

Conference Reports

New Landscapes of Religion in the West

Set within the grand and lush surroundings of Mansfield College, Oxford University, and hosted by the Department of Geography, this conference, held between September 27–29, 2000, attracted some of Europe's key academics from such varied disciplines as human geography, social anthropology, theology, and sociology. They met to discuss the creation and assertion, by minorities, of religious spaces in the West. About thirty to thirty-five participants discussed both empirical data and theoretical debates within the contexts of multiculturalism, identity, and minority rights. Out of twenty-one papers, eight specifically dwelt on Muslim communities and spaces, nine were of a more general nature, focusing either on historical or general overviews or theoretical issues, while four concentrated on Hindu and Sikh movements in the West. Much of the work presented was derived from projects conducted as part of the ESRC's Research Program on Transnational Communities, which is directed by Steve Vertovec who is in the Faculty of Anthropology and Geography at the University of Oxford. Vertovec, who is editor of *Muslim European Youth* (1998), and Ceri Peach were joint editors of *Islam in Europe* (1997).

The conference began with a keynote address from Diana Eck of Harvard University describing The Pluralism Project of which she was director. The project had three main aims: first, to document the increasing religious diversity and changing religious landscape and demography of American cities; second, to study how religious communities are changing; and third, to assess how American society is adapting to a multireligious reality. She described how the conversion of old buildings to the development of purpose-built centers such as mosques, temples, and gurdwaras marked an architectural reality that served to acknowledge the United States as a pluralist society. Muslim communities in the U.S, she noted, numbered between five to seven million—almost as numerous as the Jewish population, and more than some Christian sects. She stressed the dynamism of community adaptations and the existence of some 'ethnic enclaving.' The

majority of Muslim centers exemplify multilingual and pan-Islamic features and direct efforts toward highlighting Muslim concerns through political lobbying and media watchdogs. Yet despite growing visibility, some minorities appear to be increasingly vulnerable to racial and religious intolerance directed at their places of worship. The legacy of racial exclusion, therefore, rests uneasily alongside emerging pluralist realities such as interfaith cooperation and dialogue.

Vertovec's talk focused on the importance of distinguishing between such terms as 'diaspora' and 'transnationalism' and added a conceptual background to the talks that followed.

Roger Ballard spoke on the politics of ethnic representation and the use of ethnic categories, especially in UK Census data. The inclusion for the first time, in the next UK Census, of a voluntary question on religious identification, though useful in itself, will not be correlated with other statistical categories in the same way that the ethnicity category was. He argued that the nature and types of statistics compiled critically affect the ways proceeding debates will be shaped. Using Eck's lecture on religious diversity in America and comparing the situation in Britain, Ballard believes that the differences in the social class of migrants determines the level and extent of pan-Islamic activity.

In the next paper, Paul Weller of the University of Derby spoke about religious organizations and communities, tensions that exist between these groups, and their relationships to the state and society. Weller is the director of the soon-to-be published study commissioned by the Home Office, into the nature and extent of religious discrimination in the U.K.—a report that Britain's Muslim communities have eagerly been a waiting. In the case of British Muslims, ideological fears around Muslim mobilizations and a perceived threat from 'Islamic fundamentalism' have affected government bodies and popular imaginations, influencing to some extent Muslim successes in their efforts at political lobbying.

The next speaker was Michael Keith from Goldsmith's College, London University, who spoke about new political landscapes of religion in East London. His work (with collaborators Kalbir Shukra and Les Back from Goldsmith's College and John Solomos from Southbank University) was conducted in the predominately Muslim Bangladeshi area of Tower Hamlets which, although one of the poorest areas in the U.K., is paradoxically an area of rapid property development. Keith talked participants through a series of pictures depicting the ways in which Muslims have

created specific spaces through various schools, mosques, and cultural centers. He argued that there are now emerging what he called “permeable boundaries between the State and society and a new political landscape between the religious communities, their mobilizations, and networks.” Using slides of ‘Islamic graffiti’ on walls across estates in Tower Hamlets, and charting some of the debates around ‘identity’ that are going on from within the Bangladeshi community, Keith was keen to stress the diversity of cultural and Islamic forms that presented themselves within this area of London. Keith ended his talk by suggesting that in this area, Islam is almost becoming a form of populist youth culture that has gained grassroots support through some of the more politically motivated religious groups such as Hizb al-Tahrir and al-Muhajirun. He reminded the audience that ‘identity’ is the product of numerous processes that are dependent upon various levels of political mobilizing and social context.

The second day began with an opening session from Kim Knott of the University of Leeds . The aim of her paper was to look at three main aspects to the study of religion, place, and identity. She identified these as religion and identity; religion, space and place; and place and identity. In discussing the ways these three aspects interacted, Knott described how individual religious identities are expressed through movements of the body through space such as religious demonstrations and marches and also how instrumental the body is as a site for religion.

In the next session, Claire Dwyer of University College London, provided another visual talk focusing on the political maneuverings of local councils in the boroughs of urban Ealing, West London, and the green village-like tranquility of Northolt in Middlesex, when faced with planning requests from Muslims to build new mosques.

Similar themes were found in the papers of Kevin Dunn (read by Richard Gale) of the University of New South Wales, Sidney, Australia, whose paper exhibited the far more extreme anti-Muslim sentiments of white Australians in response to Muslim centers of worship, and in Malory Nye’s paper on the Hare Krishna movement’s acquisition of Bhaktivedanta Manor, an English country house in a rural village, and the ensuing fifteen-year dispute over the legal status of the building. Essentially, all three papers argued that because of having to deal with hostility and resistance to efforts to claim religious spaces, religious minorities are becoming skillful lobbyists and are gaining familiarity with legal structures as they became successful and more confident in asserting both transnational and diasporic

religious identities. To build a mosque, temple, or gurdwara in nations where the faith of those who use these buildings is not not indigenous, is to make a statement about a group's sense of belonging, citizenship, and home.

Papers by Deborah Philips (University of Leeds) with Mark Brown (University of Manchester) and later by Dominic Medway (Manchester Metropolitan University) with Deborah Philips, on the residential patterns of South Asian communities in Leeds and Bradford, offered some interesting patterns. Using electoral registers and a computer program called Nam Pechan, the researchers were able to explore the processes of South Asian settlement, especially when moving into and out of "established ethnic spaces." Here, the importance of 'microgeographies' were stressed, touching upon Roger Ballard's earlier suggestions. For both areas, it was found that religion is a significant indicator in residential patterns, so that there are observable Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh areas and neighborhoods. Medway, in his paper, even went so far as to comment that his Hindu respondents were 'unaware' of the complexities behind their housing choices; in interviews, Hindu respondents talked about the importance of friendship networks in influencing their choice of neighborhoods. Medway believed, however, that caste distinctions are far more influential than his respondents realized, since his data showed neighborhoods clustered around this variable.

Later that day, John Eade (University of Surrey) and Isabelle Fremeaux (Guildhall University), described an interesting example of localized work on the use of sacred space in their paper, "Constructing National and Islamic Space: Melas, and Mosques in London's East End." Continuing the apparent East London theme and focus of some previous papers, their work described disputes between the imams of the East London Mosque and local Bangladeshi businessmen over the annual Bangladeshi New Year's festival. In talking about how a place 'creates' and 'invents' tradition, the main questions their paper raised were ones about the nature of 'progress,' authenticity, and what forms of celebration are seen to be Islamically acceptable.

Igor Kotin (Oxford University) provided an overview of religious centers in Southall, while Sewa Singh Kalsi (University of Leeds) raised questions over the changing nature of Sikh identities. Ceri Peach (University of Oxford) spoke generally about the social and cultural landscapes of South Asian religion in Britain and their aesthetic qualities and contributions to a multicultural landscape. He also drew attention to some tensions that arose

within Oxford University over the location of the Oxford Center for Islamic Studies. Despite the fact that the Center is financially self-sufficient, and that its building shows no apparent religious aspect, the Center is located on the outer boundaries of the University campus. It was a shame, however, that no representative from the center was present at the Conference to offer an insider's account of what seemed to be a political issue within the University.

James Ryan (University of Stirling) charted the historical geography of religious minorities in Britain while Richard Gale (University of Oxford) reported on some interesting work based in Leicester on religion, space and law, South Asian religious communities and planning authorities. His work showed how religious communities, such as the Jains, negotiated planning regulations as a way to move past 'victimhood.' He argued that religious minority communities are skilled social actors and agents in being able to navigate around planning regulations that act to limit their rights to practice their beliefs.

The final clutch of papers were presented by Ahmed Andrews (University of Derby), with Curt Dahlgren, on religion and identity in Swedish cemeteries, Aake Sander (Goteborg University) on new Islamic forms among the youth in Swedish suburbs, and Rohit Barot (University of Bristol) on the Swaminarayan movement in the West. Sean McLoughlin (University of Leeds) provided an illuminating overview of British Muslims and their experiences of Hajj, acknowledging the assistance of two Muslim colleagues in the collection of interview data. He noted a number of shared experiences pilgrims cited, and highlighted the changes that had taken place historically in making Muslim spaces while journeying to the Holy Lands and the impact globalization and commercialization have had on the accessibility and experiences of the Hajj.

Overall, this was a very interesting conference, particularly because of the content of the papers and the insights offered by geographical perspectives on the construction of religious spaces and places and their relationships with ethnic, racial, and religious identities. However, this was not a widely advertised conference; most attendees were themselves presenters. In many respects, it was an 'internal,' almost elitist, conference of academics linked to a specific research group.

Given the vast repository of intellectual and academic knowledge that is currently being produced in the U.K. alone by established Muslim

academics, and the emerging band of younger Muslim social researchers and theorists, I was saddened to see only three Muslims in attendance (of which I was one) and only one Muslim presenter. How sharply contrasted is this conference with the AMSS conference on Muslims of Europe in the New Millennium a few weeks before, where the majority of papers were presented by Muslim academics.

Our presence as 'invisible-visible others,' especially as we are South Asian women, gave us opportunities to reflect on both the work presented and the friendly, though curious questions we were sometimes faced with. Obviously, as 'novelty factors' in an academic conference at Oxford University we should not have been surprised when faced with questions such as, 'are you an academic?' Conferences are of course opportunities for the well-known to mingle with their contemporaries and for the not-so-well-known to network. However, we were left in little doubt that our racial and ethnic visibility, with all the potent images they suggest, were the source of some mild 'curiosity' for a tiny minority. Given that the Conference theme was on religious landscapes and multiculturalism, I was left with one over-riding question: Is it really too much to expect the ivory towers of academia to now be painted in multicultural colors?

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