to “rescue Darwin” from the new Atheists. By being reasonable – by recognizing the legitimacy of science – they could make theology legitimate in public debate. Again, by American standards, the organization took a mainline or liberal Protestant perspective where the Darwinist account is true, and the Genesis account of human origins is not meant to be read literally but an account of the “meaning” of it all. More interesting is that Theos uses Darwin to show that religion is a reasonable participant in public debate and the new Atheists are not. By showing that the new Atheists are trying to colonize the “meaning” questions that are beyond the ken of science, they show who the true “fundamentalists” are. For Theos, Darwin was himself the exemplar participant in the public sphere because he left room for a respectful interaction with Christianity.

Engelke does not conclude whether these religious Rawlsians will be successful because he does not yet know – it is an experiment in progress, with the London-based office of the organization expanding and moving into more prominent space as the book was on the way to the press. Engelke’s conclusion seems to be that if they had not failed so far, at least they were not yet very successful.

A future post-mortem on this religious Rawlsian experiment will be informative and existing comparative cases suggest it will indeed be a death. One case is Mainline Protestants in America, who also do not emphasize God talk in their public advocacy, preferring the approach of the Bishops in the House of Lords. The Rawlsian path for mainliners has not been successful.

A second comparison is the history of American public bioethical debate. In the 1960s the debate included a group of theologians who used God talk. They gave it up for the same reason that Theos did – they thought it would not resonate in the increasingly secular public sphere. They first engaged in translation, but it soon became unclear what the difference was between a theologian and a philosopher. The field later established a Rawlsian scheme where universally shared secular principles would drive ethical decision-making. Some theologians tried to translate their theological claims into this Rawlsian secular register, but in so doing, any religious claim ended up being lost. This project, mainline Protestant in sensibility, eventually led to the absence of religious voices from the center of public bioethical debate 3.

Perhaps Engelke’s group never got far in their reasoning, but it would have been interesting to see how they thought creating plastic angels for a shopping mall was going to create transcendent thought. Moreover, is it still God talking if one uses public reason?

Engelke’s book is particularly relevant for contemporary Europe which has similarly secular public spheres. It is also a bellwether for the U.S. While scholars can debate whether religion has declined in the private sphere in the U.S., the institutional differentiation type of secularization is nearly complete. Scholars have shown that the religious right now often translates to Rawlsian public reason 4, and Engelke’s work suggests the many tensions inherent in that move. Like the display of the non-religious angels in Swindon, we can imagine future

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evangelicals trying to carve room for transcendent thought by putting up plastic angels in Detroit. Engelke’s book will be a touchstone for investigation of this future event.