

NOW you're TALKING

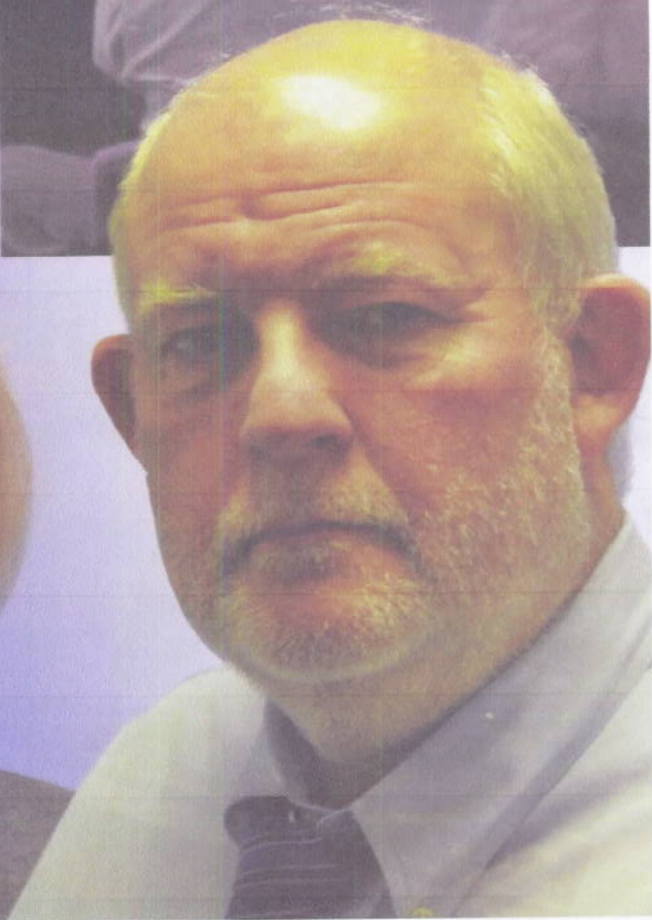
CHARLES CLARKE and **LINDA WOODHEAD** tell Philip Halcrow why they began the Westminster Faith Debates

FORMER Cabinet minister Charles Clarke and Professor Linda Woodhead hoped that people would want to talk about God. Richard Dawkins proved that their hope was not a delusion – as did other public figures such as Tony Blair, Trevor Phillips and David Blunkett, as did the academics who carried out research into education, welfare and religious freedom, as did the members of the public who filled rooms in Central London for the Westminster Faith Debates.

Sitting in the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, opposite Westminster Abbey, after a debate on sex and society, Charles says that 'there has been a tremendous response' and Linda points out that they 'are having to turn away more than 100 people for each event'.

Charles and Linda – who work in the Politics, Philosophy and Religion department at Lancaster University – began the debates as a way of informing more people about the findings of academics who took part in the Religion and Society research programme, based at Lancaster.

'The concept was simple,' explains Charles. 'We would give two researchers about ten minutes each to present their findings on a subject, and then we would get



PHILIP HALCROW



Linda and Charles oversee question time at the debate on sex and society

● For more information visit religionandsociety.org.uk

two public figures to respond with their views on religion in public space.'

The speakers then took part in a discussion before answering questions from the audience.

The debates would be based on evidence rather than polemic.

'My personal motivation in starting the debates was that, having been Education Secretary and Home Secretary, I felt that government in general was very poor at addressing issues surrounding religion – such as faith schools, RE, community cohesion and welfare provision,' says Charles.

'I thought a proper discussion about such questions was important to the public sphere in Britain.'

During a debate about welfare, Sarah Johnsen, Senior Research Fellow

at Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, said that her research into the provision of homelessness services had shown there was 'no foundation' for anxieties that faith-based organisations would use taxpayers' money to promote religion or discriminate against certain groups.

Labour MP David Blunkett said that in community work 'people's faith is something that they can draw on to keep them going when things are very rough'.

At a debate on faith in schools, Richard Dawkins said he would like to see 'a cessation of indoctrination'. Professor Jim Conroy of Glasgow University responded that such

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indoctrination did not take place.

The first series of debates with an event at which former Minister Tony Blair, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams and *Daily Telegraph* journalist Moore discussed the place of religion in public life.

'When we started the debates we didn't know if they would be successful,' says Linda. 'We thought that people weren't interested in religion anymore. But we were knocked out by the general interest and the positive response of people with public interests. People working in government said they had wanted a space for these discussions for years. They thought religion was important and they were having to deal with some of the issues that we were debating.'

'As well as the Westminster Whitehall crowd – politicians, publicists and researchers – the debates attracted people from faith organisations, the voluntary sector and education.'

The daily newspapers were alerted, as were thousands of people who watched videos of the events online.

The first time I thought the debates really caught on was at the beginning when I covered them in his radio show on LBC,' remembers Linda. 'The show started ringing in and talking haltingly about what they were saying. They were saying things like, "I don't normally talk about this." I realised there are many people who never have the chance to talk about what they believe because it is so stigmatised and trivialised. The faith debates are a chance to make it more acceptable again about religion.'

'From the start, we wanted to provide a platform for intelligent discussion of religion, because public discussion of religion is usually simplistic and has a tendency to present weird extremes. We wanted to hear the voices of most people in this country.'

Now, a second series of debates is under way, concentrating on issues of faith and personal life. At the next event, journalist Polly Toynbee, author Rosalind Edwards and Ronald Williams and Christian ethics writer Gordon Goddard will discuss the 'truth' of faith and whether it is needed in public life.

Linda sums up: 'The more people in this country are religious, the more debate takes place. It is not the case. We want to give a platform for religious views to be discussed and taken seriously.'

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