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Post-pastoral? Rethinking religion and the reconstruction of rural space

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of an extensive literature exploring the post-secularism in recent years has revived interest in the role of religion in society. However, such studies are overwhelmingly focussed on the urban experience, while the relationship between rurality and post-secularism remains largely unconsidered. Set against the back-drop of challenges to rural religious organization, such as redundant buildings, merged parishes, and lack of incumbents, this paper examines the endogenous actions of lay-people in sustaining religious services. Examining the examples of Church in Wales and Muslim worshippers in rural Wales, we argue that these actions constitute a 'post-pastoral' experience, which although maintaining religious identities, challenge the traditional community leadership roles associated with professional clerics. As a consequence, distinctions between urban and rural experiences of post-secular activities are revealed, suggesting that the potential for the countryside to experience similar involvement of faith-based organizations in benevolent action as the city is limited. This highlights the need for more attention on training and support for lay-people by religious organizations by both academics and policy formulators.

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2011, parishioners at All Saints Church in Maerdy, Rhondda-Cynon-Taf staged a lengthy sit-in to protest at the closure of their church. The building in the former coal-mining village was deemed dangerous and needed repairs worth £400,000 to maintain its structure. This prompted the parochial church council—the local body responsible for the building's up-keep—to decide on its closure. However, for many parishioners the decision undermined the needs of community, where both the church-as-building and church-as-institution had played a strong role in village life. However, and despite a vociferous year-long campaign, the church closed in July 2012.

The challenges facing All Saints, such as sharing a priest with a wider area and an increasingly limited number of self-defined Christians within the locality (52 per cent of local residents identified themselves as having no faith in the 2011 census[1]), are not restricted to the upper Rhondda Fach valley, despite the amount of media attention it received: indeed, these and other contexts provide challenges for religious activities in rural Wales and elsewhere in the UK and Europe. Yet, the actions of the Maerdy parishioners attempting to sustain religious facilities is noteworthy as a rare example of religious capital in action in the countryside. As such, the rural is largely considered as a passive actor in post-secular activities compared to the city, which has received significantly more attention in academic studies.

In the thirty years since the publication of the influential report *Faith in the City*, which served as a manifesto for the Church of England's involvement with issues of social justice in metropolitan settings, much attention has been given to the 'post-secular city' not only in the UK, but in many secular liberal democracies (Beaumont, 2004; Beaumont and Dias, 2008). However, the response to the subsequent sister-report, *Faith in the Countryside* (Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas, 1990), has arguably made a reduced impression on the public consciousness. Within Church itself, the impact of *Faith in the Countryside* was pronounced in some quarters, with a number of English dioceses establishing committees and employing officers to address the report's recommendations. And yet, the impact of the report within the media and

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[1] Since 2001, the UK census has contained an optional question on religious affiliation. The 2011 returns are noteworthy in that significant numbers of people in rural Wales – long regarded as the heartland of its religious society – had noted that they had 'no religion'; a sharp decline from 2001.

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within the academy more generally has been comparatively limited. Notwithstanding a recent edited volume considering the impact of *Faith in the Countryside* 20 years after publication (Smith and Hopkinson, 2012), this neglect is surprising considering recent work on the challenges facing rural communities through crises in agriculture (cf. Convery et al., 2005; Marsden and Sonnino, 2008) and the provision of services (for example White et al., 1997; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Paddison and Calderwood, 2007), but also given a wider interest in resilience in rural regions (McManus et al., 2012).

The above caveat raises important questions about the role and place of religion and faith in contemporary rural society, the nature of religious organisation and participation, and how religious organizations respond to the challenges facing rural societies. Among these is the apparent decline in religious participation in the countryside in recent years; although, as Voas and Watt (2014) note, numerical growth must be differentiated from participation in this regard. Historically, the proportion of the population regularly attending church is greater in rural than urban localities, and there remains a clear urban/rural divide in Anglican churchgoing. Drawing on data collated for the Church Growth Research Programme, 4.5% of adults aged 16 + attend parish church on a usual Sunday, while the figure stands at 2% in towns and cities (Ibid, p. 26) However, while the comparatively low levels of attendance now being reversed in urban contexts where 'vitality is easier to find' via youth and ethnic cosmopolitanism, churches and chapels in the countryside are often struggling to maintain their numbers.

As such, 'elderly, rural, white congregations are important but becoming comparatively less so' (Ibid). Thus, argue Voas and Watt, Anglican churches remain well embedded in many rural communities for the present but they are often numerically weak and financially struggling. These themes are also evident in data recently published by the Methodist Church (Piggot, 2014). With 21% of weekly attendances in 2013 being accounted for in 'Village Rural' churches in the UK, the average congregation size was 22 – with many reporting regular attendance being less than 10 (Ibid, p.366). More pointedly, the change in average weekly attendance between 2003 and 2013 in 'Village Rural' is reported as −32.5%. This is greater proportional decline in attendance than in 'City Centre' (−21.4%), 'Suburban' (−32.1%) and Small Town (−27.8%) churches – but not as great as the percentage decline in 'Inner City' (−37.8%) and (−38.4%). However, the drop in attendance in rural churches and chapels might be more keenly felt given the already low level of congregants. This circumstance has prompted and necessitated a range of responses in rural parishes, including the 'rolling-back' of established religious organisation through sharing facilities/officials, the selling-off or deconsecrating of religious buildings, and an increased role for lay-people. Such characteristics pose further questions about the connections between religious capital and space, particularly in translating faith to issues of charity and benevolent organization.

Defined by Baker and Skinner (2006, p.11) as a 'resource that individuals and faith groups can access for their own personal well-being, but also "donate" as a gift to the wider community', religious capital is typically associated with the formal institutional structures of faith-based organizations – but it can also be seen in less formal terms where it facilitates access to those spaces inhabited by local religious elites and their customs. In Christian contexts, the traditional pastoral figure at the centre of religious participation – commonly a priest or minister– is key to the maintenance of religious capital through coordinating faith-based activities as well as benevolent action. However, these figures are arguably becoming increasingly absent through a decline in incumbency. Using figures from UK Church Statistics 2005–2015 (Brierley, 2011), for example, the number of Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian ministers in the UK is expected to decline by 2000 between 2005 and 2015. In response to this situation ministers are increasingly being shared by several churches (Bowden, 2003), and full-time Anglican stipendiary clergy have arguably become the 'exception rather than the rule' Woodhead, 2015). At the anecdotal level there are also evident concerns that remaining resources will be deployed into urban areas, thus reducing the number of clergy available to administer to ever-expanding rural benefices (see Reader, 2014). It follows that rural institutions may not been in the position to harness and host a 'post-secular' revival[2] comparable with their urban brethren.

In light of these trends and narratives of change, this paper examines religious participation in contexts without these pastoral figures coordinating both faith-based activities and, traditionally, the overspill of 'more-than-spiritual' activities into the temporal realm. This paper commences by addressing the literature on religious activity in rural areas, highlighting the role of pastoral figures in rural power structures and an often overstated narrative of a secularization of the countryside and a decline in faith-based organization. The second section illustrates the key features of post-secular theorizations of the city over the past decade, and the insights that can be gleaned from this for rural contexts. We then proceed to provide two examples of religious groups in rural mid-Wales: the Church in Wales, 2006 (henceforth 'CinW') and Muslims. While these groups have different theologies and distinct histories and profiles in the region, both groups have instilled and implemented religious capital through pursuing varied strategies to institute and/or sustain religious provision through lay-people in the absence of pastoral figures. We note that while there is significant involvement from the lay-people, the focus is more upon maintaining facilities than on outreach or benevolent action, which illustrates a challenge in transforming religious capital into other forms of social capital. In the final section, we highlight the significance of a 'post-pastoral' understanding of rural society, locating this concept within the post-secular canon, and conclude by noting avenues of further study.

2. Rurality, religion and participation

Images of the rural idyll often centre upon the church, with popular representations of the British countryside drawing heavily on Christianity's perceived central place in community life (see Bunce, 1994; Seymour and Short, 1994; Walker, 2002). Such representations are not without foundation, and the ground-breaking community studies of the 1950s and 1960s paid particular attention to the role of church and chapel in structuring everyday rural life in the UK. In his seminal text *Akenfield*, Blythe characterizes the parish church as the physical centrepiece of the village, retaining the 'mysterious quality of an ancient sacred place which has never been out of the possession of a long line of simple rural people' (1969, p. 66). Elsewhere, Bracey notes that 'for centuries, the Church was the prime coordinator and the chief administrator of benevolent action in the village' (1959, p. 132), while Rees (1951) and Williams (1956)

[2] This turn of phrase is borrowed from Adrian Pabst (2012), who uses it in their discussion of the 'revival of religion' and the apparent 're-sacralising of the public sphere by investing the secular space with quasi-scared significance' (Pabst, 2012, 996). With re-sacralising encompassing both rhetoric and performance, it is our intention to explore this process in the context of rural Wales. It is not our intention, however, to undertake a re-appraisal of secularism and post-secularism as philosophically (or methodologically) sound concepts in their own right – as this has been (and continues to be) done elsewhere (for example Beaumont, 2008b; McLennan, 2007). We use them on the basis that they are understood to hold relevance and meaning for a wider public in terms of thinking about the role of religion in social exchange.