Religious differentiation and diversity in discourse and practice

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Religion is undoubtedly an important facet of contemporary superdiversity, influenced by migration, transnational circulations and diasporic interconnections (Knott and McLoughlin 2010; Levitt 2009; McLoughlin 2010, 2013; Tweed 2006; Vásquez and Marquardt 2003; Vertovec 2004, 2007). However, religious diversity is not solely a function of late-modern migrations and recently articulated diasporic consciousness, but has been witnessed in many times and places as a result of the predilection of religious bodies to multiply, diversify and distinguish themselves from others, and of those regulatory regimes that have sought to divide and rule them. In the second half of the twentieth century these processes were masked by the failure of Western secular social scientists and public commentators to consider and discuss the presence of religion, its importance for identity and its potential role in public life and policy making. How this changed post-2001 and the ways in which religious communities and organizations have themselves responded to new expressions of diversity will be discussed in this chapter.

Religion, differentiation, diversity

Despite the rhetoric of unity, peace, common goals and shared values, religions and those who identify with them make distinctions. They differentiate selves, groups, creatures, things, times and places, and are distinguished or set apart by others. Arguably, where religion is present, there is diversity, or at least the potential for it. The concept of ‘cultural diversity’ is now a political commonplace, an entailment of post-multiculturalist integration policies in which groups are to be accommodated with some if not all of their cultural differences intact. But the status that ‘cultural diversity’ is afforded in contemporary discourse should not be taken to mean that religious plurality and encounter is an entirely new phenomenon. Although late-modern economic, social and political globalization and urban superdiversity are clearly different from earlier processes and social formations, the movement of ethnic and religious peoples across borders is not new, and neither is religious schism or the experience of religious difference. Whether in the Roman world, along the Silk Road or trade routes of Southeast Asia, in Mughal India, Moorish Spain, colonial Africa, 1980s Japan or contemporary Canada, religious diversification has occurred, driven by migration, mission, commercial encounters or the rise of new religions in a context of social and cultural competition. Singapore and Brazil, for example, provide a striking
contrast, with the former exhibiting the top-down management of post-colonial religious diversity (Ah Eng 2008) and the latter, whilst still predominantly Catholic, nevertheless witnessing the rapid growth and diversification of new grassroots Christian formations, some Evangelical Protestant, others Pentecostal, some associated with global Churches, others highly localized and independent (Garmany 2013). One is religiously diverse by virtue of centuries of migration; the other as a result of globalization, conversion and social change.

Evidently such cases cannot be isolated from their social and political contexts, but religious ‘agency’ – if we can call it that – should not be ruled out. Instrumentalist, materialist, sociological and psychological arguments about the formation of religious groups, the motivations and behaviours of religious individuals, and the significance, place and movement of religious things are all the more convincing if those who make them are attentive to what separates apparently ‘religious’ bodies and objects from those that are not deemed ‘religious’. Their special, if not unique, focus on transformation and soteriology (saving power) leads religious groups and individuals to distinguish themselves and their spiritual journeys from those of others. Through myth, theology, ritual, altered states and social organization, they make worlds, establish boundaries, sacralize people and things, times and spaces, and demarcate insiders from outsiders.

New religions and religious innovations are forged in a spirit of competition where success and superiority are identified, not solely by economic and other material measures and achievements, but also by degrees of spiritual power, piety, mystical experience, divine election, successful transplantation and new expressions, as well as by growing numbers and the capacity to sustain traditions across generations. What is important about this for thinking about diversity is that it is not simply a question of the co-presence of multiple religious identities in contemporary societies, it is about how groups and individuals in different times and places have sought to establish themselves, make meaning, forge new places, create chains of memory in order to distinguish themselves from others, cross boundaries, cope with change, dwell simultaneously in multiple locations and survive and thrive (Hervieu-Léger 2000; Knott 2005; Tweed 2006; Vásquez 2011).

Yet such endeavours, whilst being explained and articulated theologically by leaders and scholars, are also the stuff of religious people’s quotidian, often unselfconscious practices, thoughts, conversations and relationships (Stringer 2013). They may be interwoven and supported by other expressions of diversity, based on nationality, ethnicity, language, gender or sexuality. Differences of a religious nature may come to the fore and be experienced as such whenever and wherever religion arises as a subject of conversation, concern, debate or public interest – in the workplace, at school, in the law court or in a local park or bar, and in relation to issues such as discrimination, marriage, security, education, ethics or human rights. Religious groups themselves have a variety of ways of dealing with religious and other forms of social and cultural diversity and their entailments. A group’s theological position on an issue may be publicly stated with reference to scripture, fundamental beliefs and sacred values. Its differences from others may be highlighted, as well as its willingness – or not – to engage with them, for example, in interfaith dialogue or multi-faith spaces or events.

Colonialism, contemporary nation states and religious diversity

As Fitzgerald (2007) noted, European discourse about ‘religion’ and ‘religions’ developed from embryonic beginnings in the seventeenth century, alongside and in tension with other concepts, thus being distinguished from the non-religious domains of ‘politics’, ‘economy’ and ‘society’ (ibid.: 6ff.). A counter space – everything that was not ‘religious’ – emerged and was labelled ‘secular’ (derived from the Christian idea of the worldly or temporal). The ‘crucial logic’ of this
Religious differentiation and diversity

development was the ‘separation into two essentially different domains. It is this that makes the plural objectification of “religions” possible’ (ibid.: 6). This European logic was exported globally via colonial routes and regimes, and was drawn on to distinguish other, ‘traditional’ and ‘religious’, societies from Western ‘secular’ ones (Chidester 1996; van der Veer 2001), as well as to identify separate ‘religions’ and set them apart from one another. Drawing on the Christian model, they were represented as having the same properties and dimensions, thus further essentializing ‘religion’ as a distinctive sphere (Fitzgerald 2000).

With such conceptual tools to hand, colonial rulers, administrators, scholars and travellers characterized and managed religion, religious identities and the requirements of different religious groups in parts of the world which never knew they needed such a concept and had no prior reason to separate out religion from other aspects of social life or from a ‘secular’ arena of politics and governance. In different countries within the British Empire, for example, the regulation of religious diversity was shaped not only by the colonial regime in tandem with local political structures, but also by population movements and power relations between existing and new groups. The subject of research from 2006–10 on the religious lives of migrant minorities in urban Malaysia, South Africa and the United Kingdom, these imperially connected sites were seen to provide rather different contexts of diversity, the negotiation of religious identities and religious place-making. The imperial regulation of differences was incorporated at home into the UK’s secular recognition of individual religious freedom and its strained claims to tolerance of religious identities and formations, whereas, in South Africa and Malaysia, different pre-colonial and post-colonial histories and cultural traditions resulted in the adoption of somewhat more restrictive policies toward public ethnic and religious identification and mobilization (Vásquez and Dewind 2014).

In recent decades researchers have examined the place of religions and religious diversity in multiple contexts, with reference to policies of assimilation, multiculturalism and integration, the recognition and management of difference, the particular case of Islam and Muslim migrations, and comparisons between different regimes and between diverse political and academic discourses of state/religion relations and modes of accommodation. Canadian and Indian scholars, for example, have analysed and compared the state management of religious diversity in their countries, and considered how religious communities and individuals negotiate such diversity in the context of wider civil society, public policy, legislation and education. Recognising that India and Canada have exhibited varied approaches to colonialism, majority–minority relations, secularism, world religions and globalization, scholars have acknowledged the difficulties experienced as states accommodate religious identity and diversity within national frameworks whilst seeking to be fair to all and to minimize conflict (Living with Religious Diversity 2013).

Comparisons such as these depend upon the prior accumulation of knowledge about religious diversity in different national contexts. This process was hampered in some Western countries by assumptions about the progress of secularization and the decreasing relevance of religion for the secular state and public life. In the late 1970s and 1980s, when I first began to research religion, ethnicity and migration in the UK, the dominant discourse on social diversity in both policy and academic circles focused on race and ethnicity, with culture in general and religion in particular ignored. Religion was not covered by the Race Relations Act of 1976, which focused on racial discrimination, or the Commission for Racial Equality, formed soon after, which aimed to encourage integration and improve relations between people of different ethnic backgrounds. (It was not until the Equality Act 2010 that ‘religion or belief’ was fully incorporated into the list of protected characteristics within the UK’s legal framework.) Social scientists who studied immigration, minorities and policy provision rarely mentioned religion, though anthropologists and scholars of religion recognized its significance in ethnographic studies of new migrant
communities. Above all, it was *The Satanic Verses* controversy of the late 1980s – during which liberal secularist intellectuals found their position challenged by British Muslims – which saw religious identity and Islamophobia move up the public agenda (Modood 1988, 1990).

With religion re-emerging as a social force across Europe post–2001 as a result of global events and migration, it could no longer be ignored by policy makers. In the UK, public statements and policy initiatives acknowledged the role of ‘faiths’ and ‘faith communities’ and the importance of ‘multi-faith’ and ‘interfaith’ ventures and initiatives in urban regeneration, community cohesion and the prevention of terrorism (Smith 2004; Weller 2004). Across Europe, religious communities were increasingly seen to have the potential for facilitating integration, though measures to include them or draw on their resources differed from country to country (International Organization for Migration 2011).

**Religions, representation and management of diversity**

The marginalization of religion and its apparent re-emergence in scholarly and policy discourse has not been confined to Europe and its so-called ‘Eurosecularity’ (Berger *et al.* 2008). Despite major post-war studies of urban religious diversity in the United States (Herberg 1955; Glazer and Moynihan 1963), it slipped from view as attention turned to race in the 1970s. As a result, contributors to *New York Glory* (Carnes and Karpathakis 2001) saw their task as putting religion back on the public agenda. They celebrated ‘one of the most diverse concentrations of religions that the world has ever seen’ (Carnes 2001: 3), the result of late-twentieth-century migrations that, according to Carnes, brought ‘the soul back’. The statistics he listed gave a sense of how religious diversity was constituted in this one global city:

- New York City has more Roman Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, Rastafarians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and religious Jews than any other city in the United States.
- More than one-half of Asian immigrants are churchgoers; 70 per cent of all immigrants to New York are Christians . . . and the fastest-growing institution in Hispanic neighbourhoods is the church.
- About one out of five school children is in a religious school . . .
- In the last ten years, Korean churches alone have founded more than a dozen local colleges and seminaries. The number of Seventh Day Adventists has grown 900 per cent . . . and the number of Mormons, 300 per cent in the 1990s.
- Eighty-two per cent of New Yorkers say that religion is very or fairly important to their lives; 90 per cent identify with a religious group and believe in God; and [46] per cent attend religious services once per month or more . . .

(*Carnes 2001: 3f*).

As these figures suggest, religious diversity in New York was not merely the sum of diverse groups for whom religion was a superficial badge of identity, but was constituted of dynamic institutions whose active participants and students could testify to the importance of religion in their lives. These issues of membership, congregation, conversion, belief, practice and religious socialization are key features around which the growth of American religious diversity is organized. Scholarly and public discourse about what it means to be religious in the United States represents and reproduces religion in terms of a dynamic congregationalism that incorporates new migrants and helps them to cope, that drives growth and attracts converts (Becker 1999; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000).
Whilst this congregational model of religious diversity has informed some European scholarship, it is ‘community’ that has been the key trope (Knott 2004). As Baumann (1996) discovered in research on Southall in West London, much public and academic discourse on the settlement and organization of migrant minorities drew on the language of ‘community’ and ‘culture’, thereby contributing to the representation of ‘communities of culture’ and to the reification of culture and cultural boundaries. In his analysis of the discourses of identity drawn on by Southall’s ethnically and religiously diverse population Baumann sought to identify the demotic as well as the dominant narratives in operation as people conversed within their own groups and engaged with others. These discourses of diversity showed Southallians’ ability to make appropriate judgements about ‘when to use what discourse in which situation’ (Baumann 1996: 204) in a fluid process whereby they were able to resort to the dominant discourse of ‘community’ and ‘culture’ when necessary and useful, but to ‘switch it off’ (ibid.: 195) at others and draw on demotic discourses shaped and differentiated within their immediate social groups. He summarized the latter as follows: ‘Sikhs and the creation of caste communities[;] Hindus and the culture of encompassment[;] Muslims and the multi-cultural community of Islam[;] Afro-Caribbeans and four approaches to “finding” culture[;] Whites and three strategies in the absence of community’ (ibid.: 109).

In Baumann’s study, although ethnic and religious diversity was clearly apparent as a social fact, neither ‘ethnicity’ nor ‘religion’ was the principal discursive trope or unit of analysis. ‘Community’ and ‘culture’ were preferred, but shown as malleable, fluid and, at times, interchangeable. His work highlighted the process by which certain concepts came to dominate public discourse and shape how individuals and groups were perceived and represented in the public imagination. If we return to the idea that ‘religion’ was erased from accounts of secular polity and society for several decades from the 1970s, but re-entered public discourse after 2001 – thus reversing its erasure – then we must question what such processes of invisibility and visibility tell us about attitudes to ‘religion’ and ‘religious diversity’ and their incorporation and management. Equally, as Baumann’s focus on demotic discourse suggests, it is instructive to see how these concepts are drawn on and constituted in locally diverse but quotidian contexts.

Stringer’s (2013) analysis of everyday talk about religious diversity in the English city of Birmingham revealed how ordinary people go about socially managing such diversity. Their informal discourse was very different from the formal interreligious dialogue of theologians and organized interfaith groups. It was highly contextual, sometimes used to avoid talking about race and ethnicity, sometimes to juxtapose religion and non-religion, to suggest that all religions are the same, or to express indifference (as distinct from negativity) to religion and religious diversity. In his discussion of the discourses that emerged following the deaths of three young Muslim men in August 2011, who were killed by rioters who drove into them as they sought to defend their local area, he noted that the potential to narrate the story with reference to race and ethnicity – drawing on a local history of tension between Asians and Afro-Caribbeans – was subverted. The tone was set by the father of one of the victims who offered an alternative discourse of ‘interreligious commonality’. The power of demotic discourse to resist the narration of ethnic or religious differences that might lead to further violence in favour of a story of living together in diversity enabled local people to manage a potentially divisive situation.

Stringer concludes, however, that, despite this outcome, there are no simple discursive solutions to the day to day management of diversity. It is not simply a matter of ignoring or downplaying differences. Stressing positive discourses of commonality will not simply erase underlying negative, separatist discourses which have the potential to re-emerge surreptitiously or violently as circumstances change. What a case like this shows, though, is that, within contexts of diversity, there are choices to be made about how people talk about or ignore religious as well
as racial and ethnic differences and commonalities that can have consequences for how people live together, and how their neighbourhoods are perceived by residents and outsiders. When and how they draw on or downplay ‘religion’ in the management of local diversity depends on the circumstances, their own identities and what is at stake (see also Baumann 1999).

Stringer’s focus on the demotic and local is counter-balanced by an analysis for the same period of dominant discourses in the British national media (Knott et al. 2013) that revealed representations of religious diversity deployed variously in order to express fears about the loss of a previous national identity and heritage, the marginalization of Christianity and the Islamification of ‘Britain’. However, ‘Britain’ was constructed in equal measure as an ethnically and religious diverse society, upheld by a secular state, with a cherished multi-faith character to be defended if attacked by outsiders. The reporting of religion revealed the tensions arising from increasing social diversity and the application of a liberal equality agenda, and was focused significantly around cases of religion and sexuality (such as clergy sexual abuse and same-sex marriage), religious dress, faith schools and the challenge of freedom of speech.

Although all people – religious and non-religious – are agents in the everyday narration and practice of diversity, they may also be involved in local and national responses to its management by government and other public bodies. Such responses include, for example, the formation of interfaith organizations charged with representing the claims and interests of religious people to government and the media and ready to respond with one voice on matters of public concern or at times of crisis. The provision by faith-based organizations of local services (e.g. advice for new migrants or help for the homeless) or multi-faith initiatives to provide rooms for worship or meditation in public places are further examples. The supply of opportunities, spaces, services and support by religious groups is a common feature of neo-liberal societies in which, to a greater or lesser extent, the state may be withdrawing from aspects of social provision.

In many cases, religious bodies have an interest in providing for their own members; in others, however, an ethic of care or welcoming the stranger may lead them to offer services for others. They may draw on ‘bridging capital’ as well as ‘bonding capital’ (Putnam 2000). In some cases, citizens eschew the conventional labels or organizing principles of religious or ethnic identity for broader coalitions in which those motivated by similar interests, irrespective of their differences, work together. For example, new initiatives grew out of the Christian ecumenical sanctuary movement which developed in Central America in the 1980s in response to the rise of those fleeing persecution and seeking asylum. New sanctuary movements, like the one in Philadelphia, are interfaith consortia of immigrant congregations and other groups established to give voice to injustices and enact policies that reflect values of hospitality, justice and dignity; the City of Sanctuary initiative in the UK is a network of both non-religious and religious people motivated to build a culture of hospitality and safe towns and cities for refugees. As diverse non-religious people increasingly articulate their beliefs, values and identities, and – in some cases – get together in like-minded groups or networks, so rainbow coalitions like the sanctuary movement shift and change.

References


Religious differentiation and diversity


