

Crossing Channels

Interdisciplinary answers to today's challenging questions

A Podcast series hosted by **Rory Cellan-Jones**

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Season 2 - Episode 10

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF RELIGION?

With

Iza Hussin (University of Cambridge)

Paul Seabright (IAST)

What is the future of religion?

HOST

Rory Cellan-Jones (former BBC correspondent)

SPEAKERS

Iza Hussin (University of Cambridge) and Paul Seabright (IAST)

Rory Cellan-Jones 00:06

Hello and welcome to Crossing Channels. I'm Rory Cellan-Jones. What is the future of religion? Just a tiny little subject then for the latest in our podcast collaboration between Cambridge University's Bennett Institute for Public Policy, and the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. As ever, we're going to use the interdisciplinary strengths of both institutions to explore a complex challenge. How has the global religious landscape changed over the past 100 years? What is the intersection between politics and religion? And how do religions compete? To explore these issues today we have Iza Hussin from the University of Cambridge. Iza, start us off, what does your research focus on?

Iza Hussin 00:56

Thank you, Rory. I'm largely interested in how religion underguards and at the same time undermines the modern state. So I've worked on this in terms of Islam and colonialism in South and Southeast Asia on the securitisation of religion. And now I'm working on a book about how law travels across the Indian Ocean, following a man on a ship across the 19th century. In a journey that ends with the first constitution in Southeast Asia, which is one of the first places in the world where the sentence appears, Islam shall be the religion of the modern state.

Rory Cellan-Jones 01:30

You have the ideal background for this multidisciplinary podcast. From the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse, we have Paul Seabright. Paul, reminds us of your main research interests.

Paul Seabright 01:40

I work at the interface between behavioural economics and the economics of institutions. So where our primate brains meet the busy modern world.

Rory Cellan-Jones 01:50

Paul, you're known as a very distinguished economist. Why have you suddenly become interested in religion?

Paul Seabright 01:56

Well, it's not suddenly, about 20 years ago, I wrote a book on cooperation. And a good friend of mine, Giuseppe Bertola, the Labour economist said, you know, Paul, I quite like your book but to be honest, the people in it aren't very interesting personalities. They're not gendered. They're not interested in sex. They don't have any ideology or any religion. And I thought, you're so right. And so for the next 20 years, I basically worked on the economics gender and the economics of ideology, particularly religion, I've never regretted it. And lots of economists are getting interested in religion as well. It has enormous impact on economic and social life.

Rory Cellan-Jones 02:32

Well, let's get underway then with looking at what the data tells us about what's happened to religious belief over the last 100 years. Paul, you start us off?

Paul Seabright 02:42

Well, there's a widespread belief, especially led by people in America and Western Europe, that religion is in terminal decline. And it's believed that this was predicted in the 19th century by people like Weber and Durkheim and so on. But the data all suggests that that's a mistake. It's declining for a number of reasons that we can come back to in America and in Western Europe, but in the rest of the world, it's in vigorous health. One of the things we've seen in the last century has been a decline in the share of people who

report themselves as Christians, compared to other religions, particularly Muslims. But that's largely a statistical illusion. That's because 100 years ago, Christianity was concentrated in parts of the world that were destined to grow very slowly, in demographic terms. In the parts of the world that were destined to grow very fast like Asia, Islam was very strong. It's easy to forget that 80% of the world's Muslims are not Arabs and they're concentrated very much in Asia. And in 1900, there were very few Christians in Asia. And so very few of the world's babies in the next century were going to be Christian anyway. What we actually see if we look at the trends over a century, is that both Christianity and Islam have increased substantially their membership compared to what could have been predicted on the basis of demographic trends. We also see that the importance people reporters attaching to religion, so what they say in surveys about how important religion is in their lives, shows no tendency to decline over the 40 or 50 years that we've been able to get the data. So it goes up in some places, it goes down in some places, and it stays steady in most of the world.

Rory Cellan-Jones 04:28

Iza, what is your perspective on on that pattern of change over the last century?

Iza Hussin 04:35

I mean, I completely agree with Paul's opening statement about the declinist narrative being one from a particularly narrow viewpoint, right? So if we expand our perspective to the experiences of people and societies and politics in the Global South, for example, we see a different account of religion and its experience in the modern era, including, for example, an increasing intertwining between what we used to think of as religion, which was larger, more embedded in multiple kinds of institutions, an increasing intertwining between religion and public politics.

Rory Cellan-Jones 05:15

Paul, can we be confident this data is reliable, particularly, I don't know, back in the middle of the last century, when people were asked about their religious beliefs then. Were were they more inclined to potentially, you know, answer in the affirmative, because that was the culturally acceptable thing to do?

Paul Seabright 05:37

Well, that's still very true in many parts of the world. So for example, in China, there are an awful lot more religious people than will admit to it in the census and survey data. And that's not surprising, because the Chinese government, which as we know, surveys people's opinions very closely and acts rather harshly against people expressing too much interest in some religions, particularly in Islam and Tibetan Buddhism. In China, on the whole, if you're religious, you keep your mouth shut. And that's true, whether you're applying to private surveyors or to government census officials. In other countries, like Iran, for example, almost everybody says they're extremely religious, and it's very important to them. But if you look at other measures, like how often people go to the mosque, that's been declining for some time in Iran. And there's a lot of evidence that religion, and particularly official Islam, has been discredited by the extent to which it

has been instrumentalised by political powers. So of course, you're right, there are big questions to ask about those data, still. We work with the data we've got. And they fall into two categories. There's basically census data which you ask everybody, what category of religion they fall into. And so in 1900, there were apparently no atheists in the world. Do you believe that? Well no, no censurers thought to ask about atheists or agnostics. As it happens, the proportion of world's atheists has been declining since we've been asking questions about that in the second half of the 20th century. More people report themselves as believers today of some kind, or at least a bigger proportion, than was true, say in 1950 or 1970. So we have to be very cautious about that. But still, we see some pretty big patterns. And not all of those patterns, I think, are just due to changes in reporting habits.

Rory Cellan-Jones 07:26

Is there a pattern whereby, you mentioned the US and Western European, kind of outliers in some decline? Is there a pattern whereby as economies develop and get to a high state of development, then we see religious belief declining?

Paul Seabright 07:42

No, I don't think that's generally true. What is striking about religious movements in the modern world is how adaptable they've proved in the face of economic change, increasing incomes, and so forth. I think if you want an explanation for the decline in support for religion in North America, and in some countries in Western Europe, then you have to look elsewhere. And you have to look at a disenchantment with the way in which religion has been politically instrumentalised. So that's been true in Ireland, it's been true in Spain, it's been true in the United States. But there are lots of other countries. Even in Europe, for example, in Eastern Europe, countries with a predominantly Orthodox tradition have seen an enormous increase in the importance attached to religion since the end of communism. And of course, what we're seeing in Ukraine right now is really striking. My guess is that the status of the Orthodox Church in Russia is going to decline massively because of its support for the aggression by Russia against Ukraine, but support for the Orthodox Church in Ukraine is likely to soar for the next 10 or 20 years or more.

Rory Cellan-Jones 08:51

Iza, what is your perspective on economic development and Islam in countries where people are dear mainly to the Islamic faith?

Iza Hussin 09:01

One of the things we see in Turkey, in Malaysia, in Indonesia and Pakistan, since the late 70s and the early 80s, is the incorporation of different varieties of public and institutional Islam within the development programme of the modern state, right. So there's a re-articulation of what Islam can be and should be. How it intertwines with work, with the making of the modern family, with the movement from agrarian rural organisations into the cities, and how it makes sense of different kinds of integrations into the global economy. So within Malaysia, for example, a big push to think about Islam as integral to the modern

Malaysian nationalist project, a moderate Islam that was global, appealed across the board, but also was incredibly energetic and interested in youth politics and youth mobilisation. In Indonesia, in the current moment, that's not showing itself in terms of nationalism or nationalist organisation, but in the different ways in which Islam makes meaning for a rising middle class.

Rory Cellan-Jones 10:18

Generally, your research, you've talked about looks at politics and religion and the intertwining of them. Is that a growing trend? I mean, in some countries, there was a pronounced desire to to separate the two. But that's not the case in a lot of countries now.

Iza Hussin 10:34

Yeah. Well, I mean, looking at it historically, if we think about politics as a struggle over hierarchy, authority, normative resources, institutions, it is the state that started the fight, right? religions were prior, and it is the resting of control over some of those resources by the increasingly institutional aspirationalist state that starts the tension, well doesn't start the tension but obviously gives it enormous momentum. And so that turf war, I think, between state authority and alternative modes of exercising authority, claiming institutions, doing hierarchy, continues in different ways. And one of the major impacts of that struggle has been a change in the way we have tended to think of the line between the sacred and the secular, the public and the private, the religious, the non religious, and who gets to decide where that line goes in each place.

Rory Cellan-Jones 11:39

Talk to us about India and the way over its recent history, religion has become more important. Is it as a sort of political battleground? Is that fair to say?

Iza Hussin 11:50

There's a very long history to that story. Obviously, in the 1750s onwards, there is a colonial attempt to define the peoples of India not by language or belonging or location or a multitude of different religiosities. But by two increasingly stable, definable countable, legislatable, controllable categories: Muslim and Hindu. Over the colonial period into the struggle for independence, and into the formation of India and Pakistan, these categories become increasingly invested with institutional, symbolic and normative power. And one of the things we're seeing in the India of today is, I think, one of the unfortunate long consequences of that dynamic in which Indian citizenship has become increasingly bound up with racial cost oriented and religious, Hindu majoritarianism.

Rory Cellan-Jones 12:52

Paul, in many Western countries, there was a determination to separate church and state. Where is that going? Are those who want religion to play a bigger part in political life, beginning to have some victories?

Paul Seabright 13:07

I think the separation of church and state has been historically extremely unusual. It was characteristic of the United States, which was mainly occupied by Europeans fleeing religious persecution in their own countries. And for that reason, they wanted to set up a state in which no one religion would have the predominance. France is again one of the exceptions. But a clear division of church and state is historically extremely unusual. What I think is interesting, and this highlights a very important thing in what Iza has been saying is that there's a big difference between making religion part of a shared national project and making religion a partisan project for a subset of the political class. And where the latter happens, then it's very often followed, not immediately but eventually, by a decline in the perceived legitimacy of religion. We see across the world, and this is in surveys in the United States, in Europe, in Iran, in India, we see a lot of people who may be personally religious, but who do not want one set of political leaders telling them what to do on the basis of religious authority. What seems to be clear is that in a large number of societies, if religion is perceived as being a relatively nonpartisan, overall societal project, then you'll have anything from 70-80% of the population saying it's pretty important to them. Where religion is hijacked by a subset of the political class and used in their disputes against the rest of the political class, then the proportion same religion is very important tends to decline over the long run to 30-40%. Namely, those who support the subset of the political class that has hijacked the project.

Rory Cellan-Jones 15:02

Iza, I mean, religion was a kind of revolutionary force in Iran, for instance, wasn't it? The Iranian Revolution. Was that a whole pattern in that period?

Iza Hussin 15:14

Well, I think the 1979 was an incredibly consequential moment for Islam globally, as well. It's one of the first moments we see a mass movement in Iran gain global attention, in part, because at its start anyway, it represented a popular uprising against a rulership that was increasingly being understood to be unjust, corrupt, and potentially also out of touch with the majority of the population. And you know that that language of Islam as a way of energising the young, Islam as a way of thinking about modernity, Islam as a way of doing global politics, was enormously attractive globally in all kinds of ways that we're tending to forget, right. So it had appeal, in large part, because of its resonances with people's experiences after that first moment of post colonial nation building, when we started to ask questions about what politics was for, and who the state should serve, and has, you know, evolved since then in multiple different directions.

Paul Seabright 16:42

I would just add, if I may, that, I think what Iza is describing is not only absolutely accurate, but also a very good description of something that happened in a very different country, namely Poland. So Poland emerged from communism with hugely increased legitimacy for the Catholic Church, because of the part that the Catholic Church had played in uniting all of Polish society against the authoritarian government that had preceded it. It's easy to forget that because of course, the Catholic church faces enormous

problems now that we may want to discuss later, and has been declining in its perceived importance and legitimacy in a large number of countries in the rest of the world. But in Poland, the Catholic Church increased enormously in importance because it was seen as a national project, defending the people as a whole. And you didn't have to be very Catholic, you didn't it didn't matter whether you were rich poor, whether you were broadly liberal, Catholic or conservative Catholic, but the church was there for you in Poland in the 1970s and the 1980s. And so in the 1990s, it emerged hugely strengthened. Since then, of course, the Catholic Church has lent it support to a much more narrow political project. And my prediction will be that as we've been seeing in Iran, the legitimacy of the Catholic Church is going to decline again, having risen enormously because of its perceived attachment to a nonpartisan society wide project.

Rory Cellan-Jones 18:14

Iza, let's just look at Islamic law, which as part of this sort of processes has become built into some modern states. How has that happened?

Iza Hussin 18:12

I'm trying to keep this short because it started out as a book. So two parallel processes, which I studied in the context of colonial India, Malaya and Egypt. On the one hand, an increasing marginalisation of Islamic law, by which I mean, not the Scharia, but the content of legislation that derives from authoritative Islamic sources, right. On the one hand, marginalisation of that content to fairly narrow realms of family law, ritual observance, and the private sphere, newly defined. On the other hand, despite that substantive marginalisation and increasing symbolic centrality for Islam as the thing that authorises the increasing intervention of the nation state. So you have this sort of tension that's built into the incorporation of Islam, into the ambitions of the modern nation state, in which on the one hand, its aspirations for increasing control and oversight or normative authority increase, while it attempts to domesticate the content of Islamic law to what is now considered the private sphere. And it's a tension that continues to need maintenance and underwrites a great deal of the struggle in places like Malaysia, Pakistan, to a very different extent Iran and in Muslim minority contexts as well, continues to inform the relationship between Muslims and the places in which they live.

Rory Cellan-Jones 20:03

Paul with with Christianity, the battle has often been around issues like abortion, where it's been an increasingly powerful conservative force, certainly in countries like the United States, and yet in countries like Ireland has been defeated. How do you see Christianity intervening in the sort of legal sphere?

Paul Seabright 20:24

A lot depends on whether you're talking about the Catholic Church, or about the very large number of Protestant denominations or indeed about the Orthodox Churches, which is a different story again. If you look at the Catholic Church, one of the big paradoxes of its organisation is that for an organisation that large, it has an astonishingly flat hierarchy. There are basically only four levels in the Catholic Church.

There is the ordinary believer, there's the priests, the bishop, there's the Pope. And no modern business could function with only four levels, when it has 1.3 billion members. So historically, the way the Catholic Church has functioned is by a process of live and let live. And there was very little enforcement of central doctrine. That was possible before the age of the internet and social media. You could have different attitudes to homosexuality, to practice, to abortion, to priest marriage. Now, you can't get away with it anymore. So the Catholic Church is in turmoil, because it's supposed to be imposing a degree of uniformity in practice and belief, which it historically has been unable to do. Now, if you look at Protestant denominations, it's very, very different. There's no central authority. So when you get a political movement as seen the United States that has seized on a particular view of the family, the role of women and women's sexuality as part of a political project, then obviously, there are going to be some Protestant religious entrepreneurs who are only happy to get on board. But it seems very clear that even most members of evangelical Protestant movements are rather uncomfortable with seeing their churches being exploited for political ends. So you get even within the Protestant movements, this big division between the people who are terribly excited that politicians are inviting them to come on board, and I would say the majority of even Protestant and evangelical members who are very much in two minds about whether that's a good direction in which their churches should be taking.

Rory Cellan-Jones 22:24

Iza, how do those social trends, the advent of social media, affect other religions outside Christianity?

Iza Hussin 22:34

One of the things we're seeing, I mean, and that's been running as a thread in part throughout this conversation is, alongside the sea change in religion, we're seeing a sea change in politics, right? So a great number of institutions that have historically been not transparent, that have concentrated resources, both normative and political, that have been to a certain extent above question, had been finding themselves increasingly no longer under the protection of those mystical protections. And so you know, the military, the media, cultural institutions, academia, the judiciary, and so on and so forth. And so I think the question about accountability, transparency, equality, gender, representation, race, all of those things, spell the inclusion of powerful religious institutions within a change in what we are starting to see politics. The question is, does it does it change the institutions themselves? Because there I think there is a radical disconnect between how we feel about politics and religion when they're intertwined, and what changes we can effect. And so we're seeing that as well, not just in in the Western Church, right, but elsewhere.

Rory Cellan-Jones 23:52

Let's move on to your core subject, economics. What does economics have to say about religion? What insights does it provide on the value of religious institutions, for example?

Paul Seabright 24:04

One very obvious point is that religious institutions wield enormous power. So historically, the Catholic Church in Europe by about the 8th century, owned about a third of all the agricultural land. That's enormous. Now in the modern world, an awful lot of resources heads in the direction of churches, almost always unmonitored, in most countries, churches, mosques, whatever do not have to publish accounts. So we didn't know this study in the United States estimated that the financial resources flowing towards faith-based organisations made up about 2% of personal income in the United States. Now that, to put in perspective, more than Microsoft and Apple earned at the same time, that was about 60% of the whole music and entertainment industry, to about half of what all restaurants in the United States earn. And that's just the financial resources. So when you think of the amounts of time and energy, and investments in kind that people put into religious activity, we're just talking about being part of the economy.

Rory Cellan-Jones 25:16

That's the case in the United States. That's very different in countries like the UK. We're used to seeing those very profit driven preachers in the United States with vast congregations and quite substantial personal incomes.

Paul Seabright 25:31

Yes. And that's partly to do with the history of the church, and not just in the UK but in Europe, where it was a state monopoly. Religions have a big deal economically just in terms of the resources that are commanded. But it's also interesting because implicitly or explicitly competition is happening at all levels. It's happening, obviously between, say, rival Protestant churches in the same town, but it's also happening between Protestant and Catholic institutions. And even you might be surprised to know this, between, say, mosques and churches in many parts of the world. So if people are coming from villages to migrate to cities, in Africa or in Asia, they're often stopping by the side of the road deciding where they're going to go, will they look in at a mosque? Will they chat to the people there? Will they take a look at a Pentecostal Church, which is holding an open morning for them to welcome them? The big religions are deeply in competition there. And I'm just fascinated in to study how that happens.

Rory Cellan-Jones 26:33

Iza, what's your perspective on that? Islam is a major economic force, isn't it?

Iza Hussin 26:39

Absolutely. And I think it also points in the direction of you know, what scholars in the political study of religion tend to miss, right. That the everyday appeal of religion lies less in the texts and the Friday Sermons than it does in, you know, who runs the soup kitchens, right? Who buries the dead? Who provides medical care? Who does informal policing? Who provides water in places where the government doesn't reach? Who does flood relief? So increasingly, I think the question about the everyday meaning and impact of religion and its utility, for want of a better word, at the individual level also has to do with the places where we aren't looking, right. So amongst the urban poor in Brazil, and questions of the making of

meaning around poverty and climate change and crisis, amongst the rising middle class in Indonesia, and questions of wealth and migration, and again, climate change. And these are places where institutionalised, established religions, as Paul says, are moving much more slowly, then the entrepreneurs who are in those communities, thinking very creatively and responsively, to those issues.

Rory Cellan-Jones 27:56

Let's conclude by looking to the future, looking at whether these trends will continue. Paul, you've raised the issue of abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse in the Catholic Church. If you look at what's happened in Ireland, a very small country has been the most extraordinary transformation in the position of the church there from extraordinarily dominant till quite recently to, for instance, losing a referendum on abortion. Is that a pattern that we're gonna see globally?

Paul Seabright 28:32

Yes and the first important thing to say is that sexual abuse is a crisis in the Catholic Church, but not just the Catholic Church, not just in Christian Churches, but in religious institutions across the world. It happens in Islam, it happens in Buddhism, it happens in Hinduism, it happens in Judaism. It happens everywhere. It does not only happen in religious institutions, it happens in secular institutions. We know lots of examples, it happens in sports, it happens in the entertainment industry, it happens in universities, it happens everywhere. And I think the important point is that it's nothing to do with the specific ideology of any religion. Nor is it anything to do with more good or bad people working for one type of organisation rather than another. It happens wherever powerful people are putting unchecked access to vulnerable people with no overview and no countervailing power for those vulnerable people to defend themselves. And it's true that many religious institutions including obviously the Catholic Church have historically set up contexts in which charismatic leaders have essentially unobserved and unchecked access to the very vulnerable. They take charismatic leaders and sometimes even not people who are senior in the organisation. I mean, you could be a charismatic leader because you're just say, a Sunday school leader or you're a counsellor at summer camp. But the point is that vulnerable people look up to you, and there is no recognition in the organisation, that you have rights, that it's not right for senior people to behave to you in certain ways. And if you are abused, you are completely alone. The terrifying thing about what we've seen in Ireland is that lots and lots of people were abused, horribly abused, and they had nobody they could talk to. Not because nobody believed them, but because people sort of knew it was going on and they couldn't talk about it, and they couldn't act. But so it's not about religion, per se, but lots of religious movements and religious organisations have that problem at their core.

Rory Cellan-Jones 30:43

But the result has been a huge decline in the Catholic Church, far more so than in other institutions, which have, as you say, similar problems.

Paul Seabright 30:56

Yes. And I think the two reasons for that. One is that paradoxically, the Catholic Church actually acted faster than most other religious institutions. We're gonna see this coming up everywhere. The Catholic Church was able, by its, in a sense, its historical characteristics, and its centralisation to be able to act faster. So more has come to light in the Catholic Church, but it will come to light elsewhere. Now, obviously, where it has acted to the detriment of the legitimacy, perceived legitimacy, of the Catholic Church, it is usually because political authorities helped the church to cover it up. And that's basically the story in Ireland. It wasn't just the church on its own that covered up, it was the entire political establishment. And the scandal in Ireland has been the extent to which lots of people, not just within the church, but outside the church, knew what was happening and did nothing. Elsewhere, if the religious institutions are not shored up by the political complicity of the powerful, they may and but if they take action in time, they may be able to avoid the downward spiral of delegitimation that has happened in Ireland. I think we're going to see very different experiences across different parts of the world. But some degree of delegitimation will come and I think there will be calls everywhere across the world for a greater transparency and a greater support for victims in pretty well every religious tradition, as well as in the many secular contexts in which this is a current and absolutely endemic problem.

Rory Cellan-Jones 32:30

Iza Hussin, given what we talked about at the beginning of the onward march of religion, do you do you see that being slowed or halted over the next 10, 20 years?

Iza Hussin 32:41

I think it will move from a concentration within institutionalised forms further and further away into slightly less aggregated areas. And it might diversify as well, but also spread differently, not through churches and buildings, but through the media, through travel, through migration, and through responses to crisis.

Rory Cellan-Jones 33:06

You don't think those different areas will weaken religious belief? The growing use of social media, growing travel?

Iza Hussin 33:14

Well I'm not seeing that the ways in which people are making sense of their lives and their relationship to both the seen and unseen as well as to authority and hierarchy all take place in the virtual world in much the same way as they always have, I think.

Paul Seabright 33:33

I'd add that the growth of printing was predicted by some to portend the end of religion and we haven't seen it. The growth of social media is just like the growth of printing squared. And things like artificial intelligence are the growth of printing cubed. If the growth of printing didn't kill religion, none of these

developments will kill religion either, but they will shift its shape. It's going to have complicated interactions with political and social life, but it's not going away.

Rory Cellan-Jones 34:06

It's a great point on which to end that's all we've got time for on this episode. Thanks to Paul Seabright from the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse and Iza Hussin from Cambridge University. Let us know what you think of this latest episode of season two of Crossing Channels. You can contact us via Twitter. The Bennett Institute is [@BennettInst](#) - the Institute for Advanced Study is [@IASToulouse](#) and I am [@ruskin147](#). This is the final episode of season two of Crossing Channels. We'll be back in October with a third series. In the meantime, do listen to our previous episodes, where we, for example, explored the productivity puzzle, the importance of stories in policymaking and the Ukraine war. Thank you for listening to this season and stay tuned for season three, where we will continue to explore many more policy challenges.