



Desecularisation and Sexual Equality

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There has been a rise in the political power of organised religions in both western countries and the non-west in the last two decades. There has been desecularisation of the public sphere in countries such as the UK and Australia which takes the form of deliberate government policy both to consult with ‘faith communities’ and to create an influential role for them in policy formation. These developments are likely to endanger sexual equality because the religious organisations are usually discriminatory with respect to gender and sexuality, both in their employment practices and their ideologies. This article will examine the ways in which desecularisation has been taking place in the UK and Australia and the implications of this for sexual equality.

Keywords: desecularisation; women; religion; equality

Desecularisation has taken place in Australia and in the UK in the last decade as religious organisations have been invited by governments to take a much greater part in public life. They have received contracts to run welfare services, received money to set up interfaith organisations and have been invited to take part in consultations on policy. Deliberate government policy has directed the setting up of more religious schools or the handing of state schools to religious organisations to run with state funding. These developments are one part of what has been identified by scholars of religion and political scientists as a ‘rise of religion’ in world politics. They include an increasing tendency for governments and policy-makers to interpret multiculturalism as ‘multifaithism’ and to ‘rule through religion’. Other manifestations include campaigns by religious organisations through the United Nations to impede the establishment of women’s rights to contraception and abortion, and sexual orientation rights, and to use the ‘right to religion’ to trump women’s rights. They include the accession to government, or greater influence upon governments, by religious extremists. This article will focus on desecularisation, by looking at the deployment of religion by governments in Australia and the UK. It will examine the possibility that this will be harmful to sexual equality, and by sexual equality I mean both the equality of women and the equality of lesbians and gay men.

I have chosen Australia and the UK because the government of Tony Blair in the UK and that of John Howard in Australia have both, in the last two decades, sought to incorporate religion into public policy. Similar policies have been adopted in each case: the outsourcing of services to religious organisations; the privileging of ‘faith’ schools; and consultation with ‘faith’ communities. There has been very little research on the effects of these policies on equality in any form, and this article will use what is available, including reports from government departments, research institutes and the media, while raising questions about the possible impact of this



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'rise of religion' on sexual equality in particular, and will argue that more research needs to be done in this important area.

Feminist Critique of Multiculturalism

The feminist critique of the way in which governments rule through religion is a developing aspect of the feminist critique of multiculturalism. Feminist activists have been trenchant critics of multiculturalism from the early 1990s, and this critique has recognised the extent to which 'culture' and religion are intertwined. Women Against Fundamentalism, for instance, a UK feminist group founded in 1989, states categorically: 'We want to live in a country of many cultures, but reject the politics of what has come to be known as "multiculturalism"' (Katz 1995, 43). Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis, both founding members of Women Against Fundamentalism, have argued that when governments consult with and enact policies to benefit cultural communities, they in fact favour elderly patriarchs, the community 'leaders', and disadvantage women (Sahgal and Yuval-Davis 1992). This critique was taken up forcefully in American feminist political science with Susan Moller Okin's edited collection, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for women?* (Okin 1999). Okin's book stimulated the serious academic criticism of multiculturalism, in theory and practice, as problematic for women. She pointed out that cultural practices that establish women's subordination are the very heart of what is understood to be, and defended as, cultural difference. American feminist legal theorist, Catharine MacKinnon, puts the feminist critique of multiculturalism in blunt terms:

Multiculturalism is a politically normative version of the anthropological notion of cultural relativism premised on the view 'that all cultures are equally valid' ... Feminism, however, questions the cultural validity of subordinating women to men anywhere ... feminism does not assume that anyone's culture, including their own, is valid ... Defenses of local differences, as they are called, are often simply a defense of male power in its local guise (MacKinnon 2006, 53).

Feminist theorists have been particularly persuasive in arguing that multiculturalism essentialises culture (Narayan 1997). Yuval-Davis, for instance, has argued that migrant communities seek to preserve their cultures of origin 'in aspic', so that they are unchanging though the culture in the home country changes, as all cultures do, in response to social and economic forces (Yuval-Davis 1997). 'Respect' for cultures under multicultural policies prevents the ordinary and inevitable transformation that cultures undergo. When an important part of those cultures involves the subordination of women, 'respect' prevents advances towards more egalitarian values from developing, and the privileges of men in those cultures to exploit and suppress women are protected. Despite these theoretical advances, there has been little research on the details of the ways in which multicultural policies affect women's equality. In her book *Multiculturalism, Religion and Women*, Marie Macey (2009) addresses the feminist critique to religion in the UK in particular, and her work represents an increasing tendency among feminist political theorists to argue that multiculturalism is morphing into 'multifaithism'. Culture and religion are being confused or understood as one and the same, and governments in states such

as Australia and the UK are increasingly exercising 'multicultural' policies through religion or 'faiths' with particularly harmful consequences for women. Multi-faithism is being implemented through increasing desecularisation.

Desecularisation

The term desecularisation has been developed by scholars of religion and politics to describe the increasing prominence of religion in government policies and in the public sphere in states that had previously adopted some degree of secularisation. The sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, explains that, like most sociologists, until 20–25 years ago he assumed that modernisation and secularisation would go hand in hand, but now admits: 'The world today is massively religious, and is anything but the secularized world that had been predicted' (Berger 1999, 8). The example of the role of religion in US politics proved the secularisation thesis to be wrong, as well as an increasing religiosity in many parts of the world. But he still considers that Europe, in particular the UK, and Australia, fulfil the sociological expectations of a progressive secularisation. I will argue here that this thesis holds true in terms of the levels of religiosity among the citizenry. But it ignores the phenomenon in the last decade in which a Labour government in the UK and a Liberal government in Australia both sought as a matter of purposeful policy to re-religionise the population and increase the role of religion in public affairs, despite the lack of enthusiasm on the part of their constituencies. Many other scholars support the idea that religion is on the rise and seek to explain it. UK Marxist theorist Terry Eagleton (2009), for instance, concurs that there has been a rise in religion. He attributes it to the failure of the left to offer an alternative to the values of the marketplace, saying: 'If politics has failed to emancipate you, perhaps religion will fare better' (Eagleton 2009, 44). But these commentators give little attention to the implications of this rise for women.

Feminist political theorist Anne Phillips asserts that there has been a global trend towards the 'de-privatisation' of religion and its increasing salience on the political stage (Phillips 2009, 4). She is not as sanguine about this phenomenon as some male sociologists are able to be, because she is a feminist and interested in what this means for women. Desecularisation is of concern because, as she puts it, 'I shall simply assert—without argument—that a fusion of state and religion is not favourable to gender equality' (Phillips 2009, 9). I define desecularisation as the increasing visibility and influence of religion in public life, from the pronouncements of politicians and government agencies, to the recruitment of 'faith groups' to give the government advice and to deliver services.

Desecularisation has been carried out by the British and Australian governments despite the fact that the citizenry in these countries is becoming progressively less religious. The 2001 census in the UK, for example, showed that 72 per cent of the population claimed Christianity as their religion, 15 per cent stated that they had no religion and 5 per cent nominated non-Christian religions (Berkeley 2008, 8). However, the expression of a religious affiliation does not connote any serious commitment to religion. An analysis of findings from the 2001 Citizenship Survey in the UK found that only 20 per cent of respondents 'felt their religious beliefs to

be an important part of their sense of self-identity' (O'Beirne 2004, vii). Despite this, the governments of the UK and Australia in the last decade have sought to re-infuse religiosity into public life. This development has attracted the considerable concern of democracy theorists and public policy academics. But this concern is generally directed at the ways in which these developments affect democracy and multiculturalism, and the rights of unbelievers, rather than at their potential effects on women. There has been only limited, and quite recent, commentary on the effects for women (Bloch 2009; Macey 2009; Winter 2009). In this article I will suggest that the desecularisation taking place in Australia and in the UK should be of concern to feminist scholars.

Desecularisation in western states is manifested in the choice by political leaders to demonstrate their religiosity and to deploy religion in political life (Warhurst 2006). In the last decade there has been a tendency for politicians to adopt the language of religion, and to seek to show what good believers they are, in acts of public worship. This was clear in the era in which George Bush in the US, Tony Blair in the UK and John Howard in Australia pronounced their Christianity and expressed its importance in their relationships with each other, particularly over the invasion of Iraq in 2003. George Bush, for instance, once told Palestinian leaders: 'God would tell me, "George, go end the tyranny in Iraq" and I did' (McSmith 2006). This public religiosity on the part of politicians was a surprising development of the 1990s. Although US politicians had a habit of seeking to appeal to their considerable Christian constituencies, British and Australian politicians had largely unbelieving constituencies, or at least ones that cared little about religion. John Howard in Australia formed closer and closer ties with religious extremists in his own party and in the country as a whole (Maddox 2005). Tony Blair has publicly expressed his belief that faith should motivate the behaviour of nation states in international politics and since leaving office he has converted to Catholicism, set up a Faith Foundation and taken on a role as a Religious Studies Professor at Yale. In 2009 President Obama invited Blair to lead the US National Prayer Breakfast. Blair talked about the global importance of religion, saying that faith should be restored 'to its rightful place, as the guide to our world and its future' (Doyle 2009). These politicians did not restrict their ambitions for religion to the international sphere. In the domestic sphere they created a greater role for religion through government consultation and funding of religious organisations to an unprecedented level, and in previously unimagined ways.

The Misogyny of Religion

Feminists should be interested in the implications of desecularisation because the feminist critique of the way that religions think about and treat women has been profound. Feminist criticism of religion as harmful to women was powerfully expressed in the 1970s, usually in relation to Christianity (Daly 1985). Feminist activists and theorists have pointed out the many ways in which Christian religious organisations, as well as those of other faiths, are harmful to women's equality. From the 1980s onwards these criticisms were extended to Judaism and Islam and feminists have argued that religion is foundational to the ideology of women's inferiority in all patriarchal systems (El Saadawi 2007). Religion gives authority to

traditional patriarchal beliefs about the essentially subordinate nature of women and their naturally separate roles, that is, that women should be confined to the private world of the home and family, that women should be obedient to their husbands, that women's sexuality should be modest and under the control of their menfolk, and that women should not use contraception or abortion to limit their childbearing. These views are common to the world's organised religions, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which were created by men in historical contexts where women were completely subordinate (Lerner 1987). The practice of such ancient beliefs interferes profoundly with women's abilities to exercise their human rights. Feminist human rights theorist Courtney Howland, for instance, points out that two elements common to the precepts of organised religions in relation to women, the requirement of women's obedience to their husbands and the modesty rule, chill women's political expression (Howland 1999). These precepts place an absolute limit on the ability of women in some 'faith communities' to express their opinions, exit their houses, exercise voting rights and engage in any activities where men are present.

Despite attempts by some women believers to alleviate the woman-hating culture and ideas of their chosen religions, the majority of religious organisations worldwide still do not allow women to preach or administer the sacraments, still maintain allegiance to the negative attitudes to women that appear in their sacred texts, or maintain the separation of women in special balconies and behind curtains so that they cannot contaminate the mysteries taking place or the thoughts of male worshippers. A study of the way in which mosques provide for women worshippers in Sydney, Australia, explains that though some mosques in the UK forbid women to attend, few mosques in Australia, 'if any, purport to ban women completely' (Hussain 2009, 55). The study details, however, the ways in which women are discriminated against, such as having to enter by back stairs and worship on balconies and behind screens, having toilet facilities in a basement with two staircases to the prescribed area and having no seating or very little to allow for women with disabilities. In one case women had to worship in a yard facing the dustbins on a day when male worshippers needed the women's usual space inside. Where religious organisations are involved by governments in consultations on policy and in the delivery of education and other services, it is not unreasonable to expect that such values and practices will have negative effects on the equality of the girls and women who are the recipients. Research from the UK found that when there is a clash between the equal opportunity policies of local council funders and religious organisations, over educational projects for boys only or facilities that only boys may use, for instance, this can cause significant difficulties for the professionals involved (Farnell et al. 2003).

There is a quantity of research which suggests that people who adhere to religions are likely to hold views that are hostile to the interests of women's equality (Norris and Inglehart 2004; Seguino and Lovinsky 2009). Stephanie Seguino and James Lovinsky looked at the correlations between intensity of religiosity and attitudes and outcomes unfavourable to women's equality. The outcomes they considered were how women fared in labour markets, in political representation and in political decision-making. Using world attitude surveys and other statistical data for

a number of countries they found that 'religiosity is indeed strongly linked to gender inequitable beliefs' (Seguino and Lovinsky 2009, 40).

Another problem with religious organisations from a feminist viewpoint is that they are likely to practise extreme discrimination in their hiring practices. Although some Christian denominations now admit women to the priesthood, most religions do not, on principle, and on the grounds of scriptural revelation, allow women or homosexuals into positions of authority. Within the Anglican church, for instance, there has been an acrimonious dispute taking place for some years about whether the ordination of women and homosexuals as bishops can be allowed without splitting the church. One group involved in opposition to this advance in the UK, Reform, believes in ideas of the Christian Patriarchy Movement in the US (Joyce 2009), of the need for men's headship in the church and in the family, and the importance of women's submission to their husbands (Brown 2010). On the other hand, since the beginnings of second wave feminism in the 1970s, local authorities have made considerable progress in their equal opportunity policies (Farnell et al. 2003). The handing over of public services to organisations that are publicly in opposition to equal opportunity in hiring practices cannot bode well for the sensitivity with which they will handle issues of gender and sexuality. A review of its Equal Opportunity Act by the state government of Victoria in Australia, for instance, provides a useful example of the problems that can arise. The options paper for the review suggested that the exemptions granted to religious bodies to discriminate on many grounds against employees in their partially or wholly state-funded welfare and education services should be reconsidered (Department of Justice 2008). Some religious groups put in very angry and forceful demands that their right to discriminate be continued, the Catholic church and the Presbyterian church in particular. As a result the Attorney-General Rob Hulls announced that the churches should be allowed to continue to discriminate on the grounds most important to them, that is, against lesbians and gays, and against single women who become pregnant or have de facto partners, so long as they gave up their right to discriminate on other grounds such as disability and race (Fyfe 2009). In the UK similar issues arose during the passage of the Equality Bill (Accord 2009).

The most harmful practices towards girls in Christian denominations are likely to take place in the fastest growing variety of Christian faith in the world (Berger 1999), Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism is Australia's fastest growing religion, and Pentecostal churches have narrow understandings of women's role and of sexuality (Levin 2007). Between 1996 and 2001, while attendance at Catholic churches fell by 13 per cent, that of Pentecostals rose by 30 per cent. The main Pentecostal church, Hillsong, generated more than \$177 million in revenue in 2005. If its government-supported schools are included then the revenue increases to \$263 million. There has been a particular closeness between the Pentecostal churches and Australian politicians from both leading parties. As an indication of the closeness of the Howard Liberal government to the Hillsong church, in 2004 the then treasurer, Peter Costello (son of a Baptist lay preacher), gave an enthusiastic speech at a Hillsong conference, saying: 'We need a return to faith and the values which have made our country strong' (Brissenden 2004). Prime Minister John Howard opened Hillsong's Baulkham Hills convention centre in October 2002. In 2007 as part of the election campaign of that year, in which the Labour party's Kevin Rudd

became prime minister, both John Howard and Rudd appeared at a Hillsong church to speak of their Christian values and garner Christian votes via a live telecast (Carter 2007).

This closeness may be problematic for sexual equality because of the traditional patriarchal ideology that Hillsong propagates. The harmful nature of this ideology has been revealed by ex-member Tanya Levin in her book *People in Glass Houses* (Levin 2007). Hillsong propounds what Levin calls 'prosperity theology', that is, how to be wealthy. It preaches, she explains, women's subordination by their husbands, is run by men, and is hostile to homosexuality. A speaker at a Hillsong Sense and Sexuality Workshop in Sydney in 2007, who was due to address its Colour Your World Conference in 2009, was Sy Rogers, who identifies as an 'ex-gay' and says: 'Happily, homosexuality can be turned around ... it is not what God planned for human sexuality' (Levin 2008). An American-style fundamentalist Christian group with links to Hillsong, Mercy Ministries, was reported in 2008 to be performing exorcisms on teenage girls who were suffering mental health problems or who admitted to having same-sex relationships (Zwartz 2008). The young women are taken in for six-month programmes and have their Centrelink (welfare) payments paid directly to the organisation. The closeness of politicians and governments to churches that propound and practise these harmful ideas about women and girls, lesbians and gays, is worrying, but governments are currently going further than simply seeking to appease churches and garner votes, by seeking to engage in government through 'faith communities'. In 2010 Julia Gillard took over as the first woman prime minister of Australia and announced that she was 'not a religious person' in answer to the question, 'Do you believe in God?' and this has caused speculation as to whether the Australian Christian lobby will have less influence on her government than it has had on previous ones (Wright 2010).

Government through 'Faith Communities'

The discriminatory ideas and practices of religions should suggest that they are unsuitable partners for governments that purport to be committed to equal opportunities for women. But governments in Australia and the UK, countries in which progress was made in the 1980s towards women's equality, have both allied themselves with these discriminatory organisations in the last decade. In both these countries the process of desecularisation owes its ideological origins to an enthusiasm for communitarianism and the ideas of social capital theorists. Robert Putnam, US theorist of social capital, explains: 'Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America' (Putnam 2000, 66). Social capital ideas are an offshoot of communitarianism, and this latter ideology has been criticised as expressing a conservative and elitist idealism by political theorists. It ignores all the other variables that might lead to social breakdown, particularly that of class inequality (Daly and Silver 2008). It has been taken up with particular enthusiasm in countries in the top four for inequality in the developed world, such as the US, the UK and Australia (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). This suggests that governments have enlisted 'faith' to deal cheaply with the social distress caused by market failure, including the alienation of unemployed youth from ethnic minorities, without

altering their commitment to market-driven, small-government policies. Mary Daly and Hilary Silver argue, for instance, that the enthusiastic adoption of social capital ideas, in particular, stems from the ideology of 'deprioritizing of the role of the state' (Daly and Silver 2008, 552). As they explain, 'social capital can provide a rationale for the state to exit poor communities and leave the problem-solving to civil society or individual action' (Daly and Silver 2008, 553). The idea of 'social capital' implies 'that redistribution is unnecessary, since the poor simply need to bond together and turn their social resources into economic assets' (Daly and Silver 2008, 554).

Feminist political theorists have pointed to serious problems with the rosy-tinted view of 'community' that underpins communitarian and social capital ideas. One major shortcoming is that it can serve to reify male power (Fraser and Lacey 1993). 'Communities' have typically been male dominant and recuperating an old-fashioned ideal form will have the effect of establishing male authority on a firmer footing. Another difficulty is the fact that when governments decide to 'consult' with communities they select unelected local representatives who are generally male and carry the values of the traditional model. They are quite unlikely to be women, lesbians and gays or apostates. A study of the barriers to effective consultation with the South Asian 'community' in Bradford, UK, for instance, found that the 'minorities within minorities' did not do well out of outreach programmes based on the identification of representatives of particular communities (Blakey et al. 2006). Gay men felt that they were excluded from such policies, and lesbians experienced much more complex levels of exclusion. Lesbians felt uncomfortable in the support group set up for gay Asians as this was male dominated. Their issues were very serious, such as how to avoid arranged marriages without suffering severe violence, and they needed separate spaces in which to discuss these. Lesbians and gay men faced discrimination and violence both within and outside their South Asian community because of their homosexuality. Women as a minority within this community are not covered in the report, apparently because the researcher dedicated to this issue left the project. But it does seem possible that women would have had difficulties having their concerns taken seriously, particularly when some women are not expected by their menfolk to issue forth into public space at all, being required to follow the modesty rule. The problem of the seclusion of women within the home is one that profoundly challenges all policies of consultation and engagement with 'faith communities' in which some male members enforce this harmful cultural practice upon women.

Despite these shortcomings, the talk of 'communities' and the idea that carrying out government policies through 'communities' is a positive way forward have become dominant in policy speak. They have become particularly prominent in the language of multiculturalism, to refer to 'faith' or 'ethnic' communities. Thus Bikhu Parekh, author of the influential report 'The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain', writes: 'Britain certainly needs to be 'One Nation'—but understood as a community of communities, and a community of citizens, not a place of oppressive uniformity based on a single substantive culture' (Parekh 2000, 56). Unfortunately women are not usually seen as constituting a community in their own right, but are the subordinate class in the communities that are recognised. They do not have representation. A version of multiculturalism that is based upon communities can

present the problem well expressed by Amartya Sen (2006) in *Identity and Violence*, of forcing people to fit themselves into one identity category and suppress all the other identities to which they might subscribe, such as being women, being homosexual, being Bengali, being poets. Sen recommends the acceptance that people possess a plurality of identities as a way forward. The Runnymede Trust noted that though the government is supposedly aware of the problem of representing these 'communities', it 'continues to identify particular leaders even while other members of a particular "community" object to that leader's capacity to represent them' (Runnymede Trust 2007, 22). Similar problems, such as to how to access and include women from communities that apply the modesty rule, bedevil the issue of interfaith dialogue.

Interfaith Dialogue?

Another aspect of desecularisation, and the idea that 'faith communities' can provide a solution to social problems, is the setting up of 'interfaith' groups by governments. In both the UK and in Australia there has been a concerted effort by governments in recent years to stimulate 'interfaith dialogue'. Considerable funding as well as pressure from government has been directed to this end. In a 2007 report, Hazel Blears, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in the UK, explained the thinking behind the promotion of interfaith dialogue. The growth in 'active faith', she says, 'has seen faith communities putting into practice their values and teachings to enrich and benefit wider society' (Communities and Local Government 2007, 5). The promotion of interfaith dialogue was at the behest of the prime minister, Tony Blair, who wanted 'to see stronger interfaith dialogue where people find the common ground that exists between different religions and communities in the UK and the creation of local inter faith councils in every community' (Communities and Local Government 2007, 6). The underlying motive was 'resilience to extremism in all its forms' which seems likely to refer to forms of violence purportedly based upon extreme Islamism (Communities and Local Government 2007, 6). The report shows awareness that interfaith activity presents particular difficulties of exclusion for women, with a section on the 'challenges and barriers' women face. These relate to the fact that those drawn together to 'dialogue' are usually the male leaders of the religions, but there are other problems such as male domination of the discussions and the fact that many women feel uncomfortable with the formality of the discussions and with being in a room with men or dominated by them (Mubarak 2006). The promotion of interfaith dialogue is a problem for sexual equality because it is likely to exclude those who are unrecognised by male community leaders, including women and lesbians and gays who may not feel safe to speak, but there are other reasons why such meetings may not lead to 'social cohesion'.

Concerned feminist critics in Australia have raised several problems of a general nature in relation to interfaith dialogue, not just those related to sexual equality, with respect to the interfaith push by governments. The promotion of 'interfaith dialogue' has taken place in Australia as well as in the UK, and has been identified by a feminist critic as a 'rising phenomenon within and between multicultural communities' (Bloch 2009, 181). The Australian government has spent millions of

dollars on interfaith activities since 2002. One major problem is that 'interfaith dialogue initiatives' contribute to 'the collapse of multicultural discourse into religious discourse, whereby "culture" and "religion" are conflated' (Bloch 2009, 181). As Bronwyn Winter puts it in the Australian context, there are attempts to 'cultivate religion as the new "ethnic"' (Winter 2009, 207). Barbara Bloch explains that interfaith dialogue is unlikely to be a good way to counter the terrorism that governments have been so concerned about since 2001, because the extremists and right wingers are quite unlikely to take part in interfaith activities (Bloch 2009). She argues that the idea, promoted by governments wedded to an interfaith agenda, that people just need to learn about each other's religions in order to become tolerant citizens, is unlikely to protect against the growth of violence. The promotion of interfaith dialogue provides a diversion from addressing racism directly and is indeed quite helpless against it. It also marginalises those who have no religion and are not invited to take part, while bolstering the public role of religion with its ensuing alienation of those hostile or indifferent to this missionising. Winter makes similar points about interfaith dialogue in Australia (Winter 2009). She explains that 'interfaith dialogue' has been advanced as the new expression of a multicultural society in a way that displaces discussion of racism. Moreover the framing of 'intercultural dialogue' in religious terms 'is premised on the assumption that everybody is religious, that everybody is religious in the same way, and there are clear links between religion and culture' (Winter 2009, 205).

Once governments start to categorise citizens according to faith for such purposes they find themselves enmeshed in a tangled web. 'Atheism', too, has to be made into a faith in order to show fairness of representation. A 2004 report from the UK Home Office Faith Communities Unit, called 'Working Together', explains that consultation with 'faith communities' will 'in most cases' 'tend to improve the quality of public policies and services for all' (Home Office 2004, 81). This suggests that the British public in general can be well represented by faiths, even though most are likely to have little 'faith' or none at all. But just in case the unbelievers might feel short-changed, the report includes a section on 'People with no religious beliefs' and comments that when consulting faith communities, 'Departments should usually give an opportunity to comment to organisations representing those with non-religious beliefs, such as humanists and secularists' (Home Office 2004, 81). Many unbelieving citizens are unlikely to feel represented by a humanist or secularist organisation, and may not even know that these exist. Courageous ex-Muslim apostates, who are frequently women and feminists, for instance Maryam Namazie, are unlikely to be captured in such consultations (Rix 2008). Humanists and secularists might object to being turned into a faith group with 'beliefs'. In a Progress Report on the Working Together document described above, humanists are expressly included in a list of 'religion/belief' associations that have been 'actively consulted' (Home Office 2005, 30).

Urban Regeneration

There are equality concerns, too, about another way in which religion has been enlisted by government in the UK as a partner in the project of 'urban regeneration'. Concern about urban regeneration is stimulated by worries about the

possibility of religious extremism and terrorism arising in neighbourhoods with socioeconomic problems. Funded by the government, faith organisations have been enlisted to report on the 'economics' of faith. Thus reports into faith economics in the north west and in Wales list all of the ways in which the resources of churches could be used to bolster regional and urban development. The resources include in particular the labour of volunteers, which is seen as potentially providing the state with a large unpaid labour force. In Wales, for instance, the report states that the Christian voluntary sector delivers services through 42,000 volunteers who form the equivalent of 2,000 full-time paid workers (Gweini 2008). Over 600 churches operate community centres, and churches oversee 1,600 listed buildings. One money-making opportunity that local governments are now funding is the promotion of 'faith tourism', that is, the idea that those with 'faith' might want to do tours of church buildings. In fact many people are likely to pop into churches and other religious buildings on their travels with no interest in faith at all, but who have an appreciation of history and architecture. They may not be amenable to finding themselves suddenly converted into 'faith tourists'. The economic benefit to Wales of these Christian religious resources was said to be £102 million. The upshot of this sudden valuing of the churches in economic terms is that local authorities are now adjured to fund them when handing out funds for development purposes. The churches say that they have been unfairly discriminated against in not getting enough funds from local government. The problem that they, and government reports, identify, is resistance from local government officers to the idea of funding religions, and the proposed answer is that these officers should receive education on faiths. This raises the interesting spectacle of determinedly secular public servants being engineered out of their ethical understandings of how to do their jobs in order to enforce a faith agenda (Communities and Local Government 2007). When local government officers seek to fulfil their responsibilities to fund 'faiths', this can create serious problems for sexual equality.

A study from 2003 on the issue of '*Faith in Urban Regeneration?*' is unusual in giving considerable attention to the problem of the clash between religious ideologies and practices and funding priorities (Farnell et al. 2003). The study interviewed regeneration professionals and representatives of a variety of religions in four urban centres in the UK—Bradford, Coventry, the London Borough of Newham and Sheffield. The report comments that 'Regeneration professionals are working in a context of ideological liberalism and scarce material resources, yet are confronted by demands from ethno-religious communities for "special" treatment. How do they reconcile these with legal requirements in such spheres as equal opportunities and race relations?' (Farnell et al. 2003, 32) The researchers give examples of the dilemmas the funders face. These can include what to do when an Asian project is actively promoting 'forced' marriage; when a Christian project bans gay men and lesbians from voluntary work; when a Muslim 'educational' project is for boys only. A female national community development professional who was interviewed stated: 'the way that faith is operating goes against, and cuts across, a national consensus about, say, the position of women ... The activity that is faith based is also in our view misogynist' (Farnell et al. 2003, 34). The comments of one male Muslim community development worker from Bradford provide a good example of the clashes that can arise between the attitudes of male religious

authorities and the rights of women. He remarked that 'Our women *choose* to live in purdah' (Farnell et al. 2003, 34, emphasis in original). A male local councillor/mosque president from Newham in London commented: 'Women are not outgoing, but want to remain within those four walls [home]' (Farnell et al. 2003, 34). Regeneration professionals are forced either to put aside their ethical and political commitments to equality, or face the complaints of religious organisations of discrimination and racism. This research is fascinating for the insights that it offers into the potential undermining of sexual equality through the involvement of 'faiths' in urban regeneration, but there needs to be much more research in order to understand what is happening in this process.

Delivery of Services through Religious Organisations

Equality concerns exist in relation to an increase in the delivery of services through religious organisations in the UK and Australia, a development that fits in with the privileging of faith and adoption of faith-based social capital ideas. This government funding to religious organisations is considerable and has helped to make them very influential businesses. Governments support the economic growth of religions through preferential taxing arrangements. Churches and their enterprises are generally exempt from the tax that other businesses would have to pay, depend on volunteers and are able to offer lower tenders to take over government services. This is particularly clear in a report on the business clout of religions in Australia from 2006, after the Howard government engaged in a considerable redistribution of the welfare dollar from state and non-religious agencies to religions. Adele Ferguson explains that if the top 10 religious groups in Australia were to form a corporation then it would be one of the 'biggest and fastest-growing in the country' because it accounted for more than \$23 billion in 2005, up 8.2 per cent on 2004, not including donations, employing hundreds of thousands of staff and 'wielding unsurpassed political and social clout' (Ferguson 2006, 42). The growth is possible because of their 'winning a bigger and bigger share of government concessions and grants' (Ferguson 2006, 42), because of tax-free status and being able to operate outside the control of regulatory authorities.

The churches in Australia receive more than \$10 billion a year in government grants to fund church schools, but also run public hospitals and residential aged-care and disability services. In 1996 they scored a coup with a big injection of money when the government privatised its Job Network services and directed much of this money to the churches. They also got government contracts to run counselling for parents involved in custody disputes, a particularly controversial issue since churches are likely to favour keeping families together and may not favour women's rights in this respect. They even receive \$20 million annually to provide abortion counselling services, which are likely to be infused with religious messages, such as the importance of avoiding abortion. One upshot of this transfer is that the poor are those most likely to come into contact with religious organisations and be religionised whether they want it or not. It is the poor, and poor women in particular, who need housing and unemployment services. The churches, such as the Catholic church and the Salvation Army, are now being handed contracts to run women's services such as refuges from domestic violence

and for homeless teenage girls that were previously run by feminist-inspired women's agencies. These church-run facilities are at liberty to change the ideology and focus of the services, employ men, prioritise the homelessness of boys or make the facilities mixed, and could have a negative impact on the women and girls who require safety and support. Hospitals run by the Catholic church, as Ferguson points out, will not conduct vasectomies, tubal ligation or abortions, although they are routine in other public hospitals (Ferguson 2006). Many areas do not have alternative providers, so women will simply lose access to control of fertility with grave impacts upon their lives.

When religious organisations are responsible for services that are vital to women, and particularly to poor women, they may be influenced by discriminatory ideas about women and sexuality, and discriminate in their employment practices to exclude or dismiss those who are lesbian, live with partners out of wedlock or fail to show a proper respect for the precepts of the church. These problems are amplified in relation to 'faith schools' funded by the state in which such harmful ideas may be enforced upon children.

Faith Schools

In the UK and Australia government policies of promoting 'faith' have led to considerably increased funding to 'faith schools'. There is very little discussion of the implications of this for girls, or for lesbian and gay students (Hanman 2006). The rationale behind this promotion of religious schools is that they will improve educational performance, provide parental choice and also provide 'values education'. This is despite the fact that the values of the organisations that run them include ideas such as that women are not fit to be priests, should not have sex outside marriage, should not be lesbians, should not finish their educations and, in some cases, should be obedient to their husbands. The enlistment of 'faiths' in the delivery of education has gone further in the UK than in Australia. When the Blair government took office some state educational provision consisted of schools run by religious organisations, the Anglican church and the Roman catholic church. The policy of the New Labour government was to establish new state-supported 'faith' schools, or to encourage existing independent 'faith' schools to enter the state system, and to accommodate a wider variety of 'faiths' in the provision of state education. Presently the 6,900 'faith' schools constitute a third of state schools, mostly at the primary level, and they are run by Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Seventh Day Adventist organisations. The Church of England has 4,657, the Catholic church has 2,053 and there are 36 Jewish, eight Muslim, two Sikh, one Hindu and 82 other Christian schools (Berkeley 2008).

The faith schools policy has occasioned considerable opposition in the UK from a variety of directions, including the National Secular Society, the British Humanist Foundation, and Schools Out, which represents lesbian and gay school students. Some critics have attributed the roots of this policy to a desire to privatise the education system by stealth (Berkeley 2008). Others have argued that faith schools create social division. Sen singles out the creation of faith schools as one of the problems that stems from the UK government's conceptualisation of multicultur-

alism as 'an imagined national federation of religious ethnicities' (Sen 2006, 165). This concentration on categorising people according to religion 'miniaturises' people, and prevents the recognition that people are a collection of identities, and that identities are not just socially constructed but 'chosen'. Faith schools, then, have the effect that 'young children are powerfully placed in the domain of singular affiliations well before they have the ability to reason about different systems of identification that may compete for their attention' (Sen 2006, 13).

The faith school policy became more controversial as a result of the recognition after serious rioting in northern British cities in 2001, and later the September 11th massacre in New York, that what was called community 'cohesion' was an important goal in order to prevent such events. The wisdom of creating separate development of those of different 'faiths' was called into question, and the possibility that the schools might be more likely to create division has been the main concern of critics. The Runnymede Trust, an organisation devoted to opposing racism and creating multicultural harmony in the UK, produced a report on the way in which faith schools promoted equality and cohesion entitled 'Right to Divide?' in reference to this problem (Berkeley 2008). In 2007 the government imposed on state schools, including faith schools, the duty to promote 'cohesion'. The report concludes that schools are unlikely to be successful in this area, saying that an impasse exists because faith organisations are 'unwilling or unable to change the nature of their schools significantly, offering to do little more than tinker at the margins of their provision to address issues of national concern—namely community cohesion' (Berkeley 2008, 6). The government's faith schools policy is in contradiction to the views of the British public. An *Observer* newspaper poll in 2001 found that only 11 per cent were in favour of more faith schools. An ICM poll in 2005 found that 64 per cent agreed that 'the government should not be funding faith schools of any kind' (Berkeley 2008, 18).

The way in which the faith schools policy affects the education of girls has not been researched, despite the potential for discrimination that clearly exists when organisations that adhere to ideas hostile to women's equality are given such responsibilities. Research is needed on the curriculum and practices of faith schools with relation to gender and sexuality, to see whether students are being taught hostile ideas about sexual equality. There is some evidence to suggest that Islamic state schools institute discriminatory practices; the journalist Christina Odone reports that such a school in Leicester, in which boys and girls are placed in separate wings, has organised for them to enter and leave the building at separate times so that they may not encounter one another (Odone 2008). There is some cause for concern about what may develop in schools, in guidelines produced by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) that show a commitment to discrimination. The MCB is an umbrella group representing 500 organisations which is consulted by, and has received hundreds of thousands of pounds of funding from, the UK government, including, in 2006, £300,000 'to increase awareness of the role that can be played by faith communities in reducing global poverty' and to 'produce teaching materials for Muslim schools and madrasas' (Department for International Development 2006). The guidelines are entitled *Meeting the Needs of Muslim Pupils in State Schools* (Muslim Council of Britain 2007). This publication makes demands on state schools in general and it is not unreasonable to suppose that they are already accommo-

dated to some extent in Islamic state schools. In response to media criticism about implementation of aspects of the guidelines in Stoke on Trent in 2010, the MCB states how influential they consider the guidelines to be: 'Many thousands of schools and education authorities have used it' (Muslim Council of Britain 2010).

The demands of the MCB include many relating to segregation and to modesty. Not only are boys and girls to be allowed to dress modestly, such as wearing tracksuits for exercise, and girls covering all parts of the body but the face and hands at all times, but also they should have single-sex swimming lessons and changing facilities at primary and secondary schools. They should not be expected to be naked in front of other members of the same sex, so individual changing and showering rooms should be provided, and they should not have to use the communal changing rooms in the swimming baths because some members of the public, presumably of the same sex as the children, might get naked there. Dance is unIslamic and children should be allowed to excuse themselves from such classes, the problem being that dance is lascivious and includes sexual movements. Sex education should include Islamic morality on issues such as 'sexual conduct and behaviour, abortion, contraception, sexual orientation, hygiene, forced marriages, drugs, child abuse and relationships between males and females' (Muslim Council of Britain 2007, 48). In particular Islamic morality forbids boyfriends/girlfriends, homosexuality is not acceptable and sex should only take place in marriage. Explicit pictures depicting 'private organs', and explicit discussion, should not be used in teaching (Muslim Council of Britain 2007, 48). Sex education should not take place during the month of Ramadan because sexual thoughts are not allowed at that time. In 2009 the government announced that faith schools may teach sex education according to their faith, including in relation to issues such as contraception, abortion and homosexuality (Bloom 2009). So prescriptions such as those of the MCB may become more common.

There is more information on the problems that lesbian and gay students may face in state schools. Anti-homosexual sex education is a particular concern because it is likely to be implicated in the bullying and violence that lesbian and gay students suffer. Christian and Muslim teachings that homosexuality is a sin, dirty and despicable may correlate with the beatings and murders of lesbians and gay men (Macey and Beckett 2001). A report by the respected lesbian and gay rights organisation, Stonewall, in 2007, found that homophobic bullying was reported by 65 per cent of students in British schools in general, but by more, 75 per cent, of those attending faith schools (Stonewall 2007). Lesbian and gay students who attended faith schools were significantly less likely to tell anyone about homophobic bullying than those attending non-faith schools, 23 per cent versus 58 per cent, and only 4 per cent of gay pupils felt able to tell their local religious leaders about bullying (Stonewall 2007, 8). Faith schools that are run by religious organisations that profess women's subordination and homosexuality as sin cannot, in good faith, be expected to promote a human rights agenda as a non-faith school may be required to do.

In Australia funding to religious schools, which are not part of the state system, increased considerably under the Howard government as part of what Bloch

describes as an 'increase in the public profile of religions in Australia over the past decade' (Bloch 2009, 182). This is reflected in the growth in attendance at private religious schools which depend upon generous state funding. This growth has been most evident in the area of the new evangelical Protestant denominations rather than in more traditional religious schools belonging to the Catholic, Anglican and Uniting Church (a nonconformist alliance), with more than 40 per cent of non-government school students, 200,000, attending faith schools outside traditional religions. The increasing attendance at evangelical schools which receive generous state funding is problematic considering the values that such religions promote. In the state of New South Wales the Pentecostal church Hillsong provides a programme for schools that creates a rigid gender stereotyping for girls (Bibby 2008). The programme is called Shine and girls are taught how to put on make-up, do their hair and nails and walk with books balanced on their heads. It is being run in at least 20 state schools, numerous small community organisations and within the juvenile justice system. Hillsong describes it as a 'practical, life-equipping, values-based course'. Pentecostal churches, and other religious entities such as the Exclusive Brethren, an offshoot of the Plymouth Brethren, are committed to the promotion of ideas and practices hostile to the rights of women, lesbians and gays (Bachelard 2008). State funding of such organisations is in direct conflict with decades of work by feminists and lesbian and gay activists to improve equal opportunities and human rights through the education system.

Conclusion

This article has suggested that the policies of desecularisation that have been implemented by governments in the UK and in Australia may have negative implications for sexual equality. The paucity of research on this issue is a problem for assessing its seriousness, and at this time it is only possible to be tentative in outlining the problems that may arise. Religious organisations with which governments are consulting and to which they are delivering public services may be in opposition to women's equality in relation to their employment practices and ideologies. Consultation with faith communities is fraught with difficulties because it is unlikely to be women who are consulted, and in some cases they may not be able to exit their homes or enter mixed company. There is some evidence that funding faith communities for the purpose of urban regeneration pits professionals with good intentions towards equality against organisations for whom discrimination is an article of faith. Faith schools are the most problematic aspect of desecularisation from the point of view of sexual equality because some of the religious organisations that receive state funding are committed to segregation and modesty rules, to harmful ideas about the importance of virginity, against contraception and abortion and against homosexuality. These forms of desecularisation are in direct collision with the considerable progress towards sexual equality in the public realm that has been made in recent decades. Unfortunately there is little attention given to the impact of these policies on girls and women in government documents and research reports. Research is badly needed on this issue and might reasonably start with the important concern of the way in which the equality of girls is affected by the curriculum and practices in faith schools.

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