

Workshop Summary (Workshop 2)

Personal commentary by Callum Brown

This Workshop brought international comparison, history and sociology all together. After a short empirical paper by Callum brown on the statistics of growing no religionism in the west since the start of the 20th century, Tina Block provided an extremely useful paper on the development of humanist and secularist organisation in Canada in the decades after the Second World War. She demonstrated the enthusiasm and the success of humanist growth during this period, and notably from the late 1950s onwards. Equally, she pointed to the dip in the fortunes of Humanist groups in the 1970s – something similar to what in both Scotland and England. There is a useful website with original documents about the [Oxford University Humanist Group](#) which shows how this grew to over 1,000 members in the 1960s and then collapsed in the 1970s. This leaves a big question – why?

Steve Bruce gave us a scintillating paper arguing the case that after so much secularisation in the west (and especially Britain and Scotland) since the 1950s, it seemed to him unlikely that there would be a resurgence of religion. His argument – about how religious has become alien to younger generations who not grown up in church, faith or religious ritual – is a difficult one to get around, and less one foresees success for a missionary enterprise of the kind that Europe exported to the developing world in the 18th and 19th centuries. Religion is no exotic, beyond the ken, of the vast bulk of the young and middle-aged of Scotland, for instance, even if they have had some Religious and Moral Education in Schools or ‘acts of worship’ in their curriculum. Steve also drew upon some of the materials in his new book, *Scottish Gods* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014) which provides a series of case studies (on everything from sectarianism through to the Findhorn Community and Buddhism) which illuminate the transitions in Scottish religious history in the 20th century. His contrast between Orkney and Shetland on the one hand, where organised religion has suffered serious collapse, and the Western isles (notably Lewis, where religion has remained comparatively strong), is especially interesting, lying at the heart of the issue of what has caused rapid secularisation. Steve tries to answer that.

Gary McLelland and Ivan Middleton provided important perspectives – Gary of Humanism’s place in modern Scotland, and Ivan’s on the emergence of the Humanist movement in the last 4 decades. These raised important perspectives on the conditions which make for Scottish Humanism, and the way in which Scotland has a distinctive pattern of humanist culture. This was raised in the first Workshop too, where the contrast between the HSS and the BHA was drawn. Certainly, Gary had thoughts on the work of the Sunday Assembly movement – which appeared to be working in Edinburgh but not as yet in Glasgow. Sunday assembly provides the most exuberant celebration of life in singing, comedy and collective celebration of a kind which the more restrained Scot might find too inhibited. Yet, surprisingly to some, it was Edinburgh where it worked, and not in Maryhill! This suggested that there are regional factors that it are important to be assessed in deciding what works.

Understanding the conditions for Humanist growth remains unclear. Obviously, it is strongest where organised religion tends to have declined the most, but beyond that there are major opportunities for research to explore regional, class, gender and ethnic patterns of Humanist growth.