The implicit assumption seems to be that a modest dose of religion is good for people – or at least other people,” says Professor David Voas of the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research in Manchester, who succinctly describes the equivocal British attitude to religion thus, adding that: “The notion that God’s function is to make children well-behaved, strangers helpful and shopkeepers honest means that outright secularism is less popular than one might suppose.”

Nor do the British have this attitude to themselves. In research funded by the ESRC, Professor Voas used the European Social Survey to pinpoint the emergence of what he describes as ‘fuzzy fidelity’, an attitude of uncommitted but real interest in God and spiritual matters. Its adherents include half the population of Britain and similar proportions in other European countries. This group has only a vaguely defined notion of a ‘divine entity’, and says it makes little difference to their lives.

The fuzzy faithful have grown so numerous, according to Professor Voas, because people are ceasing to be ‘actively religious’ much more quickly than they are becoming wholly secular. The way he sees it, the sheer size of this group means that upon their attitudes and behaviour will hang the future role of religion in Britain. Many continue to pray, but have relinquished specific Christian beliefs, such as Jesus being the son of God. They go to church only for the main festivals or for life’s rites of passage.

Professor Voas says that this large group’s beliefs fall within such categories of the International Social Survey Programme as “I don’t believe in a personal God but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind”, and “I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others”. One group, ‘spiritual seekers,’ has beliefs about an afterlife and fate which have little...
Another group is called the ‘Sheilaists’ after a young nurse who told a study of religion that although she believed in God, “I can’t remember the last time I went to church.” The respondent, Sheila, defined her position as “Sheilaism. Just my own little voice,” adding: “My faith has carried me a long way.”

Despite this growth of private spirituality, 72 per cent of Britons identified themselves as Christian at the last census. Professor Voas believes that reluctance to embrace absolute secularism is reflected in the ‘notoriously high’ proportion of apparently unreligious people who continue to claim membership of a faith group, especially Christianity.

Dr Abby Day of the University of Sussex has identified three groups among these ‘nominal’ believers. The ‘natal nominalists’ were born into a faith and assume that this is all that is necessary for their religious identity. ‘Ethnic nominalists’ describe themselves as Christian, Muslim, Hindu or of some other faith to signal their difference from people of other faiths. ‘Aspirational nominalists’ claim to be Christians, or more specifically to belong to an established church, because they associate membership with middle class status and respectability. But what effect might the emergence of the fuzzy faithful, with their tenuous but tenacious interest in religion, have on British society?

Professor Linda Woodhead, at Lancaster University, believes that Britain is undergoing an identity crisis. The factors that forged a sense of Britishness, including tolerant Protestantism expressed by the established Church, have weakened. It’s not so much that people see themselves as belonging to Christianity and the Church, she says, but that there’s a sense of not belonging to anything else. “If we’re not white and Christian, what are we?”

Professor Woodhead believes that religion constitutes a “very live force in western and world societies”, but has been inadequately researched. She is leading the £8.5 million Religion and Society Programme, run jointly by the ESRC and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The programme has given large awards to eight projects and is also supporting smaller pieces of research. Among the projects being funded is research on the media’s portrayal of religion, on religious division in Ireland, on sexuality in global faith networks, and on the effectiveness of religious education. Two are about Islam, on religious nurture in Muslim families, and on leadership in the Muslim community.

Professor Woodhead is intrigued by what she calls “the big question – why was it respectable to go to church a generation ago in a way that it is not now?” There are signs that mosques – currently dominated by an older, more devout generation – will not be immune from this decline, even though visible signs of devotion to Islam, such as the hijab, seem to be enjoying a revival among a younger generation on the street.

What are governments to make of this fashion for quasi-religious attachment? The churches have decried a trend towards what they see as politicians making laws about people’s morals. Legislation outlawing discrimination against homosexuals in the provision of goods and services was one example, preventing Roman Catholic adoption agencies from refusing children to gay couples.

Christian values once underpinned the values of society, principles such as “do as you would be done by”, and, in particular, the notion that life was sacred. But secular decisions on ‘life’ issues such as abortion, euthanasia and stem cell research, and perhaps even the decision to wage what the churches said was an unjust war in Iraq, have tended to usurp the churches’ role as the conscience of the nation.

The growth of moral relativism, and the replacement of the concept of absolute right and wrong in favour of a choice of what seems to be right to a particular person at a particular time, suggest that most people have distanced themselves from a strictly religious approach. Perhaps fuzzy fidelity will always give rise to fuzzy morality.

One effect of this increased fuzziness has been to unite traditionalists of different Christian groups, the churches are adapting traditional Sunday services to reach out to people wherever they happen to be, geographically and at other times of the week.
denominations, and even of different faiths, notably Muslim and Christian, in defence of religious values. Another has been to strain the integrity of faith groups themselves. The dispute within the Anglican and other churches about the sinfulness of active homosexuality is partly a discussion about the role of religion in wider society. Traditionalists insist on a strict interpretation of the Bible, arguing – as Pope Benedict does for Catholicism – that if its message is adapted to the convenience of contemporary society, and absolute values are eroded, the Church will eventually have nothing to offer society. But liberal Anglicans argue that the Bible needs to be reinterpreted in line with contemporary experience if it is to retain its meaning for people. Just as liberal Roman Catholics have campaigned for an end to celibacy and the ordination of women on the grounds that they equip the Church to operate in a modern environment.

The appearance of what an editorial in the Catholic Herald in September 2007 described as ‘Fair-trade Catholics’ represents another aspect of the tensions over the role churches should play. According to the Herald, “a Fair-trade Catholic believes that the Church’s key responsibility is to defend the environment (and) press for global economic reform in the interests of the world’s poor…” They are opposed by ‘Liturgical Catholics’ primarily concerned with the true worship of God and the dignity of the Mass. In England, there have been tensions between ‘liturgical’ immigrants from countries such as Poland, Brazil and Portugal and the more liberal ‘fair-trade’ majority of their hosts.

Perhaps a nation’s religious conscience will always lag behind developments in its secular society. Established religions prefer to adapt over long periods. The Church of England – confronted by demands to soften its attitude to homosexuality, with all that implies for how the Bible should be read – would prefer hundreds of years to deliberate. But Britain is a rapidly changing society. Affluence, education, immigration, and the internet all promote social evolution, mostly in a secular direction. Perhaps it’s no surprise that even people who retain a sense of the divine are finding a mismatch between their belief and the traditional line taken by long-established churches, and escaping into fuzzy non-commitment. Professor Voas believes that the growth of ‘fuzzy fidelity’ in Britain is eroding the number of true believers. “Fuzzy fidelity is not a new kind of religion or a proxy for as yet unfocused spiritual seeking,” he says. “It is a staging post on the road from religious to secular hegemony.”

Churches are fighting to resist this new hegemony. They are adapting traditional Sunday services to reach out to people wherever they happen to be, geographically and at other times of the week. They are repackaging the message, taking it out of the environment of splendid architecture and applying it to real life. But changing doctrine is another matter. Religion must always be ‘other-worldly’, a matter of faith separated from the practical and material world, or it will be nothing.

http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/staff/voas.html
http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/religstudies/index.php
http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/apply/research/sfi/ahrcsi/religion_
A DECADE ON, devolution appears to be producing the transformation of UK politics that many anticipated at its launch. But it has yet to produce stability. The 2007 elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all produced governments that contain nationalist political parties with ambitions to leave the UK. The Scottish National Party (SNP) leads a minority government in Scotland, Plaid Cymru is junior partner in coalition with Labour in Wales, and Sinn Fein is number two in the improbable government of opposites – with Martin McGuinness acting as Deputy to Ian Paisley’s First Minister – that successfully relaunched devolution in Northern Ireland in 2007. The SNP published a historic white paper in August 2007 advocating independence. And in Wales the Labour-Plaid coalition plans a referendum on stronger legislative powers for the Welsh Assembly by 2011.

A new debate about the government of England has also flared up. Prompted mainly by Conservative commentators, the English debate highlights concerns about the new Anglo-Scottish relationship, including representation at Westminster (the hoary old West Lothian Question), the higher level of public spending Scotland enjoys, and some of the policies introduced in Scotland since devolution which appear to be more generous than those available in England.

Only on Northern Ireland is there no current appetite for revisiting these issues, which reflects the way that polarised constitutional debate disabled earlier attempts at devolution. Few would bet, though, that the government of Northern Ireland has achieved enduring stability.

This state of flux is a particular challenge to the UK’s new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. An MP from a nation which now has extensive devolved powers of government is now Prime Minister, responsible to a Parliament which is unable to legislate in wide areas of policy for his own constituency. Although public opinion seems unperturbed, some Conservatives have cast doubt on the legitimacy of a Scottish Prime Minister in the light of devolution. But Brown is also the only senior UK politician to have devoted significant thought to the nature of the union and what holds it together. His theme has been ‘Britishness’. In a series of speeches he has tried to map out the shared identity and values that build a commitment to the UK state across its component nations.

Brown is the only senior UK politician to have devoted significant thought to the nature of the union and what holds it together

Brown has a point about British values. The Devolution and Constitutional Change research programme showed that people across the UK have more or less the same attitudes to fundamental values such as the balance of market and state or the duty of solidarity between rich and poor. They even agree about some of the issues where devolved policies have diverged from those in England since devolution, like long-term care for the elderly, or university tuition fees.

The problem Brown faces is that governments of which he was a key member thought too little about the institutional relationships needed to underpin the partnership of UK nations after devolution. No other set of devolution reforms have been conceived and implemented with so little attention to their statewide implications as the UK’s. Devolution has been a project of the parts, not the whole. Its logic is piecemeal, with different UK
ministries introducing different types of institutional reform for different reasons in each part of the UK. Those reasons may all be valid in say Scotland, Northern Ireland, or Wales. But each reform has implications beyond its own territory.

This piecemeal approach to devolution is exacerbated because UK devolution allows an unusual degree of policy-making autonomy and spending freedom within the block grants received by the devolved administrations, and has only weak mechanisms for co-ordination between the various parts of the UK. This permissiveness is amplified by the distinctive electoral and party systems outside England, as seen in the 2007 election results. Of course this is what devolution was meant to do. But there must be a tipping point where the scope for autonomy begins to rub up against the common citizenship which membership of a union implies. The UK lacks an institutional structure capable of recognising and regulating that tension.

And because devolution was introduced in a self-contained way to address problems in each part of the UK, there are spillover effects for the other parts. Devolution was introduced in Scotland to restore the legitimacy of UK government for Scots, and it has largely done so. But in the past year or so we have seen a growing sense in some parts of political, media and public opinion in England that Scottish devolution is unfair to the English.

The English problem

The biggest problem is the rump left by piecemeal devolution, that is, England. It is an enormous rump, with more than 85 per cent of UK population and GDP. England is governed by central institutions in Westminster and Whitehall which combine and often confuse England-only and UK-wide roles. The devolved administrations have little grip on those fused Anglo-UK institutions.

The final problem is that piecemeal devolution superimposes political borders on a mainly borderless public opinion across the UK. There are few significant differences in the values that the Scots, English, Welsh or Northern Irish hold.
And most people across the UK appear to dislike the idea that policy standards might diverge from place to place after devolution. Devolution did not reflect vigorous public demands for different policy agendas from those favoured by the English. It was much more a demand for proximity and ownership of decision-making, a sense that Westminster was too remote and unresponsive.

There might appear to be a contradiction between a preference for uniform policy standards and a demand for proximate devolved government, which is likely to produce diverse policy standards. The British are perverse in that sense, but not unusual. The same contradiction plays out in Germany, Canada, Belgium, Australia, and pretty much anywhere with federal or devolved government. The difference is that those places have well established techniques for managing and resolving that tension which the UK lacks. Some of those techniques are institutional, for example:

- Statewide legislation which sets minimum or framework standards.
- Conditional grants or co-funding arrangements between central and devolved governments which address agreed statewide priorities.
- Intergovernmental co-ordination structures which give devolved governments real grip at the centre. Such structures can be highly formalised. They may be written into the constitution, carried out through territorial second chambers, and subject to judicial process. They can also be highly informal, lacking a legal basis, but reflecting convention and practice. They can police quite exacting assumptions that all citizens should have more or less the same package of public policies wherever they live (as is true in Australia or Germany). Or they can express looser understandings of statewide ‘social union’ which act as minimum standards amid divergent packages of public policies from one region to the next (as in Belgium or Canada). But they all add up to routinised, systematic and transparent sets of processes.

**The next general election may well be about whether Labour can hold the UK together**

In the UK we lack such techniques for balancing the whole and the parts. Interactions between devolved and Anglo-UK officials and ministers are haphazard, opaque, and unequal, because the Anglo-UK officials and ministers are the most powerful. They do not give the devolved administrations the grip at the centre which might balance the weight of the English elephant in the UK boat. This is perhaps the central reason why the Union has not found equilibrium after devolution and why the constitutional debate about how to govern the four nations has not yet been resolved.

Until 2007, devolution had a smooth ride because Labour led the governments in Westminster, Holyrood and Cardiff Bay from 1999 to 2007, while devolution was suspended in Northern Ireland for most of the period. Labour could act as a broker of differences between UK and devolved governments. But Labour dominance was also a platform for complacency about the adequacy of the institutional arrangements for union that were established in 1999.

The challenge Prime Minister Brown faces is to make up for lost time in a situation where he now has to deal with other parties, including a long-standing foe in the Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond. He has not yet shown much of a hand; his 2007 Green Paper on *The Governance of Britain* said nothing about devolution or the management of the union. Arguably he will have more to say if he wins his own mandate at the next UK election. Brown will face a resurgent SNP in Scotland and, perhaps, a Conservative Party tempted to play an ‘English card.’ Because it has so few seats to defend in Scotland and Wales the Conservatives could see value – and votes – in presenting the English as the losers from devolution and the Conservatives as their defenders. Only a decade after leading Labour politicians argued that devolution was a ‘settled will’ and would ‘kill nationalism stone dead’, the next general election may well be about whether Labour can hold the UK together.

http://www.devolution.ac.uk/final_report.htm
http://www.pol.ed.ac.uk/people/jeffery.html
KEEPING IT IN PERSPECTIVE: BRITS, TERRORISM AND THE TELLY

The British system seems resistant to the ‘politics of fear’ that have dominated elsewhere.

There is nothing good about terrorism, but it makes for good television. This paradox is a challenge for television producers, policymakers and citizens. How do you provide information about terrorist events without giving terrorists what Margaret Thatcher called ‘the oxygen of publicity’? New ESRC research suggests that despite facing a similar terrorist threat to other countries, Britain has a subtler approach to thinking about it, and devotes less air time to worrying about it.

The New Security Challenges Programme has looked at how issues of terrorism and international security were covered on television during the 2005 British general election, and how voters reacted to this coverage. This work, by Dr Sarah Oates and Kate Smith at the University of Glasgow, found that the British are better than Americans or Russians at not letting fears of terrorism drive domestic or international policy.

The project used a content analysis of news on BBC and ITV during the campaign as well as 17 focus groups in Scotland and England to examine the role of terrorist threat in the elections. It followed a similar study for the Russian Duma (2003) and presidential (2004) elections as well as the United States presidential contest between George W Bush and John Kerry in November 2004. There was very little discussion of terrorism or security threat in the 2005 British elections. The closest it came was when the Conservatives raised concerns over poor controls on immigration. Labour was not keen to discuss Iraq, and the concept of a ‘war on terror’ was neither promoted by mainstream politicians nor discussed broadly as part of the election campaign.

This is in direct contrast to the United States presidential election of 2004. There, almost a quarter of the election news in the final two months of the campaign, on five main television channels, was connected to terrorism. In the 2005 British campaign, terrorism was mentioned in just a handful of the news segments on the nightly news on the BBC and ITV and amounted to only about three per cent of the election coverage. In focus groups in the United States in late 2004, Americans expressed fears about personal security linked to terrorism, showing that the echo of 9/11 was still felt throughout the nation. Many people talked about choosing President Bush over John Kerry because of feelings that the Republican leader was ‘stronger.’

British voters did not report this sort of feeling when discussing their voting choice in focus groups after the May 2005 elections, although half of the focus groups were held in the wake of the 7 July 2005 attacks on London transport. Most respondents were not convinced that a ‘strong’ policy would lead to a lower risk of terrorism. Many were angry over British involvement in Iraq, but this tended to be one of a range of issues they had with the Government rather than being their single complaint. The British respondents often called upon their long experience with the terrorist threat related to Northern Ireland to eschew the ideas of any quick fixes to the problem. Although they acknowledged that international terrorism linked to extremist Islam was different, they were wary of quick solutions or a show of force.

While one might expect British and American voters to share some basic views, in this three-country study it was the Americans and the Russians who were most alike. When talking about their support for President Putin, Russian focus group participants in 2004 also spoke of their preference for ‘strong hands’ and the need for force to deal with Chechen terrorism.

The findings suggest that the British system is resistant to the ‘politics of fear’ that have dominated in the United States and Russia. This is no doubt linked in part to the strength of party politics in the United Kingdom, in which parties rather than candidates set the election agenda. In addition, the British population has a longer experience with terrorism on its home soil and is aware that quick fixes are unlikely to work. Finally, despite getting a bit more glitzy in recent years, both the BBC and ITV continue to focus on issues over image during the campaign. All of these elements can be said to contribute to a more rational debate about the impact of terrorism on society in Britain than in its important neighbours to the West and East.

http://www.newsecurity.bham.ac.uk
WHO ARE WE? BRITISH ATTITUDES TO RACE

We have a sense of instability about our identity

WHAT DO WE know about British attitudes to race? Where do they come from? ESRC researchers are now finding out about British views on race in a new and revealing way. For many decades, most fieldwork on race and ethnicity in Britain has been carried out within what are now termed BME – Black and Minority Ethnic – communities, and in working class areas of ‘multicultural’ cities. The problem with this approach is that only a very small proportion of people in Britain live in areas with five per cent or more BME residents. Most people’s experience of living in Britain is not an explicitly multicultural one. So, Professor Simon Clarke, Professor Steve Garner, and Dr Rosie Gilmour under the Identities and Social Action Programme interviewed white UK people living in large housing estates and middle-class residential areas in Bristol and Plymouth.

The Researchers carried out 128 interviews between 2004 and 2006, using a technique called the psychosocial method. It involves two rounds of interviewing. The first round interviews were biographical and unstructured, allowing respondents to convey what they thought was important about their life history. All were asked for their views on identity, community and the idea of home. The second interview was semi-structured. Here people were asked what it meant to be British, whether this differed from Englishness, for their opinions on entitlement to welfare and social housing; and finally about immigration into the UK.

Community

People’s concepts of home ranged from attachments to the physical environment through to mobile ones relating to security and family. Similarly, when people give definitions of community, they tend toward the affective rather than the instrumental. Especially in their 50s and over, people often seemed to be trying to recreate what they imagine a better community to have resembled in the past. ‘Communities’ are the result of projects aimed at actively producing and reproducing them. They do not happen on their own. Outside national sporting events, the community that really matters is very geographically local, so much so that in three of the areas, people like to see themselves as members of ‘village’ communities despite the unmistakable fact that they live in a city.

When people speak about community, there is an emphasis on family and socialisation, and on institutions such as schools and churches, as well as a sense of community-building as a duty. Some
view the disintegration of such institutions as having far-reaching consequences, potentially leading to crime and territorial infighting. Removing a school (which happened in two of the areas) removes a community’s sense of ownership and identity.

Class
Social class is an important factor in the way people tell their life stories and make sense of their identities. In particular your (or your parents’) job, trade or former job bestows a sense of who you are, and where you have come from. Moreover, the ‘middle’ class are far more likely to have a rehearsed narrative of their life history, and prepared answers to specific questions on Britishness and immigration. Recognising your own difference from the norm in a particular context (school, workplace, residential area, etc) is another recurring theme in the interviews. Such differences could be a source of anxiety or of pride.

Britishness
The grand ideas of nation, country, and erstwhile empire no longer seem particularly relevant communities for most respondents. European identities did not engage them either. Indeed, many of the English respondents want to ‘shrink’ their British identity to a more localised English one like those of the Scots, Welsh and Irish.

The overlap of ‘white’ and ‘English’ identities emerges from talk about others ‘not fitting in’, and the fear of the unentitled consuming the shares belonging to the entitled. Entitlement is determined in complex, selective, and sometimes contradictory ways, ranging from genealogy through to stakes earned through the adoption of appropriate values.

Many respondents felt that a multi-cultural society was a positive, acceptable thing. However, many also indicated frustration with what they called ‘political correctness’. They thought that their own ethnicity and culture was not being taken seriously, or not being acknowledged alongside other people’s.

Welfare, whiteness and entitlement
The research found a general belief that contribution and hard work entitle people to benefit from the welfare system. Locals who didn’t work for their money and foreign incomers who were not yet entitled were perceived as queue-jumpers.

People routinely think of immigration in two ways. One is productive activity, and the other is insufficient effort to integrate into British culture. These two purportedly characterise the majority of immigrants. Many told stories of individuals who represented good models of integration, against which the mass were measured as unsuccessful. Another point to emerge was ambivalence about where the lines between the British and the Others actually lie. Some distinguished readily between migrants and longstanding BME British subjects, but the majority did not. Many think of integration (or assimilation) as an individual choice that some make and others reject.

So it turns out that British ‘whiteness’ contains a series of more or less definite assumptions about links between appearance, culture and entitlement. But a small minority of those met have a positive appreciation of ethnic interactions. The interesting thing is that in all those cases, the person’s biography holds clues as to why, such as time spent living in another country, having a partner from another culture, or perhaps feeling an outsider for some reason.

The study suggests that white identities have become more attached to local community as people seek stability and anchoring. They feel threatened by immigrants, Muslims (especially after 7/7) and others but know little about them – even whether they are actually immigrants. So a sense of instability about who ‘we’ are produces a range of emotions, which can include fear of other groups based on little experience or evidence.

http://www.identities.org.uk
A CROSS THE WORLD, wars are becoming less common. But there is increasing anti-war activism that reflects widespread anxiety about the dangers of war. It is most visible in the upsurge in peace campaigning in response to wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Dr Kevin Gillan, Dr Jenny Pickeril and Professor Frank Webster have researched why people are protesting more about something that is happening less. One reason is the growth of new media. Although most people are far removed from war, they are intensively exposed to it via the media. This means that the old assumptions about who controls the media are no longer valid. Central control of the media is difficult to carry off in an era in which anyone can access, alter and disseminate information.

New media are where awareness and concern for war are located, and where the anti-war movement engages in symbolic struggles. Anti-war opposition has been readily accessible in Britain, especially via the internet. A moment’s effort finds claims that the war in Iraq is illegitimate, that government policies are fatally flawed, or that the terrorist threat has been made worse by a misconceived ‘war on terror’. Similar criticisms appear on television and in newspapers, and once there they can be rapidly amplified by reposting or hyperlinking that information to a wide range of online sources.

Anti-war activist organisations are financially poor by comparison with governments. But they have created an alternative information environment manifested in the websites of activist organisations, in daily newsletters and in email bulletins. New technologies make it easy to assemble and disseminate information that feeds anti-war sentiment, challenges government and military accounts, and amplifies counter-explanations. Anti-war activists also draw on established media that are themselves being digitally transformed.

Anti-war groups’ materials appeal more to the already committed than to the unconvinced. And although these groups all oppose the Iraq war, they see it in different ways and object to it for a range of reasons. They form an uneasy alliance that comes together over particular elements of the war on terror. Its members range from civil libertarians to anti-imperialists, from feminist-inspired groups to macho demonstrators, from the religiously motivated to the secular, from direct action advocates to those committed to the power of persuasion, from the extra-Parliamentary left to peers of the realm, and from organised groups to loose virtual networks.

At the online level the anti-war movement offers an example of transnational collective action. However, organisation and action still tend to happen at a national level. Indeed, place matters enormously to some activists – neighbourhood allegiances are crucial amongst Muslims. New technologies have permitted vast increases in information and the velocity at which it travels. The researchers found many complaints of information overload, respondents telling us that they received too many emails, that there was too much to read, that list mails left them swamped, but also identified filtering processes designed to help them cope. These ranged from deleting emails without opening them to drawing on one’s ‘antennae’ to pre-judge a source, and to relaying only the ‘most relevant’ information to others. Such filtering is unavoidable. But it leads people into ‘information cocoons’ that make activists comfortable by presenting confirmatory materials while restricting opposing information. For most activist organisations, far-reaching debate is not a priority. Their concern is to ‘stop the war’, so information is marshalled that will assist in the mobilisation of protest.

The anti-war movement makes heavy use of email and the internet, and the most active protesters are most reliant on internet and email. But mobile phones are another new medium that activists find vital. However, the study found little original use of technology by the anti-war movement. Email has been embraced because it is a
An Image of Soldiers

While the media shows images of British soldiers as heroes, soldiers’ own photos tell stories of professionalism, kinship, and participation in military events. Research on the press coverage of soldiers, alongside soldiers’ own personal photograph collections, reveals some of the differences between these two visual economies.

Dr Rachel Woodward and Dr K Neil Jenkings at Newcastle University and Dr Trish Winter at Sunderland University examined press coverage of soldiers from 2004 to August 2006, focusing in particular on photos. The coverage they examined is dominated by the image of the soldier as hero, but they found that this image is an uneasy one, mediated through a set of anxieties about legitimised or illegitimate violence.

Widely used generic photos, such as the common photo of a soldier on a tank, show an anonymous, unidentifiable, ‘universal soldier’. The legitimacy or otherwise of violent acts is squeezed from the frame of reference by this universalized figure.

If the soldier has died, he or she is no longer anonymous. Such soldiers are depicted in two ways. They are either shown in life, in cropped images that show us a face but rarely a context, or alternatively we see a flag-draped coffin. These photographs are about absence, and about heroism attained in death. Photographs of the disabled or disfigured soldier are rarely shown, and are all the more striking for this. The ‘bad soldier’ is also always identified, for instance in stories of abuse and violence gone ‘out of hand’. The ‘soldier as abuser’ is publicly shamed, and anxieties about the legitimate and illegitimate use of violence are reflected back on the individual rather than onto the military itself.

Interviews where soldiers were asked to bring ten personal photographs told different stories about military identity and emphasised the distance between soldiers’ own representations and those in the press.

A central theme was the celebration of professional skill, competence, and expertise. Other photos were used to illustrate kinship and camaraderie among soldiers. Photos from military events were used as a ‘certificate of presence’, but also to create a sense of personal meaning around these events. While the media representations of soldiers were based on perceptions of religious and ethnic identity, the soldiers themselves base their sense of identity on what they do and their peer relationships.

cheap and effective way to target multiple recipients. More imaginative uses of technology – for instance, those which exploited online interactivity – are rare.

Social movements cannot overrule Parliament, but they ought to be recognised as a vital part of a healthy democratic system. A vibrant democracy needs dissent, and at the moment the anti-war and peace movements are a significant dissenting element. One interesting aspect of its development is the involvement of Muslims, who have often been reluctant to engage with UK politics, but are a significant feature of the British anti-war scene. Amongst activists there has generally been enthusiasm towards their participation. But it has been accompanied by a reluctance to engage in serious dialogue, not least for fear of giving offence and seeming to be exclusionary.

This is a missed opportunity. Debating issues in which religion is a factor will be fraught. But even a cursory review allows one to appreciate that within Islam there is a range of different positions, as there is within Christianity. Paradoxically, because non-Muslim activists have been apprehensive about even raising important issues such as the connections between Islam and democracy, and the position of women, they have perpetuated a flat and undifferentiated idea of what it is to be Muslim. This can lead Muslims further into insular involvement with anti-war activism that deals almost exclusively with their own ethnic community in face-to-face ways. Unless dissent is seen as an opportunity to engage in politics, constituencies – especially Muslim youth – that seem estranged from the mainstream will continue to be vulnerable to subversion by fundamentalist groups.

http://www.antiwarresearch.info/who.php

http://www.ncl.ac.uk/gps/staff/profile/r.e.woodward
ONE EFFECT OF the September 11 2001 attacks on the United States, and later attacks elsewhere, has been to increase public attention on issues of national security. This has inherently challenged support for civil liberties and human rights. Just how prepared is the British public to sacrifice some of its freedoms to gain a safer society?

It turns out that despite cooling somewhat in its commitment to civil liberties, the British public is still not prepared at the moment to trade off core freedoms in order to feel safer. But what the future holds, no one can know for sure. The concept of ‘civil liberties’ has never been clear cut. The term is used in turn to promote political freedom, democratic institutions, protection from miscarriages of justice, and the general idea of liberty itself. The more recent concept of ‘human rights’ covers some of the same areas, but also introduces principles such as respect for human dignity and space for individual expression.

Some commentators have said that we no longer embrace civil liberties as wholeheartedly as in less troubled times, and are developing sterner attitudes towards crime prevention and punishment, extreme views and freedom of speech. The New Security Challenges Programme set out to uncover whether this is the case, using the 2005 British Social Attitudes survey to collect data from 3,300 British adults.

Professor Conor Gearty at the London School of Economic and Alison Park of the National Centre for Social Research uncovered a general commitment to civil liberties. Most people questioned agreed that the right to protest, the right to not be detained by police for more than a week without charge, and the right to keep your life private from government are important. Overall commitment to civil liberties has definitely declined over the last 20-25 years. There is less tolerance of extreme views, and more openness to a compulsory identity card scheme.

So what happened in the early 1990s to make us less ‘liberty-minded’? The researchers report that this change of mind coincided with a shift in Labour Party policy, with the Party’s leadership and supporters becoming less civil libertarian in their approach to freedom and justice.

Although terrorism was not the issue that caused the civil libertarian ground to shift, it has now become a key part of how we view civil liberties. The researchers looked into which trade-offs people are willing to make with civil liberties if they believe it can help against terrorism, and found that just mentioning terrorism affected people’s views. Seventy three per cent of those who generally agreed on the right not to be detained for more than a week without charge thought an exception for terror suspects was ‘a price worth paying’. Twenty one per cent of those disagreeing with a compulsory ID card scheme thought it was worth it if it helped against terrorism. The study also showed that tolerance of extremists’ right to freedom of speech and to organise meetings was at an all-time low, virtually half that of 1985.

Those with a greater fear of terrorism were more willing to consider that limits on freedom were a price worth paying. One clear exception was torture, which a large majority opposed regardless of terrorism fears. But those who thought the terrorist threat was exaggerated and those who did not both retained a commitment to human rights and international law. This bedrock of commitment might mean that the public will continue to support international human rights law even if the threat of terrorism increases. But constant vigilance is required if we are to continue to be a country in which basic freedoms and liberties are respected.

http://www.newsecurity.bham.ac.uk
The recent flurry of books on atheism, including Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens’ *God is not Great*, plus books by Daniel Dennett, Michael Onfray and Sam Harris, has fired speculation that atheism may be on the rise. Titles such as Nick Gisburn’s *The Atheists are Revolting! Taking Back the Planet: Saying No to Religion* suggest a new militancy.

It is easy to read too much into the success of a handful of books written by talented bestselling authors backed by powerful marketing machines. Survey research suggests that the percentage of people identifying themselves as atheists in Britain remains low at around eight per cent, with a further ten per cent identifying as ‘agnostic,’ although the numbers have been growing slowly. Around the world, there are estimated to be more people with traditional religious views than ever before, and they constitute a growing proportion of the world’s population.

Probe a bit deeper, and the waters become muddier. Although relatively few people identify themselves as atheist in Britain, much larger numbers, about 20 per cent of the population, say they are ‘not a religious person’ or do not believe in God. Does that mean such people are ‘secular’? Not necessarily so, because it is possible to be ‘spiritual’, and to believe in supernatural powers, energies, fates or ‘Spirit’, without identifying as religious or theistic. Seventy two per cent of the population of England and Wales identified as ‘Christian’ in the 2001 Census, with a further five per cent identifying with other religions.

The percentage of people identifying themselves as atheists in Britain remains low at around eight per cent

Whatever this signifies, it does not suggest vast reserves of militant atheists or extensive attachment to secularism.

At this point it is useful to distinguish between atheism and secularism. Atheism is a disbelief in God and atheists may oppose theism, or religion in general, whilst secularism is more likely to be for something. Secularism is a much broader category of commitment, rather than one of opposition. To put this another way, an atheist is making a stand against a particular sort of sacred (God), whilst a secularist is likely to have his or her own sacred commitment(s) – for example, to ‘humanity’, scientific rationality, liberty, republicanism, the preservation of the planet, the nation, and so on. To divide the British population into people who are religious and secular is therefore less illuminating than looking at the variety of sacred commitments in contemporary British society, a very under-researched topic.

To my mind what is most important for contemporary reflection is to broaden out the categories of ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ to the point where they start to break down. As long as the former continues to be identified with theism and the latter with atheism, the majority of the British population will continue to fall outside both of them.

Religious riches

My dissatisfaction with the current crop of books on atheism is that they perpetuate an unduly narrow understanding of religion. Not only are they written from a deeply Judeo-Christian point of view, they also misrepresent the diversity within these traditions by identifying them chiefly with a set of beliefs, including belief in a supernatural God. Dawkins gives it away by speaking repeatedly of ‘faith-heads’.

Monotheism is the exception rather than the rule in religious history, with polytheism being the norm on which monotheism has to be slowly imposed. Belief in a multiplicity of divine beings and powers is still common in many parts of the world, and is reviving in some circles in the West. It is also increasingly common for westerners to describe themselves not as religious but as spiritual and to embrace belief in a more diffuse sacred ‘Energy’ or ‘Spirit’ than in a personal deity.

In addition, ‘belief’ is a relatively insignificant aspect of religion. You can be profoundly religious without being able to articulate your beliefs at all. Religion is the place where a group or society holds up an image of what is most sacred to it. By way of symbols and ritual practices, involving the body and the emotions as well as the head, the sacred is articulated, reinforced, celebrated, internalised, and integrated into living biographies. There is thus a great deal of overlap between religion and other sacred affirmation, including weddings, national days of remembrance, court hearings, birthday parties, openings of parliament and so on. Insofar as all recognise some reality which transcends everyday life in terms of its value, truth, beauty, goodness or significance, they all sacralise. Likewise, they all express a commitment which goes beyond – but need not contradict – what can be rationally justified.

Shared commitment

The distinction between theistic and non-theistic forms of sacred commitment can be important. But what divides many modern societies is not so much religion versus atheism or secularism as the wide variety of sacred commitments held by their members. Some religious people may share more sacred commitments with secularists than some varieties of secularists do with each other. Recognise this, and you see that the picture is more complex and less oppositional than authors like Dawkins and Hitchens would have us believe.

http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/apply/research/sfi/ahrcsi/religion_society.asp
http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/religstudies/profiles/80

BRITAIN IN 2008 55