Religion and the Political Imagination
Saltmarsh Rooms, King’s College, University of Cambridge
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A report by Gareth Stedman Jones and Ira Katznelson

Summary

The main business of this year’s July meeting of the ‘Religion and the Political Imagination’ Project was to examine the meaning and validity of the notion of secularisation from both historical and philosophical perspectives.

The first session on 26 July examined the contrasting cases of United States and of South Asia. Michael O’Brien underlined the restricted meaning of the term secularisation in American culture while Sudipta Kaviraj examined the combination between what he viewed as a ‘thinning out’ of religion and at the same time, its politicisation in the World since 1945, but particularly with reference to Hinduism and Islamism. The following Sessions III and IV examined historical instances where assumptions of secularisation have traditionally been made.

Session III looked at the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the evolution of both Catholicism and Protestantism since 1800. Gareth Stedman Jones discussed the French Revolution in the context of early modern wars of religion. Emile Perreau-Saussine analysed the connection between the French Revolution, the end of the Gallican Church and the rise of Ultramontanism. Session IV investigated changing relationships between Church and State in Western and Eastern Europe between the 17th and 20th centuries. Geoffrey Hosking traced the early secularisation of the Russian Church from the time of Peter the Great. Chris Clark surveyed the aftermath of 1848 in Germany and its connection with the subsequent rise of Christian Democratic parties in Catholic countries. Eugenio Biagini recounted the fate of the Papacy in 1848 and its complex relationship with the rise of nationalism in Italy. He also compared those developments with religious dimensions of liberalism in mid and late Victorian Britain. Ruth Harris re-evaluated the significance of the Dreyfus affair in France at the beginning of the 20th century. She exposed the presence of religious and mystical assumptions, both among the Dreyfusards and their opponents.

In Session V members of the colloquium discussed developments in the 1960s and after. Jytte Klausen highlighted the still strong taboos inhibiting the wholesale secularisation of political cultures in Western Europe, highlighting the cases of Denmark and France. Sara Silvestri traced the relations between Islam and constitutions of European states in the period from the Second World War to the present.

A concluding session of the colloquium examined some of the legal and constitutional dimensions of the enquiry. Miles Taylor considered the relationship between Church/State relations in Britain and those in the British Empire. He revealed that developments in the Empire often preceded those in Britain itself.
Anat Scolnicov examined the treatment of confessions within European and local laws. She particularly pointed to the keenness of the European Court to avoid fundamental pronouncements upon the relationship between religion and civil society. Istvan Hont highlighted the absence of wholly secular assumptions in European Political Thought over the last four centuries.

By general agreement this year’s colloquium was a success. Contributions were more sharply focussed – to such an extent that we now believe an important and coherent volume can be planned. We have already collected the bulk of the papers delivered at the colloquium. We shall be making suggestions to each author about how they might develop their essays. Our intention is that next Summer around the same dates we should convene a meeting of authors to discuss the penultimate drafts which would form the basis of a publication.