Sticks and stones: the use of anti-secular discourse in Britain

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The past decade has seen the rise of a strident anti-secular discourse in Britain. Based on the idea that a militant, aggressive and intolerant form of secularism wants to marginalise faith and drive it out of the public square, anti-secular rhetoric has found growing popularity among political and religious figures aiming to promote a greater role for faith in the public realm. The interests and motives behind this discourse, however, are substantively divergent, and the prospects of success are slim, writes ***Steven Kettell****.*

For religious actors, the main concerns centre on the impact of secularisation and the decline of religious influence in British society. The use of anti-secular discourse forms part of a broader move towards a form of identity politics based on a language of minority rights and demands for religious freedom. One aspect of this has been to promote the notion of a competing hierarchy of rights, in which those of faith communities are said to have become subordinate to those of other social groups, such as ethnic minorities and homosexuals.

The scale of the problem is well revealed by official census statistics showing that the proportion of the adult population in England and Wales describing themselves as Christian fell from 71.7 per cent in 2001 to 59.3 per cent in 2011. Figures for non-Christian religions show an increase, but the overall trajectory is distinctly one-way. In this context, frames of discrimination and the defence of minority rights are useful for various reasons, not least for promoting group cohesion, solidarity and activism. A strategy of appealing to the values of group rights and perceptions of fairness also promises to resonate with the wider public given the more general salience of human rights norms and identity issues.

The promotion of anti-secular discourse by political actors is driven by markedly different concerns. The overarching context here is not secularisation but the growing pace of political change and the transformative impact of processes that have contributed to an apparent diminution of state power and a narrowing conception of the 'political'.

In this respect, the use of anti-secular discourse signifies an attempt to deal with these problems by promoting a form of identity politics based on the idea of 'Britishness', to inculcate a sense of shared national values infused with the ostensible benefits of religious beliefs and practices, framing Christianity as a core part of British national identity.

This provides potential benefits for the Conservative party in terms of broadening its appeal amongst religious sections of the electorate. Figures from the 2015 general election show that 46 per cent of Church of England members voted for the Conservatives (compared to 30 per cent for Labour, 13 per cent for UKIP and just 8 per cent for the Liberal Democrats). Catholics and members of non-Christian faiths were more likely to vote for other parties, but the overall trend favoured the Tories.

Anti-secular discourse combined with a growing emphasis on the value of faith has the potential to enthuse traditional Conservative supporters while appealing to wavering voters sympathetic to the notion that religion is under threat. Anti-secular rhetoric also enables the Conservatives to pursue these objectives without overtly compromising claims to be a modernised political party. Framing militant secularism as being driven by oversensitivity to the concerns of minority groups provides a 'dog whistle' for right-wing antipathy towards issues such as multiculturalism and political correctness.

The prospect of anti-secular proponents achieving these various goals, however, remains slim. One problem for

religious proponents concerns the nature of anti-secular discourse itself. Promoting a greater role for faith with a language of civic and human rights denotes the acceptance of norms for public discourse that are themselves intrinsically secularised. Putting the case for religion in such a way concedes the point that in order to influence wider opinion, public discourse needs to be framed around liberal secular values. Claims that religious groups need to be accorded the same formal equalities as other social interests also highlight the sectional character of religious interests, and provide no obvious reason why they should be treated differently to any other social interests.

A key problem for political proponents is that positions designed to appeal to religious groups contain the potential for clashes with party desires to be regarded as forward looking. This point was amply demonstrated in the reaction of more traditionalist elements within the Conservative party to the legalisation of same-sex marriage, and the dilemma remains unresolved.

Anti-secular discourse might be on the rise, but it is unlikely to produce the kinds of results that its proponents want to see.

About the Author

Steven Kettell is an Associate Professor in Politics and International Studies.

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