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### Cultural policies and religion

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## INTRODUCTION

### Cultural policies and religion

The relations between cultural policies and religions have to date received relatively little attention on the part of researchers in cultural policy studies. They warrant such attention, however, for both fundamental and topical reasons. On the one hand, they shed revealing light on underlying relations between the ‘cultures’ and ‘policies’ that maintain and divide human social groupings across time. On the other hand, and particularly during the last decade, the relations between values and dispositions inculcated by religious organisations and those held to characterise western liberal democracies have become the object of intense concern.

Peter Berger once observed that ‘all societies are exercises in world-building’ ([1967] 1990, p. 3). The ‘worlds’ humankind constructs for itself he calls ‘cultures’, and their ‘fundamental purpose is to provide the firm structures for human life that are lacking biologically’. These cultures must be ‘continuously produced and reproduced by man. [Their] structures are, therefore, inherently precarious and predestined to change. The cultural imperative of stability and the inherent character of culture as *unstable* together posit the fundamental problem of man’s world-building activity’ (p. 6). Across the millennia of more or less reconstructable history, Berger notes that ‘religion has played a strategic part in the human enterprise of world-building’ (p. 27).

Admittedly, the interest of religions in this respect may seem to some readers largely archaeological. They constitute more or less archaic ‘cultural systems’ out of which newer world-building enterprises such as nationalisms have emerged (cf. Anderson [1983] 2006, p. 12). Yet the forest of religiosities that once seemed to be ‘behind’ modern societies now seems to be before and indeed all around us (Debray 2003). As Ahmet Kuru has observed (citing here the later work of Berger), the secularisation theory that long dominated disciplines such as political science ‘distracted’ analysts from the enduring and sometimes rising potency of religions in world politics. Secularisation theory explained ‘the declining religious beliefs and participation’ in European societies, and the emergence of a ‘global secular elite’ whose ‘way of life’ was removed from local traditions (cf. Berger 1999, pp. 9–10, Kuru 2009, p. 2). Beyond this, much fell out of its frames. Furthermore, ‘the normative argument that religion should not play a substantial public role in a modern democratic polity’ (Kuru 2009, p. 2) came in many contexts to constitute a very unwieldy principle when it came to governing populations with divergent beliefs and attitudes. Rather than the other of modern national cultural policies, religions have come into focus as an element of an often intractable cultural diversity that has to be managed.

The considerations above indicate something of the perspective in which we have assembled the current special issue of the journal. The understanding of both cultures and policies that is required to grasp some of these processes is necessarily broad, and

must take in much that is ‘implicitly’ as well as explicitly cultural (Ahearne 2009, Bennett 2009). The bodies promoting these policies may be national governments, but also religious bodies themselves, or indeed other kinds of formal or informal organisation within which such issues are treated. Far from providing any kind of definitive overview of a topic which has heretofore been relatively neglected within our discipline, we have looked to open up new perspectives across a relatively wide range of historical and geographical subject matter.

The issue begins with two articles that treat the cultural policies of religious bodies themselves in a relatively ‘pure’ manner (i.e. they bracket for the purposes of analysis the relation of these policies to other kinds of worldly powers). Oliver Bennett explores the role of religious formations as heightened examples of the ‘optimism promoters’ that induce populations to invest hopefully in their futures, here along lines mapped out by variously conceived soteriological and eschatological doctrines. Kevin V. Mulcahy analyses the extensive post-Tridentine artistic policies promoted by the Catholic Church in the context of the counter-reformation. He shows how these were conceived as instruments designed to instill in populations affective dispositions and mental routines that would protect them from the pull of the protestant reformation.

The next four articles look at the interplay and conflicts between the policies of modern states and those of religious bodies. Jeremy Ahearne explores the various fronts on which national culture-shaping strategies in France have come up against questions of religion, as well as the increasingly explicit cultural (or sometimes ‘deculturating’) policies of religious organisations themselves. These fronts include education policies, arts policies and also the ‘second-order’ policies for the affirmation of national identity as such. Marion Maddox traces the ambivalences that mark the uses of religious schooling in contemporary Australia. On the one hand, particular types of Christian school cater to a social and instrumental demand for educational performance and segregation in a market-driven system. On the other hand, these religious groupings are able to use this demand to embed themselves within a secular society and gain a platform for their values and creeds. She also analyses the discrepancies between the attitude of diverse public authorities to Christian schools and to projects for Islamic schools in terms of underlying attitudes towards cultural diversity. Nedret Kuran-Burçoğlu analyses the ‘cultural programme’ pursued by various groupings promoting a ‘second wave’ of Islamism in Turkey since the 1980s. Operating within an assertively secular republic, this cultural programme has targeted particular sections of the population (young people, rural women who have moved to the cities, ordinary television viewers) through various strategies deployed in the sectors of education and the media. Finally, Karim Tartoussieh investigates the relations between religion, politics and culture in contemporary Egypt, in the context of a new digital media landscape. He looks at the representations of religious movements diffused in popular mode on national state television, as well as the endeavours by such movements themselves (in this case the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood) to use modern digital technology to diffuse competing representations. He also considers the uses made by the state itself of other such technologies (here in ‘surveillance’ mode) in its attempts to compete with religious groupings as an upholder of traditional (sexual) morality.

The last three articles consider, in very different ways, the relations between certain arts, heritage and media organisations and questions of religion. Jane Woddis analyses the pressures that have been put on certain arts organisation by religious pressure-groups, both at the level of artistic production itself, and in terms of the material

and symbolic contexts for such productions. She also considers the attempts of a national arts policy organisation (Arts Council England) to deal with such issues, as well as their implications for various theoretical approaches to matters of religion, culture and secularisation. Mark O'Neill's article is organised around two case studies of religiously themed museum exhibitions in which he was directly involved. The first concerns the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow, launched in 1993 as the first museum in the UK devoted to world religion (and one of only four or five in the world); the second concerns elements of a programme of events organised by Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art in 2009 on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex art and culture. Both indicate the kinds of flashpoint and challenge that are generated when those involved in such exhibitions break, as O'Neill puts it, with prevailing 'expectations that [museums] provide only celebratory and idealized views of the world'. Here, arts and heritage policy institutions function as a kind of stage upon which issues relating to religion and cultural freedoms are represented, debated and sometimes dramatically fought over. Finally, Phil MacGregor's article seeks to put some flesh on the bones of A.N. Wilson's intuition that 'no visitant from another age who landed in the midst of our [English] twenty-first-century culture would begin to make sense of our popular journalism – prurient, self-righteous, spiteful and pompous – unless they were able to trace its origins to the [...] traditions of the nineteenth-century Nonconformists' (Wilson [2002] 2003, p. 463). There are many factors that combine to produce what one might call the culture-shaping 'quasi-policies' constituted by multiple journalistic bodies working with similar dispositions under similar market conditions. MacGregor's contention is that these have been mediated in English contexts through the emphases and obsessions of a particular 'puritan' tradition. In this case (which is perhaps not susceptible of clear-cut proof), erstwhile religious forms might persist where the original religious contents or themes have been largely forgotten.

We should stress that the present issue carries no specifically religious agenda. Our intention, at one level, was to 'try out' within religious domains the broader approach to cultural policy studies that we have begun to develop in previous issues of the journal. In so doing, useful insights can be developed regarding the contemporary conditions under which cultures (embodied systems of attitudes and values) develop, and the range of institutions that look through more or less formally devised courses of action to shape them. And one of these insights, noted already in his fashion by the republican secularist Durkheim ([1912] 1976), is that the distinction between enlightenment and myth does not always sit securely where we start out by placing it.

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