

# Religion: not talked about but still present

*Mark Argent reflects on his conversations with both individuals and organisations, where he finds genuine religion under the surface, but for various reasons not openly acknowledged. These include a mistaken perception among individuals of what religion is really about, and in organisations a fear of causing offence or being seen as discriminatory, as well as not connecting genuine passion for values with a religious experience. He concludes that organisations should have the courage to see members of their staff as whole people, rather than just their job descriptions.*

Religion is found in pretty much all human societies. It seems to be part of being human. On arriving in an

unfamiliar country, evaluating the contribution which religion makes there doesn't give me simple answers

about how things work, but I find it a rich way to clear away some of my preconceptions and listen more deeply.



But religion is also a highly contested area in our society. There are some who will claim that theirs is the only valid religion. There are others who claim it's all rubbish — often with a fervour that sounds decidedly religious. There are some who seem genuinely threatened by the religion of others. I've a hunch that the certainties of religious fundamentalism are envied as well as feared. Even those who see themselves as “spiritual but not religious” seem to have a strong sense of the religion they are choosing not to identify with.

Something I've been exploring with Coreene Archer at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations is where religion sits in contemporary organisations. My sense that it is “something not talked about” is perhaps partly an unintended consequence of the Equalities Act, which tends to make it harder to talk about religion for fear of accidentally causing offence or being discriminatory.

Yet religion is clearly around, firstly in the private lives of people in organisations, and secondly in the values organisations live by.

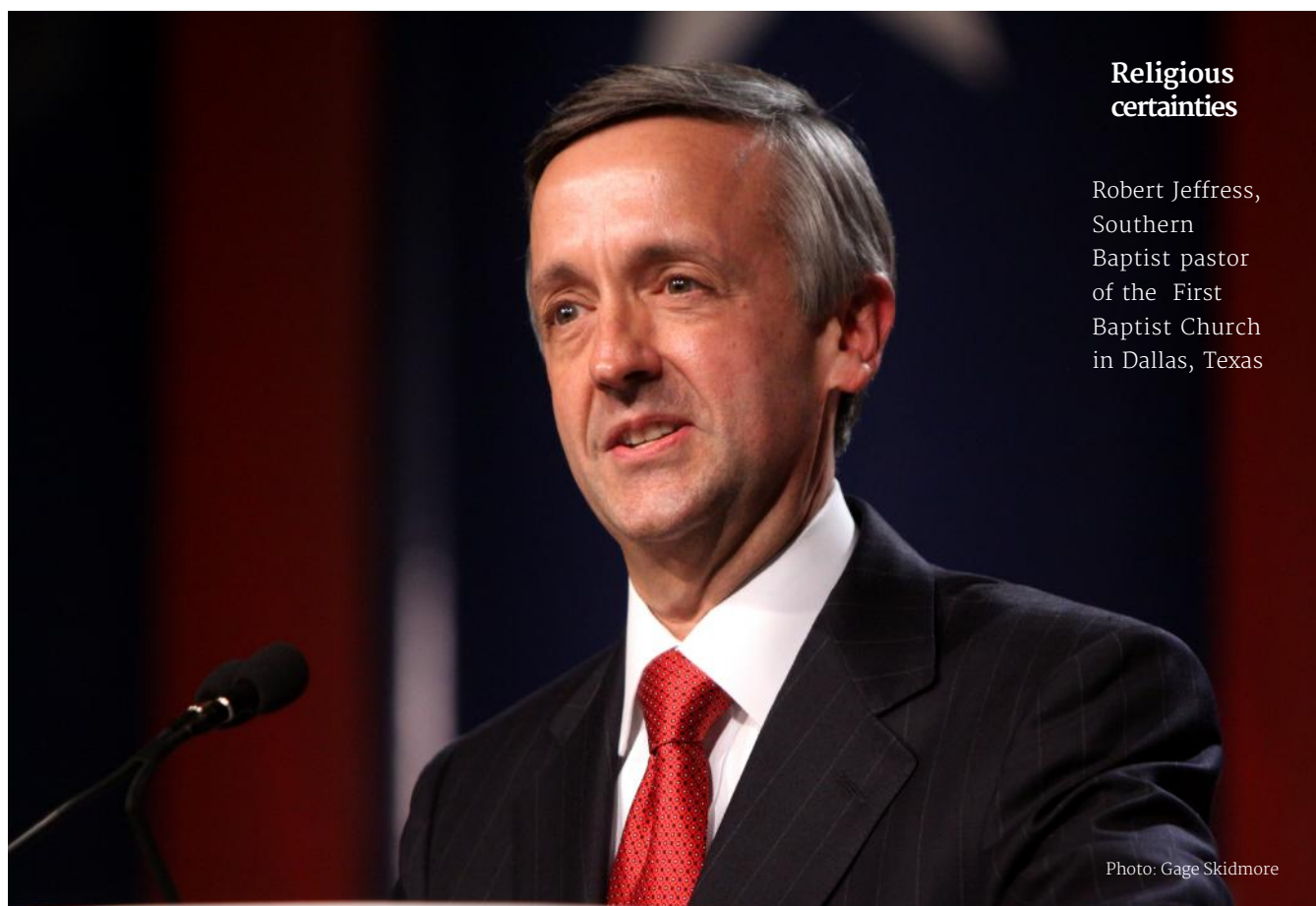
### **Religion in people's private lives**

From the perspective of my work in spiritual direction and retreat giving, I find it often takes a while to get to the complex depths of a person's religious or spiritual make-up. It usually feels as if there is a superficial layer which is about how things are “supposed” to be, and it takes a gradual build-up of trust to reach the messy reality.

When I first became a URC elder I remember visiting an elderly couple where my sense was that they had put on their respectable clothes, got out the best china, and had the Bible open to make a point. It didn't quite ring true. But then one of them found out about my interest in cooking and I was shown their hob. Something shifted. Next time I visited, it was normal clothes, normal china, the

Bible was gone, and the conversation ended up being about hymns. My sense now was of two people with long and rich stories that were hard to express in formal words, but somehow coalesced in a way that was utterly real in the memories and stories of hymns that mattered to them. For all its realness and depth, such a religious space easily becomes invisible. People can be wary of talking if they fear they won't be understood.

On another occasion I was involved in starting a Muslim-Christian dialogue. A meal seemed the place to begin. The suggestion was that it should be vegetarian — which ducked a raft of questions around Halal food. What we did instead was to talk about Halal food and what it means, so we shifted from “not causing offence” to seeking to understand, engaging with something really important to Muslims, the depth of which is hard to express in words.



### **Religious certainties**

Robert Jeffress,  
Southern  
Baptist pastor  
of the First  
Baptist Church  
in Dallas, Texas

Photo: Gage Skidmore





Political certainties

Photo: Mary Turner/Getty Images

### Religion and values in organisations

It seems really important to have room in organisations for people to be understood, so that the message is not just “turn up and do your job” but “come as a whole person”. The optimist in me wants to say that resilient organisations are enriched by their diversity, including faith. But I have also seen many organisations where what matters is how someone fits in, and diversity doesn’t go much beyond a desire not to end up facing an employment tribunal.

Organisational mission statements often need to be taken with a pinch of salt. Yet organisational culture always includes a set of values — of what is and isn’t acceptable — which is much more comprehensive than the “mission statement”.

With a not-for-profit organisation “success” doesn’t necessarily map on to profit figures. That creates a really complex situation, as different people think differently about core values.

Even when an organisation is sharply focussed on profit, which sounds like an unambiguous values statement,

things are usually much more complex than that seems. What shapes people’s views of what is “acceptable” profit? Would they be prepared to bend or break the law? Is it about short or long term profit? How do people actually work out such questions (it is usually more subjective than it seems)? Somewhere in there is a set of values, which is how people in that organisation are living their work lives. There’s also potential for significant stress if people have different values at home and at work.

In connection with such hidden values, I recently wrote a blog post to see how far it made sense to see the more extreme support for Brexit in quasi-religious terms. It was an interesting task in that religious language has been used to support both sides. I’ve heard some of the more hard-line support for Leave described as “religious”, but rather than use that as a way to dismiss it, I was fascinated at how much could be categorised as “religious” and then looked at in terms of “Why do people need to believe this?” That led to a rewarding way to think about the

longings and anxieties that were in play.

Using such religious language felt a little provocative, but there is something here about how we handle basic fears — not least fears around survival. One of the things all the major religions do is to enable people to think about the really big questions of life, death and meaning.

From that angle, being narrowly focussed on “the bottom line” looks rather different. It has more the character of a dressed-up version of anxiety about survival, or an expression of power as another form of survival anxiety.

One of the riches of organised religion is that it gives us a way to recognise that we’re not the first people to face these things. The decline in religion can make talking about them harder, but the Psalms are an interesting place to look. In all their complexity, they hold the messy stories of people’s struggles for survival, for power, and for resisting abuse.

### Religion as story in organisations

All religions work with stories, which takes that understanding of

the Psalms much further. For centuries the Authorised Version of the Bible and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* were key influences on the English language and culture. They were holding something really important about how people thought. One of the many twists of this is that people can read the same narrative piece of scripture from very different places. That's a problem if someone needs to claim to have "the only correct understanding", but being able to read the same story from different perspectives is a way of enabling people to connect with each other even though they disagree, and to change position by exploring other ways to read the same story.

That sounds a little abstract. A century on from the end of the Great War, my mind leaps to Rudyard Kipling's short story *The Gardener*. In a sense, it is the story of a woman who brings up her nephew, who dies in the war. The sense that it might be about something else as well is sharpened when she arrives in a graveyard where the graves have only numbers on them. Someone asks her which grave she seeks, and, flustered, she just gives her nephew's name, and is taken to his grave. Only afterwards does she realise she never gave the number. The throwaway comment about the person showing her the grave is that "she thought he was the gardener". There's an unmistakable parallel with Mary Magdalene in John 20, mistaking the risen Jesus for the gardener. Stories

can hold within themselves other stories, and in the process point to something quite profound. The power of Kipling's story is that it takes us by surprise, in this case letting a new sense of resurrection emerge.


A few years back I read the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*, as a way of understanding where some Hindu friends are coming from. Recently I have been revisiting it, using a serialisation on YouTube. One of the turning points of that story is a moment where the protagonists are inveigled into a rigged and disastrous game of dice. As the episode unfolds, various key characters look on in horror but each feels unable to intervene. As it happens, the saga around Brexit was going through a particularly disconcerting patch at the time. I found myself thinking of the various leaders and civil servants also caught up in the process and powerless to stop it. This Hindu narrative from millennia ago put me in touch with the timeless dimension of humanity in what is feeling like a very contemporary crisis.

### Final Thoughts

People are less used to thinking of the stories of individuals and of organisations as ways to encounter God, but how we think of our stories plays a crucial part in how we

experience God. Running these things together, I'm left with an edgy thought that religion might well be around in many contexts, showing itself in people's values and things they struggle to put into words, making it hard to talk about.

In effect this is to say that one turns up in an organisation as a whole person, and a violence is done when the wholeness is not recognised. The hitch is that so much of this is subtle stuff that it is really hard to express. A manager can't say to someone "tell me about your religion" and hope to get an answer that is anywhere near complete. So there's something instead about recognising that this is an important part of a person's being that can't be categorised or labelled. It means a person is much more than their job title. The tricky part is how to stay with that and not lose the richness of people by seeing only what can be measured.

The cause for optimism is that it would be crazy to attempt to "measure" one's friends, or "assess their usefulness". So the conversation about religion in organisations also includes taking the risk of being real. From a Christian perspective, that's about whether we can let ourselves see people as being in the image of God, rather than limit them to what fits someone else's preconceptions of God and of them. 

**'In effect this is to say that one turns up in an organisation as a whole person'**

1 For example <https://www.politico.eu/article/carwyn-jones-wales-hard-brexit-first-minister-hard-brexit-is-like-religious-fundamentalism/>



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