Reflections on the 36th Denton Conference on Implicit Religion

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The 36th Denton Conference on Implicit Religion was held at Denton Hall in Ilkley, West Yorkshire from Friday evening May 10th through Sunday noon May 12th, 2013. The gathering consisted of 32 registrants and 18 paper presentations.

By now, the concept of “implicit religion” has become widely known and used, in large part due to the efforts of Edward Bailey, who coined the term in 1968. Now, 45 years later, scholars routinely reflect on the concept, as well as explore its empirical expressions. Such varied interests and emphases were evident at the latest Denton Conference.

Theoretical and methodological issues

People with an interest in theory would have enjoyed hearing Netherlands sociologist Meerten B. ter Borg begin the Conference by reflecting on transcendence. He drew attention to the fact that people, in the course of developing both explicit and implicit religions that function as “sense-making systems,” transcend the limits of their world views. Professor Ivo Jirásek, a specialist in Physical Culture in the Czech Republic, reflected with the group on the Jungian-derived concept of “systemic constellation” for understanding life at the level of the unconscious, and we discussed its possible use in exploring implicit religion or non-religious spirituality. Cambridge professors Graham Howes and Tim Jenkins offered observations on how now, after close to five decades, the idea of implicit religion is faring in “the academy.” Scholars increasingly are giving attention to expressions of religion that are less conventional, with the concept of “implicit religion” currently more pronounced in Britain, other parts of Europe and Canada, than in the USA, where observers typically are inclined to emphasize concepts such as privatized religion and spirituality. The methodologically-minded may have been drawn to the paper by Yours Truly in which I suggested that a valuable unobtrusive indicator of implicit
religion might be found in learning the bases for how individuals view their personal futures, given that so many people everywhere readily supplement their otherwise “rational” forecasts with God, luck, superstition, feelings, dreams, astrology, fate, and so on. The basis for such “add-ons” may provide “allusions” to the presence of implicit forms of religion. The multi-faceted Roger Grainger, whose many doctorates and other degrees include a PhD in Dramatherapy from Leeds, suggested that another source of gold for those studying implicit religion might be found in the theatre, where some writings point to unique characteristics of the human soul that draw people to religious belief. A case for the conceptual value of implicit religion was offered by sociologist William Keenan from Liverpool Hope University. Using the example of cyclist Lance Armstrong being an avowed atheist, yet frequently wearing a silver necklace with a cross pendant, Keenan pointed out that the idea of implicit religion “cultivates a way of seeing the religious-in-the-secular, the sacred-in-the-profane (and vice versa).” Such a flexible viewpoint makes for a richer and fuller sense of the religious life and its cultural dynamics than academics conventionally permit.

Empirical reports, explicit style

A number of interesting papers had a strong explicit religion focus that might have left you—as a fly-on-the-wall-observer—politely asking presenters to be more explicit about what they believed to be implicit. They included veteran British researcher Peter Brierley’s examination of the 2011 UK census, where he reported that the number of people who identify with Christianity readily exceed members and attendees. He also noted that the numbers who identify with diverse alternatives—versus opting for no religion—continue to grow. Gill Hall from the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit reflecting on the contemporary interest in Celtic Christianity, while calling for caution regarding the historical authenticity of a number of features of contemporary Celtic Christianity, drew attention to the convergence of current social themes and alleged historic Celtic Christian emphases. John S. Knox from George Fox University in Oregon drew on his research in a city of about 30,000 people near Portland, to describe the “emerging” radical individualism that is characterizing many American churches. One evangelical megachurch in particular, he said, is characterized by an emerging openness, acceptance, and sanctification of non-traditional beliefs and practices, although it remained to be seen how pervasive such emphases will become. Barbara R. Walters, a sociologist from the City University of New York (CUNY), attempted to demonstrate
that liturgy can be a source of both explicit and implicit religious inclinations. She offered a detailed exposition of the text and subtext of the office for the Feast of Corpus Christi from a 14th century musical manuscript, arguing that “the office represents an implicit and explicit religious vision and practice.” Stella Mills from Staffordshire University reported on the results of her team’s research at the Birmingham Children’s Hospital on the effectiveness of computer-supported multi-cultural “end of life care” training, for staff who deal with dying children and their parents.

**Empirical reports, implicit-style**

In 1983, a freshly-minted doctoral graduate heard a presentation by Edward Bailey at the SISR meetings in London where “the penny dropped” on the significance of “IR.” On his Leiden University website, Meerten B. ter Borg comments that, in subsequently giving much of his career to studying implicit religion, “I became notorious in the Netherlands as the man who labelled practically everything as religion, from spontaneous adoration and mourning (Lady Di) to football.” The 36th Denton Conference did not lack for stimulating, empirically-oriented papers where researchers—like detectives looking for clues—were similarly seeing signs of implicit religion in an array of unsuspected places.

- **Chris Deacy**, who teaches in Applied Theology at the University of Kent, argued that Christmas “is one of the most fertile embodiments of religious agency in the world today.” Through the eyes of implicit religion, Christmas—he maintains—can be seen as a fertile expression of religion, because of, and not in spite of, its material and commercialized characteristics.

- **Francis Stewart**, a sociologist at the University of Stirling, carried out research where she looked beyond the better-known Catholic-Protestant reconciliation attempts in Northern Ireland and focused on grassroots developments in the form of punk rock. Here she found that involvement with the punk subculture enabled young people to ignore the divisiveness of religion in favour of an interwoven approach to belief and faith—possible manifestations of implicit religion. She drew attention to comparative possibilities in settings such as Russia and Indonesia.

- **Olivier Masson**, who is studying at the University of Quebec at Montreal and the University of Paris, reflected with the group on “transhumanism”: belief in the power of humans to transcend
themselves. He pointed out that the exponential growth of technology has accelerated the belief that a new, enhanced kind of existence is possible, fuelling new meaning for life, as well as the ability to shape our species. While transhumanism is not a religion, he suggested it might provide some of the same functions.

• New York psychologist Steven Doehrman was explicit about clinical psychologists engaging in a form of implicit religion which increasingly involves more affluent but less dangerous clients, with conditions such as eating disorders, rather than people with serious mental illnesses.

• Catherine Racine, who is completing her doctorate in Theology and Religion at Durham University, gave an exposition of the historical and philosophical understandings of wonder, and reflected on the importance of its early emergence in clinical care, and its potential to refresh both mental health providers and their vulnerable help-seekers.

• Long-time Edinburgh hospice chaplain Derek Murray reflected on Scottish heraldry, with its themes of history, family, and nation, and its resilience in a secular world, as an expression of implicit religion.

• And David Schneider from Erfurt University in Germany shared his dissertation proposal, which focuses on the possibility of religious belief systems increasingly being replaced with secular belief systems in settings such as Germany and France. He wants to use interviews with three generations of families, along with group discussions, to explore the role that secular myths play in community building, and sees the family and adolescents as starting places to examine the transmission of such ideas.

Concluding thoughts

Taken as a whole, the 36th Denton Conference served as a reminder that significant thinking and research is taking place that focuses on the idea of implicit religion. Denton continues to provide an important annual opportunity for scholars from around the world to share their thoughts and empirical work with one another.

It has been said that a sociologist is someone who goes to a football game and watches the crowd. Such a spectator at this year’s conference
might have come away with at least three thoughts concerning how future conference gatherings might be even more helpful in advancing the understanding of implicit religion.

First, some five decades ago, Peter Berger wrote that, in defining religion, we need to remember that if everything is religious then nothing is religious, resulting in lots of grey cats on a dark night. Presenters might be encouraged to be a bit more specific in making a case for why the subject of their empirical focus provides an example of implicit religion.

Second, to ensure that the concept of implicit religion knows its rightful and important place in academic thinking, there would seem to be value in Denton thinkers being more explicit in linking the concept to some of its more widely used conceptual cousins, notably “privatized religion,” “invisible religion,” and “spirituality.”

And third, it was gratifying to see a fair amount of academic and social diversity among this year’s participants—including a new, up and coming Bailey. That diversity needs to continue to be consciously encouraged, ensuring the presence and input of a good cross-section of people who are bright, stimulating, and current.

The 36th Denton Conference was valuable and enjoyable. Here’s to number 37 (9–11 May, 2014)!