7. The role of Religious Studies
in understanding the ethnic experience

Kim Knott, 1992

A series of research papers produced in conjunction with the Community Religions Project in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds.

The papers in this series are working documents only, some having been given at seminars and conferences, and some having been published. They may be cited freely, but quotations from them may be published only with the written permission of the Head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, The University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT.
Community Religions Project Monographs

Out of print.


The Evolution of a Sikh Community in Britain: Religious and Social Change Among the Sikhs of Leeds and Bradford.

Cheques should be made payable to the 'University of Leeds' and sent to the Community Religions Project, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9iT (Tel. 0532-333644).
'The role of Religious Studies in understanding the ethnic experience' was a paper originally given at a conference in September 1989 in Warsaw, Poland entitled 'Studies of religion in the context of the social sciences: methodological and theoretical relations' and sponsored by the Polish Society for the Study of Religion, the Institute for Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and the International Association for the History of Religions.


The content of the paper has not been changed for publication here, but a Postscript appears at the end.

Kim Knott, August 1992

The Community Religions Project (CRP)
Department of Theology and Religious Studies
The University of Leeds

Co-ordinator: Dr Kim Knott
Editor: Dr Elizabeth Sirriyeh
Secretary: Mrs Jill Killington
THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN UNDERSTANDING
THE ETHNIC EXPERIENCE

It is my intention to discuss several theoretical and methodological issues in the course of this paper. Initially, however, I wish to describe the religio-ethnic characteristics of Leeds and Bradford, two cities in the north of England. I do this not because what I wish to say later is informed by these data in particular but because they stimulated my own research interest as a young student and currently provide the geographical and social context for the religions on which I work. In addition, these cities are not untypical of many Western cities (in Europe, the USA, Canada and Australasia) and, as such, they provide data for comparative reflection and analysis.

Leeds and Bradford
Leeds and Bradford are two cities which grew up during the 19th century industrial revolution on the strength of the production of woollen cloth and garments. They are only some ten miles apart and are surrounded by smaller towns. In the 19th century, Leeds in particular was a centre of settlement for Irish Catholics and, later, Eastern European Jews. After the second world war both cities saw the arrival of European voluntary workers (particularly Greeks, Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Latvians) and New Commonwealth migrants from
the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent. Chinese and more recently Vietnamese families have also arrived, as have students from many Arab and other Asian countries.

Leeds has a population of around 712,000. Religio-ethnic groups form only a very small proportion of this. For 1986 we have the following figures: Jews, 14,000; Muslims, 12,000; Sikhs, 6,000; Hindus, 4,000. In addition, there are 12,000 Afro-Caribbeans, 2,500 Chinese and 450 Vietnamese, not all of whom identify with particular religious categories. The other European groups, for whom the figures are unreliable, belong to various ethnic churches, e.g. Greek Orthodox, Polish Catholic, German Evangelical.

Though the minority populations of Leeds are small, they are extremely diverse. On one road in Leeds (a major arterial road which runs north out of the city) in a three mile stretch there are an amazing array of places of worship: two Anglican churches, two Catholic, one of which is Polish Catholic, two Methodist, one Afro-Caribbean black-led church, two synagogues, three Sikh gurdwaras, and one Hindu temple. In addition, there are religious and cultural centres for Serbian and other Eastern European groups and for the Vietnamese, most of whom are Buddhist.
Within about 500 metres of the road, there are also several mosques, a Baptist church, a Greek Orthodox church, and further synagogues and gurdwaras.

Bradford, a smaller city of 500,000, is not dissimilar in its ethnic and religious composition. In addition to considerable numbers of members of a wide variety of faiths, its major non-Christian religious community, unlike Leeds, is Muslim. There are approximately 40,000 Muslims residing in Bradford, 8.5% of the population, and they are served by over 40 mosques representing different ethnic and sectarian groups. Most of the Muslims are Pakistani (from different regions), though there are a few thousand from India and Bangladesh.

Recently, Bradford has been the scene of demonstrations against the author Salman Rushdie, his novel, *The Satanic Verses*, and its publishers. This has revealed, in no uncertain terms, the potential significance of religious issues for a minority community. Not unrelated to this has been the question of the place of the discipline of Religious Studies in the public domain, in debates about the relationship between religion and issues in contemporary society. Scholars of religion have been expected not only to contribute to the body of knowledge about Islam in Britain, in this case, but also to have frameworks and models which can help to explain what has occurred. In many cases, they have not been ready to do so, at least in part
because they are only just beginning to take seriously both the relationship between religion and its social context and the reproduction of historical religions in new locations and in new forms.

I hope this gives a flavour, albeit inadequate, of the religio-ethnic nature of the area in which I live and work. Though I do not expect to refer to it again in detail, it does provide the context for many of my thoughts on the subject of the rest of this paper.

**Studies of ethnicity and religion in Britain**

Most studies of ethnic minorities in Britain have been undertaken by sociologists whose primary interests are either race and racism or social disadvantage. Many of these have mentioned religion in their work but have not given it serious consideration, focussing most frequently on policy issues such as education, policing, housing, social services etc. In fact, until recently, they have given little attention - beyond very brief descriptions - to any features of ethnic tradition (language, religion, food and dress, social organisation etc). The task of cultural analysis has been left largely to those in other disciplines. Anthropologists, however, who have shown a much greater interest in describing religious practices and affiliations, have produced many useful studies. Despite this, and with a few notable exceptions, they have failed to provide
plausible accounts of the role and significance of religions in the lives of the groups they have described (see references to works mentioned in Knott 1988a, 1991).

What about those involved directly in studying religion? How far have they engaged in discussing issues relating to ethnic and religious minorities? Surprisingly, those situated in departments of sociology, formally referred to as 'sociologists of religion' have shown no interest in this subject, or for that matter, in non-Christian religions in any context. Some theologians and philosophers of religion have taken seriously religious and cultural pluralism and have begun to reflect on issues concerning dialogue and encounter, and the theology of race relations. Religious educationalists, particularly those involved in curriculum development for schools, have also taken an interest in this area. However, it is in the discipline of Religious Studies or Religionswissenschaft, the non-confessional, multidisciplinary approach to religions, that most studies have been conducted.

There are several institutions in Britain where research is now undertaken on the religions of ethnic minorities (Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations and a similar centre for Judaism, both at Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham, projects in the Department of Arts Education and the Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations at the University of Warwick, and
local studies in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Newcastle). The most long-standing and extensive work, however, has been done at the University of Leeds.

The **Community Religions Project** (CRP) in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds has been running since 1976. In the broadest sense, it operates as a centre for the study of contemporary religions in Britain. However, most studies are conducted locally and the majority have focussed on the religions of ethnic minorities. The project engages in the following work.

(a) It aims to provide more in-depth information on particular religions by encouraging empirical research. Studies have been conducted on Hindu groups in Leeds and Bradford, caste and sect among Leeds' Sikhs, Bangladeshi Muslims in Bradford, Polish Catholics in W London, and the Greek Orthodox community in Leeds amongst others. A number are currently in progress, eg. studies of Pakistani Muslims in the local area, several projects on the religious and cultural experiences of young Rastafarians, young Asian women and elderly Christian women, and research on religious nurture amongst different communities.

(b) It aims to investigate the different stages in the reproduction of the religions of ethnic minorities in
Britain and to raise questions concerning their future development.

(c) It aims to contribute to academic debates about the relationship between religion and ethnicity.

(d) It provides a resource base of published and unpublished materials and ephemera for the study of contemporary religions in Britain, particularly the religions of ethnic minorities.

(e) It maintains a bibliography of relevant books and articles, published and unpublished.

(f) It produces a series of research papers and a further series of monographs.

(g) It introduces this area of study into courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level within the university and into in-service programmes outside it, for teachers, clergy, health workers etc.

(h) It aims to work in conjunction with other academic disciplines to share information and develop valuable research initiatives on the history, identity and organisation of minorities.
In addition to its own work, the Community Religions Project has been instrumental in stimulating comparable research, has been used on a consultancy basis, and has worked in collaboration with other research groups.

**The task of studying the religions of ethnic minorities**

It is not my intention to advertise the Community Religions Project but rather to present it as a model for employment by other scholars in different but comparable situations. Just as anthropologists have in recent years channelled some of their attention into studies of their own societies, so Religious Studies scholars should look around them for potential sources of study rather than so frequently directing their efforts backwards in time and across oceans and deserts. Many of the religions which have been studied so effectively according to this latter approach are now present in towns and cities near at hand. This is true for scholars in many countries worldwide.

The orientation of my own work and that of others involved in the Community Religions Project does not differ from that of many other scholars in the study of religion who adopt a 'scientific' approach, though, of necessity, we focus on contemporary religious expressions and use social scientific methods rather than engaging primarily in historical analyses. It is our intention,
I. to describe, categorise and analyse religions transplanted by migrants and refugees;

2. to compare these where appropriate, (i) with religions in homeland, and (ii) with other religious groups in similar situations (e.g. comparing different religions in the same migrant context or the same religion in different migrant contexts);

3. to contribute to the generally available accounts of ethnic communities and their social, religious, cultural, political and economic conditions and experience (accounts which might then be used by others for the making of policy);

4. to contribute to the theoretical debate about 'ethnicity', particularly to uncover and explain the place of religion in relation to it;

5. to contribute to general theoretical and methodological discussions about the nature and role of religion and religions in the human experience, eg. religion and personal identity, religion and change.

These constitute the general, methodological aims and the responsibilities, both social and intellectual, of the task as I see it. To fulfil these it is necessary that religion is seen both as historical process and in interaction with other areas of human concern, eg. politics, social and economic issues, education, family life etc. To use two oft-used terms
recognised by scholars of religion of both East and West, care must be taken to observe religion diachronically and synchronically. In considering the religions of ethnic minorities - of migrants, refugees and settlers - both are important. All religions change with time but migration, which not only provides the stimulus of an entirely new context but also a deeply traumatic experience, is of special interest. Increased traditionalism, new sects, unlikely religious unions, conversion and mission, amongst other things, are all potential features of the post-migration experience. For as wide a range of groups as possible, it is necessary to observe and chart these changes both for posterity and in order to understand the religious experience of future migrant groups. Simultaneously, it is essential to see the operation of religion alongside that of other areas of society and culture, and to see any particular religious group in its social and cultural location and in relationship to other groups.

This demands a multi-disciplinary approach involving the use of historical, sociological and anthropological tools in particular.

In addition, there are various issues in the study of religio-ethnic groups which might be particularly conducive to the employment of one set of tools above another. For example, though all general studies of such groups require some
sociological analysis, more specific studies might be conducted on such subjects as secularisation or the typologization of religious organisations, both of which are frequently discussed with reference to contemporary Christianity (Rex, 1988).

Similarly, historians of religions would find ample data for comparative studies of religious authority, sectarianism or religious practice. They might study the 'before' and 'after' of religious transplantation. Oral history too could provide fascinating data for studies of the religion of migrants.

In addition to these, geography of religion, psychology of religion, social and cultural anthropology with a focus on religion, studies of religious iconography and textual studies can all contribute to this field of investigation.

**Some theoretical issues concerning the study of the religions of ethnic minorities**

The discipline of Religious Studies in Britain or elsewhere has not so far developed a coherent perspective on ethnicity, ethnic identity, the ethnic experience and their relationship to religions and religious change. Gradually, this situation is altering.

It is perhaps because this is a comparatively newly-delineated area of interest (though migration itself is hardly new) that
Religious Studies has seemed to accept, often without question, conclusions derived within other fields of study, particularly those specialising in social and cultural organisation.

Other explanations for this might be, first, that many scholars of religion lack confidence when writing or speaking about sociological issues and hold back from questioning the claims of social studies scholars, and secondly, that many of us engage in developing thorough phenomenological descriptions, sometimes without feeling the need to move on to the broader issues of explanation these may present. In the case of the study of the religions of ethnic minorities, such modesty and self-restraint could lead to an acceptance, certainly in Britain and the US, of the predominant view which sees religion as the passive instrument of ethnic identity. This view is espoused particularly by scholars of sociology and social anthropology with an avowedly functionalist orientation whose main focus is not religion as such but ethnicity and those elements which contribute to its character.¹ For them, the important question is 'to what extent and in what way is religion in the service of ethnicity?'. Some of the studies produced from this perspective are illuminating and convincing. Others are inadequate because there are times when religion plays a more active role in the definition of an ethnic group's identity and behaviour than many of these accounts suggest.

¹
Indeed, of those whose work in any way looks at religion and ethnicity in interaction, very few have really challenged this passive view of religion as the instrument of ethnicity. The result of this is that there have been relatively few accounts of migration and settlement in which religion has been described as having any significance for individuals and communities beyond its role in assisting them to organise, to reap material benefit or to enter dialogue or competition with the wider society. Needless to say, religions do perform these functions in many situations. However, they also have their own dynamics which, though related to and informed by their social, political and economic contexts, are explained from within rather than from without (with recourse to their historical development, texts, value systems, ritual practices, socio-religious organisation etc).

For example, the recent 'Satanic Verses' controversy cannot be seen solely as an expression of Muslim community's disadvantage and frustration. The position of Muhammad as the final prophet to be revered by all Muslims irrespective of their sectarian persuasion is central to the demands of the demonstrators for the book to be banned and the author to be punished or killed. That these demands are rooted in questions of power and authority is not in question, but the demands themselves have their roots in a religious tradition as well as a contemporary socio-political crisis. The controversy cannot be explained
without an account of both and a consideration of how the two arenas affect one another.

To accept the sociologists' explanation and not that of the religious community itself is unhelpful and inadequate. It is the Religious Studies' scholar, however, who should have the training and knowledge to present with objectivity and historical awareness the community's 'religious' explanation (its members will, of course, have their own confessional account) alongside the sociologist's 'social' explanation.² Neither is adequate on its own; both must be sensitive to the other's contribution and, ideally, should incorporate that in the other's account which represents scholarly progress or further enables it to occur.

It is useful, in order to understand more fully the role of Religious Studies in this, to examine briefly several accounts which explore the relationship between religion and ethnicity from a social functionalist perspective.

In an early work, Abner Cohen laid out this position in his account of Hausa migrants in Yoruba towns who joined Sufi orders in a process of 'retribalization' and in an attempt to assert their corporate identity among the Yoruba (1969). More recent work has also taken this stance. The clearest example is given in the work of Rutledge (1985) who has a chapter
entitled 'Strategies for ethnicity in religion' in his book on the Vietnamese in Oklahoma. After examining Buddhism and Catholicism among the migrant Vietnamese, he states that 'ethnicity employs, but is different from, religion.... Ethnicity in the case of the Oklahoma Vietnamese encompasses the totality of life of the ethnic membership. Religion embraces a sizable segment of the group's behavioural system, but it does not encompass the whole' (pp.73-4). He is interested in the way in which religion serves as a 'strategy for adaptation' (p.74) and he lists several of the manifestations of this such as 'religion as a strategy for revitalisation', 'religion as a strategy to obtain material needs', 'religion as a strategy for intra-ethnic identity' and 'religion as a strategy for tolerance in the host community'.

These are persuasive points and it is certainly possible to think of examples of religion being utilised in these various ways. Quite clearly, however, religion is seen here as the passive instrument, and, although Rutledge mentions that religion may sometimes have a prior claim on people's actions, he provides no illustrations of this and does not discuss it.

In addition to reserving judgement on Rutledge's analysis of religion as strategy, I would like to question his use of the term 'ethnicity'. Ethnicity is a certain form or condition of identity, that experienced by migrants or settlers with a
continuing awareness of 'difference'. Religion, like gender and sexual orientation, occupation, age and language, is an aspect of identity, with continuity. As Rutledge says (pp.73-4), religion and ethnicity do not have the same relationship to identity. As such, ethnicity, when it is experienced, may include religious behaviour, occupational activity, social custom etc. What is more, these features will almost certainly be different in a migrant context to what they were in the land of origin. This is not the same as saying that they suddenly come into the service of ethnicity following migration. They will still be in evidence, albeit in an altered form, and they will continue to have the potential for being instrumental in social change (as they no doubt also had back home). In this sense, religion is like other aspects of social and cultural identity but, like them, it has its own dynamics and its own rationale. Ethnicity, however, is a certain form or condition of identity in which the contributive aspects of identity experience a shift. Therefore, it would be my inclination to demythologise the concept of ethnicity or 'ethnic identity' which in my view comes into being only in particular situations, those in which the boundaries of the 'ethnic' group are experienced (Barth, Wallman).

In two other studies undertaken recently the authors have been somewhat more restrained in their assessment of the relationship between religion and ethnicity. Wilpert (1987), in an article
on Alevi and Sunni Turkish Muslims in Berlin, concludes that a variety of relationships between religious identity and ethnicity are possible. Nagata (1988), while recognising that religion has a function for ethnic groups, suggests that religion does this actively: 'the religious congregation simultaneously reinforces the ethnic commitment and probably helps to reduce some of the stress and problems of immigration' (p.130).

In this last quotation we are getting closer to the relationship asserted by Hans Mol in an article from 1979 in which religion is seen as the 'sacralizer' of identity, in this case, the identity experienced by migrants. Religion enables change to be harnessed and groups to cope with the new and difficult situations imposed by the migration process. As Mol states in this article, he too had originally operated with what he later sees as an oversimplified view of religion, in which religious organisation and function were equated. In his later work he develops a more imaginative and flexible view of the role of religion in providing a stable tradition and system of meaning, useful for migrants in a disordered environment.

As Mol himself recognises, he is one of the few sociologists - of religion or otherwise - interested in these issues. He is certainly the first scholar to make a systematic attempt to
examine and understand the relationship between religion, identity and migrant experience.

Like Rutledge and others, Mol adopts a functionalist view of this relationship. However, he does not reduce religion to a passive role in the formation of ethnic identity but rather sees it actively providing meaning and order in times of change. Mol discusses such things as transmission, tradition and ritual as they play a part in this. Mol's contribution lies in his elucidation of the function of religion as 'sacralizer' in social change (further explored in Lewins 1978, Knott 1986, Marzec 1988) rather than in an analysis of religious change. He is generally more interested in what religious conditions imply for individual and group identity under pressure than for religions themselves or the religious sentiments and experiences of their adherents.

Both are important. The business of assessing the functions of religion should not be left solely to sociologists, social psychologists or social anthropologists but should be undertaken also by scholars who have investigated the beliefs and practices of religious people and their historical development. Such scholars have the advantage of knowing, through a comparative exercise, what religious features are novel or lost, redefined or relegated, in short, how the content of the religion is changing. The task then is to
investigate why these changes occur (perhaps to serve the interests of the group or as a reflection of their conditions, perhaps in response to religious changes elsewhere or as a result of the internal dynamics of the religious tradition itself).

Therefore, in the investigation of the relationship between religion and ethnicity, a more focussed examination of the 'content' of the religions of ethnic groups is required. This is important not just for its own sake, but because these religions - as communities of believers - are dynamic, active and influential. Unfortunately, they are not always the stable sources of tradition and meaning that they are often held to be, particularly by some sociologists who, in their investigations of social change, assume the religious variable to be static. It is true that religious believers and participants frequently treat religious tradition and meanings as if they were fixed, and that these same traditions and meanings are at times slow to change. But, as any scholar of religion knows, theological interpretation, socio-religious organisation, values and experiences, as well as conservative ritual and liturgy, constantly change as they pass into new hands, minds and hearts. Religious Studies scholars have the opportunity to witness this, to document it, to compare new and old forms, to seek explanations, even to contemplate future
trends. It is my hope that increasing attention will be given to these tasks.

Much of the research that I hope will be done will focus on specific communities and the reproduction of their religions. It is also to be hoped that these studies will pose general questions and provide useful models that can be widely discussed and tested. It has been my aim in several recent articles to generate such ideas (Knott, 1986, 1988a, 1991), and as a conclusion to this paper, I would like to finish by raising a number of general questions which pertain to the issues I have explored here.

(a) What effect does the ethnic experience have on religion?

(b) What strategies do religious groups in ethnic communities pursue in order to survive and grow?

(c) Are there any discernible stages in the process of religious change following migration and the transplantation of religion?

(d) How do religious groups cope with change, not just after their transplantation but decades hence when second and third generations of settlers constitute their membership?
What issues are of particular symbolic or functional significance in the reproduction of these religions in their new location, e.g. the use of vernacular and sacred languages, the role of religious leaders, inter-faith dialogue, the use of places of worship, mission and sectarianism.

There may well be no general answers to such questions but it is only by reflecting on how they may be answered in a number of specific situations and for a range of groups that we can make progress in understanding the relationship between religion and ethnicity and the process of religious change.

NOTES

1. For a definition and further discussion of ethnicity, see the examination of Rutledge's ideas below.

2. Religious Studies scholars may or may not be members of the religion they are studying but their scholarly tradition requires that they 'bracket' their own beliefs and attitudes.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

ABRAMSON, H, 1979, 'Migrants and cultural diversity: on ethnicity and religion in society', Social Compass, 26:1, 5-29.


Postscript

Although this paper was given in 1989 and published in 1990, I have continued to receive requests for copies as the Polish publication is difficult to obtain. As a result, it was decided to reprint it as a Community Religions Project research paper, though this has taken some time as a result of my temporary absence from CRP affairs during a period of maternity leave.

Since the paper was written, there have been inevitable changes both in the academic study of minority religions in Britain and in the religions themselves. The numbers of adherents of different religions in Leeds, for example, has changed. The work of the Community Religions Project itself has moved on, with some projects being completed and other initiated. Most importantly, the public awareness of the importance of religion to Asian communities in Britain has increased and, with it, the desire to give it greater academic recognition. This has been brought about as a result of the controversy concerning The Satanic Verses by Salman Rushdie and, while it is true that much of the attention has been directed at Islam in Britain, other minority religions are also beginning to benefit from more study.

In the paper, I mention the unwillingness of sociologists to consider the role of religion in British life. This situation is gradually changing. Sociologists of religion are engaging
seriously with others in theoretical debates about postindustrial and post-modern society, and sociologists of race and ethnic relations are beginning to accept the need to understand the dynamics of religious belief, practice and organisation. Religion is frequently of importance to the members of Britain's ethnic minorities and demands serious multi-disciplinary study if - as the editor of a recent issue of *New Community* (17:3, 1991, pp.307-11) suggests - their voices are to be taken seriously.

This change of attitude to the role of religion is occuring slowly, but publishers' lists and conference programmes in the social sciences have begun, in recent years, to include more studies of the religions of Britain's ethnic minorities and a greater consideration of the relationship between ethnic and religious identity. This is good for scholars of religion with an interest in this field and essential for those in minority communities for whom religion is an inextricable aspect of their personal and social lives.

Dr Kim Knott

August 1992
Community Religions Project Research Papers (New Series)

1. ‘Community Religions’ at the University of Leeds.
   Kim Knott, 1984 (£1).

2. A Report on Hinduism in Britain;
   Ursula King, 1984 (£1).

   Religion and Identity and the Study of Ethnic Minority Religions.
   Kim Knott, 1986 (£1).

   Vanessa Howard, 1987 (£2).

5. The Role of the Polish Catholic Church in the Polish Community
   of the U.K: A Study in Ethnic Identity and Religion. Joanna
   Marzec, 1988 (£2.50).

6. The Greek Orthodox Community in Leeds.
   Katherine Kotsoni, 1990 (£2.50).


   Judith Law, 1991 (£2.50).

9. The Religious Beliefs and Practices of the


11. The changing character of the religions of the ethnic minorities of
    Asian origin in Britain: Final report of a Leverhulme Project. Kim
    Knott, 1992 (£2.50).