IN TODAY’S SURVEILLANCE society Big Brother is watching, but he is also curiously myopic. His gaze is selective and misses a lot. Since 9/11 governments have stepped up their monitoring of citizens under the anti-terrorism label. But in the same era, governments have failed to spot great transformations in what financial markets were up to. That turned out to be the greatest international security peril. Where were the CCTV cameras in the City dealing rooms?

Even inside Channel Four’s Big Brother house itself, the overview was limited. We watched Jade Goody’s every pout and inflection, but the all-seeing eye told us nothing about her background, class or culture. Understanding her behaviour requires a different kind of ‘surveillance’.

Big Brother is often like Cyclops; what goes on outside his field of vision is as important as what he sees. Just as the banking crisis showed how much more supervision we need of certain kinds of economic transaction, so we could be better informed by the expansion of another kind of surveillance – by social researchers seeking a deeper understanding of trends and behaviour.

That’s why we should be on our guard when newspaper columnists and headline-chasing MPs say we are being videoed to the point of suffocation. Look out, in 2009, for exaggerated comparisons with 1949, when George Orwell published his novel 1984. CCTV cameras do follow our passage.
through town centres, car parks and public places. Dr Michael McCahill of the University of Hull – who is beginning a research project on the meaning people ascribe to ‘being watched’ – estimates that a person could be captured on 300 of Britain’s 4.2 million cameras every day, at least if they were living and working in a city.

But Dr McCahill’s work is going to be especially interesting if people turn out not to be the hapless victims of a plot against civil liberties as they are often painted. Intriguingly, the big expansion of CCTV in the high streets in the 1990s had a lot to do with fears that shops and trade were being lost to out-of-town locations, and high streets needed to be safer and smarter in order to compete.

On CCTV people generally take the pragmatic line that cameras are welcome, if they work in reducing crime. They play a part in boosting social and civic confidence. But as with crime at large there’s a puzzling discrepancy between confidence and the measured phenomenon. People rate cameras, but a 2005 study for the Home Office concluded that CCTV schemes had little overall effect on crime levels within defined areas.

The contrary is true for cameras on roads, which are linked with significant reductions in death and injury in traffic accidents. Here, however, the press has orchestrated public opinion – or at least the views of car and lorry drivers collected by the media – into disliking this form of oversight.

What that tells us is that technology – such as automated number plate recognition – can never be assessed outside the political and social contexts in which it is put to use.

That’s why we need studies like Dr McCahill’s work on how people experience monitoring put in place for the sake of public security. How do poor people living on a city estate, or school and college students, perceive surveillance? Dr McCahill has previously looked at video surveillance in train stations and shopping malls, asking how aware people are and whether their behaviour alters when they are being watched.

Of course, surveillance has not suddenly become sociologically interesting. Before modern technology, monitoring took forms such as the Second World War’s mass observation, now such a treasure trove for researchers. Argument rages, not about the form or fact of surveillance, but about its purposes. They depend on which Janus face government happens to be turning to us; one moment benign, the next threatening. As with taxation, we are condemned to dispute incessantly over how much is enough.

Government needs to collect data about citizens for the state and public services to function. Citizens cannot be citizens unless they are constantly exchanging information with the state. But how much, and in what circumstances? After the death of Victoria Climbié, the government extensively reviewed how social services, the police and other agencies collect and disseminate information about children at risk. Better data sharing between agencies and departments would surely improve the service. Similar arguments have recently been made about benefits and housing data.

But strong tides of individualism have been flowing through modern society. Government has had to recognise the enhanced integrity of the person, notably by strengthening rights to privacy. The UK government integrated European norms into domestic law with the Human Rights Act 1998. Data protection law has given the public substantial rights to see and control data held by government and companies with data protection legislation. The Human Tissue Act 2004 is another piece of legislation that puts restrictions on what government and researchers can do with the information they have about individuals.

Policy is moving simultaneously in these two directions, and the strains are beginning to show. In a recent project, Professor Christine Bellamy of Nottingham Trent University and colleagues asked about the ways in which both national policymakers
and street-level agencies in social services “attempt to strike settlements between these apparently conflicting imperatives”.

Their study looks at multi-area agreements between councils and providers of services for the mentally ill and older people. It finds a rich mix of protocols for sharing and protecting information and reliance on professional judgement. It’s “professional training, experience, tacit knowledge or effective supervision, rather than from national toolkits or local protocols which few had ever read” that empowers managers and staff in making assessments of when and when not to share data.

But citizens are far from passive in their dealings with official gatherers of information, as Professor Miriam Lips from the Victoria University of Wellington and colleagues from the Oxford Internet Institute found in their study of e-government. The texture of citizenship is being rewoven as some information is voluntarily shared while other data are covertly gathered.

Citizens phone call centres, using pin numbers, passwords and other ‘shared secrets’. In dealing with town and county halls they may employ smart cards. Security personnel (private and public sector) are increasingly using scans or fingerprints, especially in travel hubs such as airports. Some government agencies use radio frequency identification to track people and vehicles. These amount, say the researchers, to “fundamental changes in citizen/government relationships as a result of digital identity management”. Among them, “there has been a move away from equal treatment and equal public service arrangements available to all citizens, towards tailor-made individual arrangements.”

What if one group of citizens earns loyalty cards (and preferential treatment) while others, deemed to behave less acceptably, don’t? But also, use of algorithms and IT-based protocols are reducing the area of discretion open to officials and “leading to decreased human prejudice in public decision-making; and more equitable public service”.

Nowhere have the tensions between perceptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ government been played out more dramatically than in the UK's response to the surge in Islamist terrorism in recent years, especially since 9/11. In a recent series of high-level seminars, Professor Conor Gearty and colleagues from the Centre for the Study of Human Rights at the London School of Economics brought together lawyers, academics and practitioners to ‘think-ins’ on the border between freedom and constraint, security and licence, liberty and civil protection. They picked out two threads, one running with human rights and civil liberties, the other against.

The first is based on criminal process. Anti-terrorism law aims to punish those convicted for offences, both actual and in the shape of conspiracy. Central to this way of thinking is that no one can be punished until they are found guilty under a “proper human rights binding criminal process”, one that looks for proof beyond reasonable doubt, puts the burden of establishing this on the prosecution and ideally has a jury on hand to give a final verdict.

The second is based on the precautionary principle, which Professor Gearty says has been adopted as the definition of what constitutes counter-terrorism by the security service and specialist police. The people to move against become not just those who have done things, but those who might. Intelligence has come to matter more than evidence: suspects have to be stopped in their tracks, disrupted and constrained. From this perspective what matters are not criminal prosecutions but administrative actions against suspected bad guys.

The Blair and Brown administrations have tried to keep these contradictory positions in play, through control orders and pre-charge detention, but also through moves to “criminalise counter-terrorism” (Gearty argues) by giving judges a say in detention and charging and prosecuting more terrorist suspects for substantive criminal offences.

As with data collection and CCTV, the state has simultaneously to protect citizens, but not intrude too far on their private lives. There is no permanent or fixed balancing point: arguing about where it should begin and end is the eternal stuff of democratic politics.

http://www.hull.ac.uk/socsci/research/projects/surveillance/index.html
http://www.york.ac.uk/res/e-society/projects/13.htm
http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/humanRights/research/projects/ESRC_Seminar_Series.htm
Preaching to the pupils
THE VALUE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

SOCILOGISTS WERE confidently predicting the demise of religion in post-industrial Western countries a few years ago. Indeed, in Britain it seemed as if public talk of religion had all but disappeared. Less than a decade later, however, it is back on the political agenda and has become a focal point for public acrimony and disagreement about the relationship between the state and religious communities.

Clearly the events surrounding the attacks on the World Trade Centre’s twin towers in New York on September 11 2001, which killed 2,775 people from 91 different nations, have had a significant impact on the resurgence of political interest in religion. But this is only one dimension: mass migration of peoples with a range of religious beliefs and attachments has also played its part.

In public, debate has become increasingly acrimonious with many well-known figures from journalism through to academia becoming increasingly shrill in their condemnation of what they see as the resurgence of regressive, authoritarian and malign, forces which might undermine liberal tolerance.

Such figures as Polly Toynbee, Muriel Gray and Richard Dawkins are indicative of a much broader grouping committed to evacuating the public and political spaces of the perceived pernicious influence of religion. In recent years a key battleground has emerged around the influence of religion in schooling and education.

No other subject on the curriculum is so regularly thrashed and berated, both within the press and within educational circles themselves

Britain has, for a variety of reasons, retained both religious schools and religious education in public schools. Despite the apparent and substantial decline in the attachment to religion, religious education has been retained for cultural and educational reasons.

Culturally, there are those who argue that there is a need to continue to communicate these traditions. In losing touch with the ideological and normative grounds of our social lives we lose an invaluable resource in helping us shape our social, cultural and moral lives.

A second, possibly overlapping group, wants to point out that Britain, in common with much of the post-industrial world, is plural in its value systems and multicultural in its attachments. Many of those who migrate to Britain bring deep religious affinities and if we are to live harmoniously with our neighbour, we need to ensure that we understand something about these. We need to have some insight into their moral frameworks so that we can communicate with people whose beliefs might, in important respects, be quite different from our own.

More recently, and most particularly since the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, a third, related imperative has evolved to shore up the justification for teaching religious education in state schools: that is the formation of citizens.

Religious education should, it is suggested, make a contribution to citizenship education and support the drive to nurture social harmony. Of course, for the church or religiously supported school, religious education has a further aim: to nurture students in the particular religious world view of that community. There are those who would argue that there is some incompatibility here.

On the one hand, religious education is meant to shore up the common project of citizenship; on the other hand, it is focused on the beliefs of a given community.

The interesting question, which has bedevilled the deliberations of liberal theorists for some time now, is whether or not it is possible to hold together what, at least on the surface, appear to be such contradictions. Lodged in the midst of these justifications and underpinning reasons is an uneasy question: ‘does it work?’

This is no easy question to answer since we know that values, principles and ideals develop and evolve over time and that certain attitudes and dispositions held in adolescence may not endure into adulthood.

A study of conversations on the efficacy of religious education, conducted by Glasgow University with Queen’s University Belfast and King’s College London, would suggest that there is quite a lot of agreement amongst professionals about the high-level educational concepts to be cultivated. Religious education should help students develop critical capacities and thoughtful insights; it should open their imaginations to others and it should help foster tolerance and goodness.

Moreover, there is much agreement about the practices and methods to be adopted in the classroom. For example, there is consensus that it should be enquiry-based and student-centred. However, there is something of a gap around context, with some regarding the context as critical in fleshing out the high-level objectives. It is often at this level that the most interesting findings emerge.

High-level policy is often quite easy to agree on because it looks as if people agree on matters in principle. (After all, in a liberal democracy, who is going to stand up and say, “I don’t think that students should be taught to think for themselves”?) The real challenge emerges at the level where people attempt to explain what they mean by, ‘thinking for oneself’. What is fascinating is whether religious education does make the kind of contribution to religious understanding that many teachers, academics, professional officers and politicians would like to see.

After all, no other subject on the curriculum is so regularly thrashed and berated, both within the press and within educational circles themselves. Consequently, the question is of no small import.■

http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research/phase_1/large_research_grants
HIV AND AIDS: HOW THE CHURCH INSPIRES HOPE IN ZIMBABWE

HIV rates in Zimbabwe are declining, as is the social stigma associated with the virus.

The huge stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS in many countries makes meaningful discussion about the illness and its causes enormously difficult. Tragically, this is particularly true for faith groups in countries where such dialogue is most needed, such as in Africa, where AIDS has been described as the cause of a “silent genocide”.

But, as a new study finds, local churches can provide a strong support network to sufferers and an educational resource to their friends and families. And many doctors and nurses attest to the impact that an individual’s faith has on their attitude towards their health in terms of prevention, dealing with diagnosis and coping with treatment.

The glimmer of hope in Zimbabwe is that the country has begun to see a decline in HIV in recent years, a drop attributed to a reduction in the average number of sex partners and to an increase in condom use. In fact, despite its many problems, Zimbabwe is the only country in Southern Africa to have seen such a decline.

The research by Dr Martha Chinouya and Professor Eileen O’Keefe of London Metropolitan University examined the issues surrounding HIV in Manicaland, Zimbabwe, where AIDS has had a devastating effect.

Zimbabwe has a population of 13 million. United Nations AIDS data for December 2007 tells us that 1.7 million people in Zimbabwe are HIV positive, and it is estimated that 1.3 million children have been orphaned by AIDS. The country also suffers from hyper-inflation, increasing poverty, international exclusion, little support from major international funders, and a lack of medical facilities and essential drug supplies, such as anti-retroviral therapies (ARVs).

Such economic and social issues restrict any efforts to provide medical facilities or support prevention. Zimbabwe has also suffered from a brain drain, with highly qualified people, including doctors, choosing to leave the country to find higher paid careers elsewhere.

The shocking, man-made disintegration of Zimbabwe saw the World Health Organisation reveal in 2006 that the country now has the lowest life expectancy for women anywhere in the world: 34. In cemeteries, new gravestones tell the ghastly story. People being buried were born in the 1970s and 1980s.

Men have the option of leaving children to jump the border into South Africa. Many return only to be buried, but at 37 years, their life expectancy remains marginally higher.

Looking at the beliefs of participants in their study, researchers discovered that it was common for women to be blamed for HIV, including the allegation that they conjured up ‘supernatural forces’ resulting in men’s illness. Women also spoke of being suspected of being HIV positive if they dressed in mourning clothes for their late husbands.

Celibate nuns showed little interest in learning more about the virus, despite caring for and being in contact with infected people. The few priests who acknowledged being HIV positive found it difficult to access ARVs and support. They believed that their role as priests was more stigmatising because they were seen as role models.

The project found that few participants had access to ARVs, with the majority being on a daily dose of antibiotics. A substantial percentage of the participants used herbal remedies, and all of them used their faith, with prayers and holy water, to help manage HIV.

While there is no doubt of the severity of the HIV epidemic across Africa, there is cause for optimism. One of the reasons for this is participation in the project of the Anglican Diocese of Manicaland, which now recognises the importance of its role in offering spiritual and practical support for sufferers.

http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/research-units/hrsj/staff/martha-chinouya.cfm
THE HOUSE OF LORDS: THE POWER AND THE GLORY

WHAT HAS BEEN the impact of reforming the House of Lords? Considerable, according to a study which says the Upper House has grown in legislative strength, increased in legitimacy and gained greater kudos in the public eye. The removal of hereditary peerage has created a more balanced party representation in the Upper House. It has also given the Liberal Democrats greater confidence and power to flex their legislative muscle, it says.

The report’s author, Dr Meg Russell of University College London, says her research contradicts assumptions that the 1999 reform would have little impact. “Contrary to what many predicted, the reform was significant and has strengthened the House of Lords”, she says. “The Lords now plays an important role in British politics.”

The research is the first of its kind undertaken since the reform. Its findings include evidence that four out of every ten government defeats in the Chamber result in a negotiated outcome closer to the position of the Lords than the government, and that the Lords is more likely to ‘win’ such battles on major rather than minor policies. With over 400 defeats of the government since 1999, the Lords is having an important policy impact. Such defeats are, however, just the tip of the iceberg. To avoid defeat now requires government concessions, taking on board objections raised by peers.

In terms of party impact, the Lords was traditionally dominated by Conservatives but with much less party influence than the House of Commons. The reform has changed this. The Conservatives no longer dominate and, despite its large size, the crossbench group is rarely decisive in voting outcomes due to a low turnout and inconsistent voting patterns. The Liberal Democrat group is far smaller but it is highly cohesive and with a higher turnout, making this group decisive on voting outcomes most of the time, which explains why the Lords has been very active on civil liberties issues. Also, the fact that the Liberal Democrats now mostly vote against the government in the Lords explains why there are so many government defeats.

“The results can be seen as controversial because the House of Lords continues to be unelected and yet is increasingly influential”, says Dr Russell. ■

http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/parliament/house-of-lords.html

THE ARMY TRANSFORMERS

Preparing for operations in the 21st century

THE NEW WORLD ORDER of the 21st century means military forces have to adapt to a changing geopolitical and technological landscape. A study by Dr Terry Terriff of the University of Birmingham, Professor Theo Farrell and Dr Tim Bird from King’s College London shows how European military forces are responding to the challenge of military transformation.

Though NATO member states agree on the need for transformation, there is less agreement about what this entails. There is no lack of changes, both within and outside of NATO: new member states from the former Eastern Bloc have introduced democratically controlled military forces, and Western European militaries are moving from conscript to recruited forces. Most importantly, the focus has shifted from preparing for state-on-state war in Europe to waging counter-insurgency campaigns and stabilising post-conflict societies outside Europe.

The US military is adapting to this situation by changing its strategy from a ‘platform-centric’ model (with larger military forces) to a ‘network-centric’ model, with smaller, more flexible units using technology in deployment and operations. Another shift is the move from operations focusing on firepower to so-called ‘effects-based operations’ (EBO), which includes political, economic and social measures.

European states have been unable to match the United States level of investment in military technology. This has led to a growing...
‘transformation gap’ between Europe and the United States. In addition, European military cultures tend to be less based on technology. As a result, a number of European militaries are aiming for a scaled-down version of the Americans’ network-centric approach, called a ‘network-enabled capability’ (NEC). This model, like the network-centric model, emphasises a networked military force sharing information rapidly to improve synchronised operations and mission effectiveness, but instead of placing the network at the centre, it is integrated as part of a larger framework. Overall, the project offers a more nuanced picture of the transatlantic transformation gap. It reveals enormous variation among the European allies on the extent of transformation, suggesting that there may be both technological and conceptual gaps within Europe.

British armed forces have placed NEC at the core of military transformation, and are phasing it in over the next two decades. A modified form of EBO, called an ‘effects-based approach to operations’ (EBAO) is a key concept in the British military for force deployment and the conduct of operations, including the campaign in Afghanistan.

The study, part of the New Security Challenges programme, showed markedly different strategies between seven European NATO member states. Although the French military is committed to ‘transformation’, the emphasis is more on technology and less on the doctrines of NEC and EBAO compared to the British. “Change in French thinking on the conduct of military operations is more apparent than real,” conclude the researchers.

Germany and the Netherlands are more committed to NEC and EBAO approaches, but both are hampered by budget constraints and a lack of a cohesive development strategy. The Spanish military professes support for NEC but has not allocated the necessary resources, investing instead in conventional military hardware.

Both the Polish and the Romanian armed forces have previously undergone significant changes in the transition to a democracy, moving towards all-volunteer professional forces and having to meet basic NATO standards. The Romanian military do not have the resources to implement transformation, rather using the language of ‘transformation’ to distance themselves from the communist era. In Poland, much of the military budget is used on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving few funds for investing in innovations. Although the Polish military sees EBO as an important development, they are still at very early stages.

Initial findings from a survey of officer attitudes to military transformation across NATO member states suggest that 65 per cent believe military transformation is necessary to fight efficiently against future enemies. However, almost as many agreed that the transformation was necessary to sustain defence budgets. They did not see NATO as being the driver of transformation in their countries, and were ambivalent about copying the United States approach for military innovation.

http://www.newsecurity.bham.ac.uk

NEWS POLITICS, RELIGION AND SOCIETY

extremism targets precise places, and specific places can make it possible, they say.

Belfast’s graffiti, Beirut’s posters and Berlin’s ‘wars of stickers’ between neo-nazis and anti-fascist movements show how radicalisation changes cities.

At the same time, the physical layout of cities influences possibilities of social conflict. Belfast authorities avoid planting trees and bushes where these enable hiding, climbing and stone throwing. Beirut professionals choose commuting routes and office locations offering easier escapes from potential shooting, and recently a municipal decree has ordered to take down all political posters from anywhere in Beirut.

So can cities become tolerant by design? In Belfast, Berlin, Amsterdam and Beirut, the researchers are speaking to officials and the public, and involve young members of the local communities, asking them to take pictures of their own neighbourhoods to document the physical side of escalating division – and sometimes of reconciliation.

Evidence from the project is already showing how urban design is linked to social trends in divided communities and is looking at specific cases where more integrated approaches between society and its physical surroundings could have avoided tension.

For example, a new pedestrian bridge on the Westlink highway in Belfast became a point for stone throwing against nearby houses of Protestant and Catholic communities, re-opening a pacified interface of conflict.

Technical considerations led to the bridge being sited in that location. The Northern Ireland Office has erected additional fences on the bridge.

http://www.manchester.ac.uk/sed/architecture/research/radicalisation
THE POTENTIAL OF religious belief to foster more sustainable ways of living has often been invoked. And in their 2005 report of UK faith groups’ sustainable development activities, the World Wildlife Fund UK and the Sustainable Development Commission concluded that: “Faith groups are better placed than others in society to take up the Ghandian idea of ‘live simply that others may simply live’, and to challenge consumerism.”

Little research has examined the extent to which such challenges to consumerism may be occurring. Research carried out by Dr Miriam Pepper at RESOLVE, the Research Group on Lifestyles, Values and Environment, aimed to bridge this gap, concentrating on institutional Christianity and the ways in which it motivates sustainable living on the part of its adherents.

In a survey of religion, values and consumer behaviours, churchgoers were found to report more frugal lifestyles. They also reported slightly higher levels of socially conscious purchasing practices such as buying fair trade products.

These behavioural differences were small and less pronounced than the differences between the values of churchgoers and non-churchgoers. Churchgoers placed much weaker emphasis on the importance of material possessions than non-churchgoers.

Discussion groups with churchgoers also revealed a range of ethical beliefs that might be expected to fundamentally challenge materially intensive lifestyles – that the environment should not be damaged, but protected and nurtured on behalf of the creator; that all material property belongs to God, not to humans; and that the rich and the poor are reversed in the kingdom of God.

So do Christians live sustainably?

RELIGIOUS PEOPLE ACROSS Britain and continental Europe are likely to be happier than atheists or agnostics, according to research by Professor Andrew Clark and Dr Orsolya Leikes. What’s more, many religious people are better able to weather such disappointments as becoming unemployed or getting divorced.

But the study also finds that religious people can be more socially conservative and against government intervention in the labour market. On average, religious people are anti-divorce and against job creation programmes for the unemployed. Countries with more religious electorates tend to have lower unemployment benefits (relative to wages) than countries that are less religious.

The research uses data from across Europe, including Britain, to investigate the effect of being religious on life satisfaction and attitudes towards different government policies.

Its findings are that: religious people enjoy higher levels of life satisfaction than non-religious people; religious people suffer less psychological harm from unemployment than the non-religious; both Catholics and Protestants are less hurt by marital separation – but while Protestants suffer less from being divorced, Catholics respond worse to it; religious people are both anti-divorce and anti-job creation programmes for the unemployed; unemployed people who are religious are less likely to actively look for work; and the ratio of unemployment benefits to wages is lower in more religious countries.

Analyising data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), a nationally representative panel of 5,500 families interviewed annually since 1991, the study finds that in Britain: less than a sixth (16 per cent) of churchgoers agreed with the statement that ‘It is better to divorce than to continue an unhappy marriage’, compared to more than a quarter (29 per cent) of non-churchgoers; only two in five (40 per cent) male churchgoers agreed with the statement that ‘It is the government’s responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one’, compared with almost half of male non-churchgoers (47 per cent). (The difference for women is smaller but still significant.)

The study asks whether religion acts as a form of insurance, buffering the impact of stressful life events such as unemployment or divorce on...
discussion groups suggested a range of processes that are at work here. Care for the environment, though a part of Christian life, may be a lower priority than responding to other social issues.

Christians may profess a belief in the ‘upside down’ kingdom of God, but be fatalistic about the possibility of this vision being realised, starting with everyday life in the here and now.

The injunction to serve God rather than mammon may be spiritualised and understood to be about how attached one is to one’s possessions. And the call to sell one’s possessions and give the proceeds to the poor becomes virtually impossible in an individualised world, where communities of common ownership are few and far between.

These processes of prioritisation, fatalism, spiritualisation, and individualisation defuse the challenges that Christian beliefs may pose to material excess. The RESOLVE work suggests that the potential contributions of Christianity to fostering sustainable living remain largely unrealised. However, the research did not concentrate on churches and Christian networks that were specifically undertaking sustainability initiatives such as environmental activities or possession sharing projects.

The study of such initiatives, particularly from an action research perspective, could help with efforts to shift religious challenges to consumerism from rhetoric more strongly into the practice of everyday life.

http://www.surrey.ac.uk(resolve

people’s well-being. It also examines how religion changes people’s views about economic and social issues, and whether this is reflected in policy.

Of course, after a stressful event it is possible that people will become religious. But the evidence from the BHPS indicates that this is not a common phenomenon: religion is determined by other factors and does act to help people through many stressful times.

The research also finds that religious people are even happier the more often they attend church and the more often they pray. The authors comment: “Over and above denomination, churchgoing and prayer are also associated with greater satisfaction. Religion tempers the impact of adverse life events: it has current as opposed to after-life rewards.”

They add: “Religious norms have a sharp impact on people’s quality of life. These psychological effects may help explain why different institutions have arisen in different countries. Changes in a society’s religiosity may lead to changing support for different types of social redistribution, and eventually lie behind the evolution of economic and social institutions.”


HOW WOMEN VOTE

IT IS COMMONLY thought that women are less interested in politics than men; that they are alienated by the posturing and point-scoring. But this is not true. They simply have a different perspective. And they have never been so important to political parties. Winning the votes of women in the 1997 and 2001 elections was the key to Labour’s landslide victories.

A study of UK gender and voting behaviour says that while men are interested in politics in general, women are more interested in domestic politics, focusing on the needs of people they know. They were on average nine per cent more likely than men to say they judged a policy on how it would affect their families and children. Men were about seven per cent more likely to say that they judged policies on how they affect Britain as a whole.

But even these differences were still far less marked than in previous research involving focus groups, suggesting that focus group findings could have been inflated.

The differences in political attitudes between the sexes were found to be “generally small but consistent”, according to Dr Rosie Campbell’s new research. Women were about 15 per cent more likely than men to place themselves in the middle on a left-right scale, but were still more left-leaning in their political attitudes than men. They were six per cent more likely to agree that failing to ‘give everyone an equal chance’ was a big problem, and seven per cent more likely to think the nation’s wealth is not distributed fairly to ordinary people.

Women were more right-leaning than men on issues of morality and civil liberties. They were 20 per cent more likely than men to agree that magazine censorship is necessary to uphold moral standards, and six per cent more likely to feel that a strong government is needed to create a better society. Of the people who focused on how policies would affect their families, men were more likely to be concerned about taxation, while women focused on education and the health service.

This suggests that gender roles, with women as nurturers and men as providers, still have an effect on how we relate to politics, even if the differences are smaller than we thought.

http://www.bbk.ac.uk/polsoc/research/projects/rcampbellvoting
There are differences between those women who come to Britain to marry and those who are British-born.

The practice of cousins marrying cousins is common in the UK among communities with links to the Middle East, North Africa and the Indian subcontinent. In fact, 20-50 per cent of marriages in such communities are so-called ‘blood marriages’. But with marriages between relatives comes an increased risk of inherited genetic disorders.

Dr Sophie Gilliat-Ray and Dr Santi Rozario of Cardiff University looked at how Bangladeshi Muslim families in Britain coped and how culture and religious practice informed their understanding of genetics and health care. Their research showed that there are often misunderstandings about the nature and causes of a genetic disorder. This could be due to a number of reasons. Some were as simple as language difficulties, but others were connected to a lack of openness between couples and the idea that things happen according to God’s will.

There was also confusion about being ‘affected’ and being a ‘carrier’ of a disorder. Initially, genetic disorders are understood as a biomedical problem needing conventional medical treatment, which is also in line with Islamic duty. Religious interpretations are likely to be secondary but can influence decisions about treatment or termination. The cause may be seen as supernatural, and cures sought from an imam or a religious healer. Regardless of whether families see the genetic disorder as medical or supernatural, many believe disorders result from Allah’s will, and that the outcome of treatments will depend on Allah’s will.

The research shows a clear disadvantage for women arriving in the UK later in life compared to those who are British-born. Those arriving in order to marry may find themselves isolated, with limited English skills, lack of family support and lack of knowledge of the British health system. With limited English they rely on their husband for information about the genetic condition, and that information may be inaccurate or incomplete. They could also be blamed for the genetic disorder and for failing to be a good wife and mother – damaging the ‘purity’ of the family-line and tarnishing the family reputation.

Bangladeshi women born in the UK, on the other hand, are usually better equipped to understand and cope with a genetic disorder.

http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/relig

Aid Chains: a Catholic Church study

Creating and maintaining a strong partnership takes work and persistence. What works for some will result in failure for others. Using the Catholic Church’s work in Nigeria as an example, research by Professor Stephen Morse within the Non-Governmental Public Action research programme reaffirms that ‘partnership’ is indeed a complex dynamic when it comes to delivering aid to Africa.

Catholics are often proud of saying that even though Latin is no longer the chosen language for the Mass, they can still walk into any Catholic church anywhere in the world and understand what is taking place, because it is the same everywhere. While this undoubtedly provides significant advantages for church aid chains there are nonetheless stresses and strains. And these are often very different from diocese to diocese.

Dioceses have different histories, resources and facilities, and often local solutions to local problems. They must also consider how their aid partners in the global north are operating and how that influences the different projects and programmes that are set up. The result is much variation in the form, function and effectiveness of church partnerships across both space and time.

Another important issue is sustainability. There is little point in committing valuable and scarce resources to work that cannot be sustained. It is here that the Church has substantial advantages: all are in the aid chains for the long term. But Professor Morse says that circumventing local structures leads to a dilution of any potential success and works against sustainability.

So those who are involved in delivering aid at a local level need to manage partnerships, and manage them well. This sometimes means considering whether one partner’s views should take precedence over another and if so, how often, and who should make such a decision? Is it the partnerships that matter, or the results of those partnerships? Professor Morse asks.

http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/NGPA/Research_projects/briefs/Morse.pdf
WHO BECOMES A VIOLENT EXTREMIST?

trying to find out what it is that triggers politically inspired violence within certain cultures

In September 2007 a team of researchers led by Dr Jonathan Githens-Mazer sought to explain the genesis of extremism among some North Africans living in Britain, France and Spain. The study, under the New Security Challenges: ‘Radicalisation’ and Violence: a Critical Reassessment initiative, was designed to understand how myths and memories of colonial violence and state repression in North Africa created a basis for violent jihadism.

Interviews were conducted with North Africans currently living in the UK and other parts of Europe. Researchers said that while radicalisation was resulting from ‘stories grandmothers tell grandchildren’ about past atrocities linked with colonial occupation and political repression, the form of radicalisation was very diverse.

Some examples of radicalisation were familiar, such as the Crevice Cell, a terrorist cell that included Algerians who sought to blow up London nightclubs and shopping centres. Findings showed, however, that radicalisation also regularly led individuals of North African descent living in the UK to study for MAs in such subjects as human rights and democratic theory. It also accounted for how and why some North Africans in Britain joined secular pluralistic political groups such as the ‘Stop the War’ coalition. In this way, ‘turning radical’ is not easily explained because it takes very diverse forms.

The study takes as an example the radicalising efforts of individuals such as the Egyptian-born cleric Abu Hamza al-Masri, or the Jordanian born cleric Abu Qatada al-Filistini. While both men sought to exploit the Algerian civil war of the 1990s to claim legitimacy for their extremist ideological positions, they did so in very different – some would say opposing – ways.

For an individual such as Qatada, Algeria was part of a larger global struggle in the name of Islam. Qatada’s stance was shaped by a global al-Qaeda stance, reflecting the thinking of prominent members of the Afghan Jihad, including Abdullah Azzam and Osama Bin Laden. Qatada’s approach emphasised a global jihad to justify the use of violence and to mobilise supporters.

Hamza’s brand of radicalisation was substantially different. Despite claiming a global outlook, spending time in Afghanistan, and allegedly having a track record in aiding and abetting terrorist conspiracies beyond the UK, his was a much more local outlook.

For Hamza, his followers in ‘Supporters of Shariah’ generally came from North London, and this group ultimately represented Hamza’s powerbase. Islamically inspired radicalisation, violence and extremism were applied to very local experiences.

Hamza’s radicalisation wasn’t based on ideological justification, but on understanding how experiences of racism and perceptions of persecution in contemporary Britain could be mobilised when applied to perceptions of the Israel-Palestine dispute, Muslim repression in Bosnia during the 1990s, the conflict over Kashmir and other disputes.

The research challenges the idea that the perpetrators of terrorist attacks like 7/7 can be understood as having been on a conveyor belt leading them from non-violent to violent expressions of radicalism.

The researchers say that while it’s very tempting to seek one answer for the ‘why’ of radicalisation, the reality is that “People are better off understanding that there are many different forms of radicalisation; many different reasons why individuals come to feel that the only way to express their feeling about globally prominent situations, or indeed their own personal experiences is through violence.” This requires complicated solutions by the government and its security forces.

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/research/nsc/projects/githens-mazer
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THE NORTH ATLANTIC Treaty Organisation celebrates in 2009 the 60th anniversary of an organisation that has come a long way. On 4 April 1949, 12 nations met in Washington DC to sign a treaty that at its heart had a commitment to collective defence. The parties agreed that “an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all” and consequently they agreed that each of them will assist with such action as was deemed necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. That solidarity made political sense to majorities as the cold war deepened: in 1949, the Soviet Union had its armed forces stationed in half of Europe, and detonated the first of its 715 nuclear weapons tests.

Sixty years on, NATO has successfully built a military and political organisation, centred on its headquarters in Brussels. The latest two members of the organisation will officially join in 2009, taking membership from 12 to 28. In 1949, Germany was not a member of NATO; in 2009, the centrepiece of the 60th anniversary celebrations will be the Franco-German relationship, symbolised by their joint hosting of the event. NATO forces will still be in operation in Afghanistan, and the Alliance will be involved in key debates over a range of issues from struggles against terrorism to collaboration over civil defence.

The professionals in the Alliance are concerned with a new strategic concept, a way to frame what NATO should and shouldn’t do with military force, and how

Not all will be celebrating, however. Russia, in particular, has become antagonistic towards NATO, arguing that NATO has betrayed a series of promises: not to incorporate East Germany into the Alliance; not to expand into Central Europe; not to expand onto former Soviet territory. Each of these promises has, from a Russian perspective, been broken, and many Russians accuse NATO of planning to encircle their country with the active recruitment of Ukraine and Georgia as members.

The Russians are not the only ones unlikely to be celebrating; NATO has become a target of the anti-globalisation movement, for whom NATO symbolises the determination of the West to impose its will on the world by military force, and protests are planned. From their different perspectives, both the Russians and the anti-globalisation movement argue that NATO has outlived its time. They are not alone.

Many strategic thinkers have questioned NATO’s purpose since the end of the cold war. Many purposes have been proposed: a role in the Middle East peace process, or including Israel as a member; turning NATO into a core actor in the war on terror; or turning the Alliance into a global organisation of Western democracies. What unites these ideas is the sense that NATO isn’t enough as it is.

But there is a lot on the NATO agenda, and it will come to the fore at the summit. The professionals in the Alliance are concerned with a new strategic concept, a way to frame what NATO should and shouldn’t do with military force, and how. That debate is being helped by the new, friendly attitude of the French.

In 1966, President De Gaulle withdrew France’s military from NATO’s structure; independence became a key element of Gaullist foreign policy. President Chirac took a formal step back into planning in 1995; and President Sarkozy may well lead France’s military fully back into NATO structures in 2009.

Yet these planning and organisational debates are overwhelmed by the dilemmas of enlargement and the new, assertive Russia. In three waves, the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe have acceded to NATO, to Russian discomfort. That discomfort has reached a new level, now that the Ukraine and Georgia have asked to join, and at the 2008 NATO summit, NATO declared “We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.” Not least since the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, these issues are now sharper than ever.

Why should NATO expand to threaten Russia? Or, how can NATO refuse membership to a democratic European country committed to joining? While such debates are going on, NATO is also involved in military action, something it never saw during the cold war. In Afghanistan, it is NATO that runs most of the military operations (but not that on the border with Pakistan, a United States operation seeking Osama bin Laden). Some 27,000 troops – the majority non-American – have served with the NATO forces from 2006-8.

During the cold war, NATO had multiple identities. It was seen by some and at certain times as the guarantor of Western democracy; by others, and at different times, as a war-mongering organisation risking nuclear destruction. After the cold war ended, NATO was seen by some as a spreader of democracy, by others – as in the Bosnian war – as ineffective, or as murderous. In between times, NATO has slid from public view, to become immersed in its own debates over issues such as strategic concepts.

But in 2009, with its debates over who should join NATO next and when, and with its military forces in Afghanistan, NATO will again become the focus of intense public scrutiny.