

Editorial: Religion: Implicit and Inescapable? Reflection on the 28th Denton Conference on Implicit Religion, 6–8th May 2005

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The annual conference, organized by Edward Bailey at Denton Hall, in Yorkshire, UK, again demonstrated the power and subtlety of the concept of Implicit Religion as a tool for exploring the underlying significance of a wide range of social phenomena. Professional academics from different fields and others, bringing a variety of professional and personal interests, gathered to hear and discuss thirteen papers. As well as the usual benefits of making new and renewing existing contacts, the Denton Conference facilitates dialogue between disciplines, and sometimes between cultures, dialogue which is increasingly important given the target-focussed and output oriented pressure on academe. Despite the dangers of imposing an artificial categorization on the extraordinarily rich variety of themes and approaches of the thirteen papers, they are reported upon under four headings: the classic use of the concept of Implicit Religion; empirical studies; conceptual challenges; and windows on new worlds.

Classic applications of the concept

William and Joanne Swatos demonstrated the resurgence of civil religion in the U.S.A. following the tragic events of 11th September 2001. A striking series of photographs showed the use of the slogan ‘God Bless America’ in an amazing range of ways: from pizza boxes to medical practice notice boards to Christmas tree decorations. The presentation vividly illustrated the juxtaposition of explicit/conventional religion and implicit religion. How much is ‘God Bless America’ a petition invoking divine blessing on the nation, and how much is it an expression of adoration towards the nation? More of the latter it would seem.

Claudia May, literary critic and currently Research Fellow in Implicit Religion at the United College of the Ascension, Birmingham, UK, presented something of her work in progress on the allure of celebrity, in particular David Beckham the English soccer player. Together with Leiden-based Karen Parna's paper *The Internet as a Sacred Phenomenon: The Meanings of a Contemporary Hierophany*, this demonstrated the way in which major contemporary phenomena can be understood as implicit religion. Something of the power and significance of these phenomena are seen very clearly when subjected to the kind of rigorous investigation executed by both May and Parna.

Guy Ménard from Quebec and Meerten ter Borg from Leiden used implicit religion as a tool to explore facets of personal behaviour: contemporary sexuality and the persistence of rituals respectively. In both these papers questions were raised pointing in two directions: how can our understanding of personal behaviour, such as the ritual of teeth cleaning or participation in dangerous unprotected sexual activity, be enhanced by the concept of implicit religion, and how can such study clarify our understanding of implicit religion?

Empirical

Leslie Francis, Mandy Robbins and, in his absence, Emyr Williams from the University of Wales, Bangor, shared some of the initial results from an investigation into religion, superstition, luck and fear, amongst 13–15 year old girls in Wales. Initial analysis of the numerical data indicated such things as the persistence of belief in an afterlife amongst churched and unchurched girls, generally higher amongst the churched, but a rather lower level of belief in the supernatural and in good and bad luck amongst the churched.

Results of the *Spirituality at Work* project, sponsored by the Leeds Church Institute between 1998 and 2000, were presented by Kathryn Fitch. Issues of 'ultimate meaning and purpose' and spirituality at work broadened out to include matters of ethos and staff morale, with some indications of distinct differences between private, public sector and voluntary sector organizations. Much of the information generated by the investigation was qualitative rather than quantitative and the data is still available for further analysis. Might this be susceptible to exploratory investigation into the implicit religion lying behind responses to questions about matters of ultimate meaning and purpose?

Conceptual challenges

Unlike some previous Denton conferences, there was little debate about definition of concepts. Edward Bailey's own work on the concept of Implicit Religion is now much more widely known whilst, at the same time, the long-running dispute about substantive or functional definitions of religion seems to be exhausted, at least for now. One or two papers at this year's conference did, however, raise significant conceptual questions. In his wide-ranging discussion of *Implicit Religion and Pastoral Care in Counselling* Simon Robinson, from Leeds Metropolitan University, suggested the interchangeability of the terms 'hidden spirituality' and 'implicit religion': not an unchallengeable suggestion.

The paper by Linda Rudge of the University of East Anglia, *Implicit Religion in English School Settings: Religious Education and Secularized Faith*, argued for a clearer recognition of the phenomenon of implicit religion in the world of Religious Education. The paper raised fundamental questions about implicit religion as a religion alongside other religions. Is implicit religion what has replaced conventional religion in the later modern period? Is it 'secularised faith'?

David Thomas's paper, *Agonised Attraction: Slavoj Zizek and Suspended Belief*, introduced the Conference to developments in the thinking of the Slovenian philosopher from a psychoanalytical and Marxist background. The quotation from Zizek, 'No one escapes belief... underlying structure of belief is pervasive', was particularly interesting, given Zizek's previously assumed atheism. Is belief, however hidden, inescapable and, if so, is implicit religiosity an inevitable part of human behaviour?

Windows on new worlds

That the study of implicit religion is interdisciplinary is well illustrated by the annual Denton Conference. This is not least because of the presentation of papers out of their own disciplines by prominent practitioners. Such papers not only open windows into other areas of study, they also provide an opportunity to consider the possibilities for development of the concept of implicit religion.

Israel Selvanayagam, from the United College of the Ascension in Birmingham, UK, delivered a masterly overview of religious life in India in his paper *The Quest for Spirituality in the Secular and Multi-Faith Context of India*. In doing so he clarified some of the problems in promoting the use of the concept of Implicit Religion in the sub-continent.

Simon Lee, Vice-Chancellor of Leeds Metropolitan University, described something of the story of the development of Liverpool Hope University, as well as giving vignettes of the life of his present university. He described some of the issues of value and identity which lie behind the teaching and research functions of such institutions. *Caring for the Spirit* was the title of the paper presented by Alan Brown of the School of Healthcare at the University of Leeds. Again, the Conference was given a glimpse of another professional world, that of hospital chaplaincy and the apparent marginalization of chaplaincy, at precisely the same time as serious efforts are being made to enhance the professional skills of the chaplains themselves. Whilst neither of these papers dealt overtly with implicit religion, both did raise questions about the implicit religion operating within the two respective institutions.

Inescapable?

Could it be that almost any area of human life could be described in such a way as to indicate that there was some quasi-religion functioning within it? This may be so if one is sufficiently imprecise about terminology. Some commentators do seem to yield to the temptation both to argue by analogy and to draw unwarranted conclusions from the adoption by secular groups and institutions of expressions used by faith communities. The concept of implicit religion can facilitate a more disciplined analysis. It has become a powerful tool with which to examine social phenomena. Its use in an increasingly wide range of contexts does, however, disclose the possibility that implicit religiosity is universal in human social behaviour. Evidence mounts, as the Denton Conference illustrated, but the case is not yet proven.