

What the Community Religion Project can tell us about the study of religious diversity in the UK

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Abstract:

The Community Religions Project at the University of Leeds (<http://arts.leeds.ac.uk/crp/>) has been in existence for over 35 years and provides a unique model for observing development in the way religious diversity and pluralism have been conceptualised and studied in the UK. Many leading scholars of religion in the UK have produced monographs, research papers, or other work in conjunction with the CRP. The increasing engagement with concepts and challenges of religious diversity and pluralism are visible in the greater emphasis on interreligious relations, and religion(s) or 'faith' and the state; largely through sociological and policy studies, rather than ethnographic studies of discrete religious communities. Issues concerning religious categories and conflation of religious with national or ethnic identity are notable in early CRP studies, but are now more clearly articulated as a focus for study. The continuing focus on qualitative methods is revealing of prevailing UK models of study of religions, though the move from micro (very local) to macro (UK-wide) studies involves increasing use of secondary and quantitative data. Using the archive of the CRP, this paper will provide an intellectual history of study of religions in the UK which highlights the changing engagement with pluralism and diversity. Using example studies, issues concerning terminology, method and theory will be identified. The move to a focus on interreligious studies and religion and policy will also provide a framework for considering how study of religions in the UK is articulated in response to both academic and non-academic interests and concerns.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to trace how the context dependent methods for the study of religious diversity in one particular institutional location have changed over time, and what these changes tell us about the changing experience, study and articulation of diversity and pluralism, the relationship between the terms, and the implication of these discussions for contemporary study of religions in the UK and beyond.

Between 1976 and 2014, the Community Religions Project (CRP) has conducted empirical research on religion and religions 'near at hand' in the English cities of Leeds and Bradford, and beyond. The results of the CRP's research, conducted by undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as established scholars, have been made widely available through the CRP website (<https://arts.leeds.ac.uk/crp/>), and the publication of research papers and a monograph series. A later focus of CRP work was research and consultancy in relation to the rising profile of religion in legislation and government policy. Reports have been produced on issues as varied as policing, regional faith representation and chaplaincies. Most recently, the CRP has moved to a focus on learning and teaching, with

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the Centre for Religion and Public Life at Leeds continuing new work in long established areas of expertise.

So, why might it be useful to look at the history of the Community Religions Project at the University of Leeds in order to explore questions about the critical study of religious diversity? The CRP is at something of a crossroads with the changing focus to learning and teaching, including undergraduate research. In 2011 a major celebration of the CRP marked a change of personnel and also an opportunity to reflect upon and reformulate the work and purpose of the CRP, a process which came to an end with the new model established this year. This paper tracks some of those changes and issues but also models the future for locality based research, using 'diversity' and 'plurality' as a means for doing this. This approach is appealing not only because of current research interest in interfaith dialogue and interreligious relations as models and locations for issues in religious diversity and plurality, but also because it is an apposite way to interrogate the work and development of the CRP.

Throughout this paper I am relying on a fairly ready distinction between plurality and pluralism that can be seen for example in Bouma and Ling:

In our discussion of religious diversity, we distinguish *plurality*, which describes a state of society, from *pluralism*, which refers to beliefs and attitudes about diversity. Societies are more or less religiously plural, but may or may not have pluralism, that is – cultures favouring diversity (2009:508).

However, I want to strengthen this sense of pluralism because of my specific interest in interfaith studies. In the Christian context particularly, 'pluralism' has the much stronger religious sense of a specific theological response to the experience of religious diversity. Pluralism is an attitude to interfaith dialogue, not just an expression of favour towards religious diversity. Debates around the Christian theological concept of 'pluralism' are best exemplified in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Hick and Knitter, 1988), critiqued by D'Costa in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* (1990) and further honed in the hard pluralism of Wiles (1992), the soft pluralism of Keith Ward (2005) and the radical pluralism of Martin Marty (2005). Using the term 'pluralism' in relation to religious diversity in a context where these theological formulations may be significant is to risk confusion with a specific position of faith. 'Pluralism' in certain theological discourses does not then simply favour diversity but promotes a belief in 'many paths to the same God'. It is particularly significant to be aware of these subtleties of definition given the criticism that Fitzgerald levels at Religious Studies, that:

...ecumenical liberal theology has been disguised (though not very well) in the so-called scientific study of religion, which denies that it is a form of theology and at the same time claims that it is irreducible to sociology either' (2000:7)

In the context of study of religions then, the term pluralism should be reserved for the specific occasions when the theological import of the word is relevant. Diversity and plurality are approximately interchangeable (though I would tend to distinguish diversity as describing variety between and within traditions from plurality as describing variety of traditions), and they **describe**. Pluralism, on the other hand, **prescribes**, and religious studies scholars should not risk being seen to prescribe certain theological responses to the experience of diversity or plurality. Although not especially significant in the earlier archives of the CRP,

this kind of caution appears more important in recent projects where theologians are adopting the approaches and engaging with the resources of the CRP.

The Study of Religions in the UK

Firstly, it is useful to reflect on the context of the CRP in terms of the study of religions in the UK. I agree with Eric Sharpe's observation in 1986 that the 'uneasy relationship between the various members of the religious studies families could be greatly illuminated if teachers and students alike were to look up various family trees' (1986: 317). The description and definition of what constitutes religious studies is neither straightforward nor agreed. However, some characteristics can be identified. For example:

The academic study of religion can be characterized as follows: 1) it is a composite field of study; 2) it is based on a methodological pluralism; 3) it is influenced by specializations and local institutional and cultural traditions; and 4) it is caught in a web of epistemological tensions (Geertz & McCutcheon, 2000: 4).

Certainly within the UK context we can identify all of these characteristics, both looking across 'study of religions' in multiple academic locations, as well as focussing on particular academic locations. A key point to note initially is that in the UK, unlike many other national contexts, there is in most universities some relationship between theology and religious studies. The historical legacy of Christian theological studies in higher education, coupled with the growth of religious studies as a discrete subject area, most significantly from the 1960s, has seen the development in many locations of academic departments where theology and religious studies sit alongside one another, both in terms of teaching and research. Although there is an extensive literature, especially from the US, critiquing the relationship between theology and religious studies, there is a relatively uncontroversial relationship between the two in the UK system. As theologian David Ford argues: 'it is healthier for the field in universities to have the diversity of theology and religious studies in constant interaction' (1998: 5). This interaction is potentially negative because of the challenges it creates in the public understanding of religious studies (as confessional or advocating of 'religion'). However, as is exemplified in the recent work of the CRP the interaction between theology and religious studies can be valuable in furthering better understandings of, and engagement with, issues of diversity and plurality.

Religious Studies in the UK is as marked by the features identified (above) by Geertz and McCutcheon as it is in any other location, and this requires us to be sensitive to the specific disciplinary requirements which shape the nature of studies undertaken. With Sharpe, I argue that scholars need to take seriously the impact of the disciplinary and institutional location of our studies, and this impact can be observed in the outputs within the specific location of the subject area of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds. As Sharpe notes (1986: 288), the Department of Theology and Religious Studies² at Leeds was one of only three centres for Religious Studies in the 1950s and early 1960s. Founded in the 1940s, the first Professor of the department, which has always been of both theology and religious studies, was the anthropologist of religion E. O. James. Despite, therefore, the presence of both theology and religious studies, the social scientific approaches to religion have been significant from the start. It was not until the 1970s though that the social

² The department no longer exists, and the subject area is part of the School of Philosophy, Religion and the History of Science.

scientific impact began to be particularly significant, when the Community Religions Project, initially developed in partnership with the department of Sociology, became a defining feature of study of religions at the University of Leeds. For over thirty years therefore Religious Studies at the University of Leeds has, through the Community Religions Project, had a focus on research of local experiences of religious diversity, especially as this has related to what are usually termed 'ethnic minority communities'.

The Community Religions Project

In 1977, Michael Pye, co-founder with Ursula King and William Weaver of the CRP, articulated the reasons for studying religion in locality

The City of Leeds itself contains population elements from south and east of the Hindu Kush. In addition the hymns of Martin Luther are sung in German, the Catholic mass is celebrated by Poles, and Greek Orthodox perform their exits and entrances in the Church of the Three Hierarchs directly beside the main West Indian and Sikh communities of Chapeltown. Moreover, Yorkshiremen are interesting too, and so is the Church of England in its mysterious empirical forms. (Quoted in Knott 1984 p 1)

Preceding by forty years Steven Vertovec's (2007) articulation of 'super-diversity' as a description of diversity in the UK, this statement about the original interests of the CRP indicates the extent to which religious diversity at least has been understood as more than the 'African-Caribbean and South Asian communities of British citizens' (Vertovec, 2007:1027) which government policy (particularly 'multiculturalism') has focussed upon. It is significant to note that from the beginning of the CRP there was a tacit recognition of religious 'super-diversity' not only in terms of religions and denominations which were features of newly arrived communities, but also in terms of the diversity of the Christian community within the UK. The key feature though, as identified by Pye, is the presence of local diversity.

Pye, writing in 1976, described the CRP's original purposes as:

... to carry out and publish research into the religious communities of Leeds and neighbouring cities, and to relate such research to associated matters such as community relations, inter-religious understanding, religious education, and teaching programmes within the University' (quoted in Knott, 2004: 68).

Diversity in locality is key here in the way the task of the CRP is outlined. Not only is the fact of diversity central to this articulation, but also the implications of this diversity. Clearly, there is an expectation that the diversity of religious communities is significant for a range of stake holders. Interestingly though these early articulations of the role of the CRP concern utility for, or 'impact' on, a varied audience. These early explanations of the CRP are concerned with 'mapping', identifying and perhaps curating a model of religions in the area. Importantly, this 'mapping' involved Christianity alongside other religions, an important theoretical development in study of religions. Until this point study of Christianity was largely the preserve of church historians and theologians. Mapping religious diversity in locality has emerged in other localities in response to other, but usually 'public' concerns, for instance in Spain with the 'Religious Map of Catalonia' (http://www.isor.cat/diversidad_religiosa/home). The work of the CRP in 'mapping' diversity continues but primarily at an undergraduate level – as discussed below. However, the model of 'mapping' religion is itself open to challenge,

there are questions to be asked about what such a map can do, projects tend to emerge from a sense that there is information that needs to be gathered because the information is, of itself, of value and utility. Yet the fluidity and complexity of local experience renders such maps rapidly out of date, and potentially 'fixes' a version of local diversity – with implications for policy and practice, as well as theoretical accounts, which may be far reaching.

Despite, therefore, the potential challenges of such work, the early work of the CRP was primarily concerned with recording religion. Material collected is stored in the West Yorkshire Archives and has also been recently re-discovered in a basement store room in the University of Leeds. An undergraduate project to produce a database of the materials stored has revealed information about small religious groups which no longer exist, demonstrating some of the value in archiving ephemera. Although there is material relating to the major traditions of the local and wider area, there is also a good deal of evidence of the attempt to record the 'super-diversity' of the area. This is evident again in a photographic archive from the 1970s which interestingly records Sikh and Hindu worship and home life alongside a major local West Indian carnival where religion, as such, is not immediately evident. The focus on ethnic minority traditions remained in the work of the CRP for some time, and it is interesting to note that 'Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Afro-Caribbean' was an unproblematic characterisation of diversity at this time.

This CRP emphasis on diversity in locality has in many ways been ahead of its time. This was true even in 1984, when Knott specifically addressed the centrality of the experience of diversity – and the challenge this posed in terms of articulating a role for the CRP:

Its *raison d'être* was the apparent diversity of religious groups, and the variety of their beliefs and practices, in Leeds and neighbouring cities. There seems nothing odd about this diversity now – or indeed the fact of being interested in this diversity – as scholarly works, conferences, newspaper articles, and so on have begun to deal seriously with the issues of religious and cultural pluralism. However, despite the work of the Institute of Race Relations and the Community Relations Commission in the 1960s, and the growth in interest amongst educators in the teaching of religion in multi-faith schools, the academic study of 'ethnic minority religions' in Britain has been slow to develop. (Knott, 1984:1)

Knott is here both noting the 'slow to develop' area of studies of religions (and particularly religion associated here with ethnic diversity), and also giving an account of a shift in focus of the CRP which occurred around the mid 1980s, with a move away from an emphasis on recording of local diversity (for instance through painstaking archiving of information about religious groups) to an emphasis on the national experience and the nature and response to plurality of specific groups. So Knott 1984:4 notes that 'the emphasis of the Community Religions Project shifted from an exhaustive concern with religious institutions and groups in the local area to an interest focussing on particular groups at the national level, on the Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims and Afro-Caribbean communities'. She identifies two key questions underpinning such work: 'What's the relationship between religion and ethnicity, and what religious changes have taken place for minorities as a result of their migration to this country?' (1984:6).

Alongside the interest in theoretical and empirical account of religion, and the evolving nature of study of religions, the work of the CRP is also influenced by, and on occasion

influences, government policy. The significance therefore of a shift in governmental engagement with diversity, from a focus on race and towards religion, needs to be dwelled upon briefly. McLoughlin (2010) characterises this shift in UK governmental policy as being from a race relations 'industry' (exemplified according to Knott in the Institute of Race Relations and the Community Relations Commission) and towards what McLoughlin describes as a 'faith relations industry', concerned with engaging those for whom religion is a dominant feature of their identity. The development of this faith relations industry can be seen in governmental support for bodies such as the Inter Faith Network for the UK and the now defunct Faith Communities Consultative Council (following the inner City Religious Council) with a role to act as government supported and funded representative and consultative bodies when discussing issues with potential impact on religious institutions and people of faith. The work of the CRP clearly relates to changing national priorities and awareness.

The next phase then of the CRP, in relation to this move to better understanding nationally significant groups and engaging with deeper theoretical issues such as the impact of migration, was the monograph and research papers series which began during the mid 1980s and record some interesting early discussions and articulations of issues of diversity while retaining in most cases a focus on detailed local study to support broader claims and analysis. Available to download from the CRP website (<https://arts.leeds.ac.uk/crp>) the research papers were published between 1984 and 1999, and the monograph series ran from 1986 to 2003, covering a range of traditions and localities but primarily reflecting on religion and its relationship with ethnicity. The dominant methodological approach throughout the publications is fieldwork studies, focussed on typically ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews, though usually supported by some engagement with analysis of texts and latterly with secondary analysis of quantitative data. McLoughlin notes that '... given a tendency to emphasize objective description over critical explanation in Religious Studies at the time, the CRP's original theoretical discussions now look comparatively limited.' (forthcoming). The publications are nevertheless examples of a

...movement away from the modernist regime of collecting, classifying, comparing, and typologising data on religion towards seeing religion as a dynamic and engaged part of a complex social environment or habitat, which is itself criss-crossed with wider communications and power relations. (Knott 2005: 119)

The monograph series will be the primary focus here, as it provides more detailed examples for discussion. The monograph series includes studies of Hinduism (Knott, 1986) and Sikhism (Kalsi, 1992) in Leeds; Bengali Muslims (Barton, 1986) and the Sathya Sai Baba community (Bowen, 1988) in Bradford; studies with a wider national focus (Geaves, 1996), and local focus in other areas of the UK (Waterhouse, 1997; Nesbitt 2000); as well as a study in Norway (Østberg, 2003). The first of these monographs, by Knott herself, indicates in the foreword the reason for the study, and sets the scene in terms of why this approach to the study of religions was novel, but also necessary:

The subject addressed in this thesis became of interest to me in 1977. Until that time I was involved in an academic study of religions which was concerned by and large, with texts, historical periods and religious elites. I was aware that in the city of Leeds itself there was a multiplicity of religious groups with a bewildering diversity of beliefs,

practices, experiences and attitudes. I decided, therefore, to bring together the interest I had in the Hindu religious tradition, and my desire to investigate some aspect of this local religious scene, not in a mission to compare Leeds Hinduism with what I had learnt of Hinduism as a world faith, but in order to attempt to describe and understand the forms which Hinduism had taken in its new geographical location. I wanted to see this local religion as a phenomenon in its own right, and not simply as an illustration of historical Hinduism. (Knott 1986: 1)

Although the study appeared in 1986 it related to fieldwork from 1977. So that although this monograph closely relates to the early locality-focussed descriptions of the CRP provided by Michael Pye, it nevertheless marks the start of publication of the monographs as concerned with significant articulations of local experience in terms of burgeoning theoretical frames. Even if, as McLoughlin notes, they now look theoretically limited, these studies attempt to bridge the gap between the modernist project of recording and collating, and the need for greater theoretical and indeed methodological nuance.³

Perhaps significantly, in terms of the developing enterprise of the CRP, the final monograph is the only one not to focus on UK experience. This is justified by Knott in the preface:

This particular monograph, on Pakistani Muslim children in Oslo, falls outside the formal remit of the Community Religions Project in being on a community situated beyond Britain. However, Sissel Østberg's research on religious socialisation accords with the discussion by Eleanor Nesbitt of young British Sikhs in an earlier monograph, and utilises a related theoretical approach based on the interpretive method of Clifford Geertz. In discussions of education and nurture, time and space, and purity and impurity, Østberg shows how young Norwegian Muslims from Pakistani heritage families become competent at expressing 'integrated plural identities' in which ethnicity, religion and nationality all play a significant part. (Knott in Østberg, 2003, preface)

This preface demonstrates the significance of academic 'lineage' – the academic family tree of this monograph justifies articulating this project within the CRP, yet it is taking a broader locale (Norway) as the realm of exploration. Although not without weaknesses this monograph is one of the most theoretically driven, focussing to a considerable degree on the issue of plurality both in terms of religious diversity but also plural social spheres of influence on children's lives. Operating with a variety of theoretical tools to analyse the experience of Pakistani children in Oslo, and the relationship between the Muslim and Pakistani 'identities', the monograph is of particular interest in articulating plurality at a variety of levels of experience:

In the development of *integrated plural identities* Islamic nurture was both part of that plurality and had an integrating function through its role in primary socialisation and through its special combination of formal educational and informal bodily and sensory elements. Islamic identity was not only one among many aspects of their plural selves, but there was a plurality within their Islamic identity. (Østberg 2002: 223)

³ Interestingly of course, in terms of the evolution of the study of religion, it is noteworthy that more recent attempts to theorize religion itself start from the complexity of local experience, which, though not necessarily attentive to the impact of diversity in local experience and performance nevertheless echo the close ethnographic accounts of the CRP monographs (cf McGuire, 2008 and Tweed, 2009)

So, although the CRP has been primarily concerned with the experience of diversity or plurality in locality, this study draws out a range of different spheres where plurality (in this case, distinct from diversity) operates, opening up a much wider area of study.

There was often, as a result of the interests of specific academics related to the project, a particular interest in education as a theme in the monographs as evidenced particularly by Nesbitt and Østberg, but present to some extent in several others – and indeed schools were one of the key early public spaces where issues of religious diversity were engaged with. The emphasis then on utility has related to the public sphere, and public bodies, since the inception of the CRP. Since the 1990s there has been an even greater focus on projects which serve more ‘public ends’. This has included work that has been commissioned as well as work that has emerged in response to specific events. Arguably, this is evidence of the increased visibility of religion in public life in the UK, though I would agree with Beckford (2010) that this is largely a matter of governmental ‘management of religious and ethnic diversity’, rather than any resurgence in religious believing and belonging.

Two features of this ‘management’ of diversity are worthy of note here. Firstly, the economic value of ‘religion’. The work of the CRP in this area contributes to a wider discourse about the role of religions and ‘faith based organisations’ in the provision of care and welfare in local communities. Although such work has the potential to be controversial, a 2009 report by the Yorkshire and Humber Faiths Forum identified the contribution of faith communities to the regional economy as £300 million per year (YHFF, 2009). Much of this economic impact was related to the provision of welfare services to the local community. Secondly, the Equality Act of 2010, based on European legislation, requires local authorities to give special attention to religion and belief, including non-belief, as a ‘protected characteristic’. This means that in the provision of services agencies must give attention to whether individuals experience discrimination or exclusion as a result of their religion or belief, or indeed lack of belief. There are clearly some very significant questions to be asked about this legislation and the models of religion/belief/non-belief which are operative, and in turn what the role of the religious studies scholar is in providing data in this arena. This is particularly the case where the exact remit and application of the legislation is being developed through case law, and religious studies scholars are called on as expert witnesses in this area, as they have already been for some time in the area of criminal proceedings related to violent extremism. So, in the context where religion is important to legislation the work of the CRP has renewed significance to local agencies where there is a perceived, and often actual, lack of knowledge about religion in its various forms in the locality.

However, this engagement with policy and the state is by no means new. In 1998 an early piece of CRP policy-related research looked at the potential for interreligious social action in Leeds. The report ‘Faith in Our Future’ (Burllett and Reid, 1998) identified some of the key issues hindering cooperation in Leeds, including the geographical dispersal of faith groups, the lack of contact between faith groups and the different needs and interests of faith groups.⁴ It also identified some of the potential advantages of better co-operation: “*more*

⁴ The language of ‘faith groups’ is used throughout and this in itself interesting. The use of religion/religious/faith/belief is rarely justified in academic work and this lack of clarity also, unsurprisingly, finds itself expressed in policy and legislation. A shared and common usage of appropriate terms is highly

people, more experience, more extensive contacts to co-operate on vitally important issues and activities". Of course, it is assumed throughout that co-working is of benefit and this is certainly seen in policy and practice⁵. Fifteen years later in Leeds there are certainly more extensive contacts between religions, increasingly diverse neighbourhoods, and increasing recognition of the overlap between the needs and interests of different religious groups in Leeds. Some projects, such as 'Faith Together in Leeds 11' (a partnership of faith and secular groups in Beeston, South Leeds which is at the heart of recent community building developments) are positive examples of the potential for co-working between people of different faiths (Prideaux, 2008).

The product of a partnership with the Leeds Churches Institute, which remains a key CRP collaborator, the 1998 'Faith in our Future' report is one of the many examples of work commissioned by, or jointly developed with, another organisation to address shared concerns. As well as stake holder groups such as Leeds Church Institute, CRP partners have included the Home Office, the (now defunct) Regional Development Agency (Knott, McLoughlin and Prideaux, 2002) and the Metropolitan Police (McFadyen and Prideaux, 2010). The remit of these projects has been wide, and has required some diverse approaches to data gathering, and it is arguable that much of this work is not self-evidently part of the CRP. However, I return again to the 'family tree' model of academic community. Even where the focus has not been locality studies, or field based data gathering, the projects do have at their heart an attentive engagement with the practical implications of religion as a feature of identity in the UK.

Currently, one of the most significant areas of overt CRP work is, as already identified, with undergraduate students - and this is in many ways revealing of the employability focus in British higher education. The detailed local knowledge and interrogation of religious diversity in community is a key skill that religious studies graduates are expected to demonstrate and, as well as the students being keen to gather such skills and experience, our community partners are interested in seeing students, soon to be part of the pool of job-seeking graduates, as 'experts'. However, this engagement of undergraduate students in the work of the CRP is yet another feature which, though fitting the current climate is not 'new'. For over 15 years our final year students have had the opportunity to participate in an ongoing undergraduate research project: 'The Religious Mapping of Leeds'. Each year the team focuses on an area of the city, building up a comprehensive 'religious map' of Leeds. This research, which is of use to faith communities, researchers, public bodies and local groups, aims to identify where particular groups and their activities are located, how they interact with each other and the wider community, and what services they provide. Through field visits, observations, interviews and liaison with a community partner, the students develop a directory of places of worship and write a detailed report. A presentation to the local community provides an opportunity to share their research with a wider audience and receive feedback on their work. The mapping groups recently have seen much stronger indications from the local community and community partners of what research would be

unlikely to ever be achieved, but it is worth reflecting on the implications that different use of terms may have in different studies.

⁵ There is significant potential to challenge the assumptions here about the benefits of co-working, though that is not the purpose of this account. Nevertheless the tendency to produce an uncritical account of the benefits of religion is an issue which needs further exploration across the breadth of local, and particularly partnership, studies of religion in the UK.

'useful' for them. In a more recent development, students also undertake placements with Leeds City Council, West Yorkshire Police and other organisations where they gather detailed local information, with insight into analytical issues, to inform policy and practice. There are many issues which could be interrogated regarding this engagement of undergraduate students, but the key issue I want to note is that for local organisations the type of work the CRP engaged in back in the 1970s and 1980s in mapping religious diversity is still useful and relevant. The key methods of data gathering remain important because they provide the sort of detailed local information that is hidden by macro level and quantitative studies.

Other methodological issues in relation to the CRP and diversity are also worth noting. For instance, one of the earliest monographs presents what is now a challenging premise for a study of the Satya Sai Baba community of Bradford:

The subject matter disposes it to present raw material for an exercise in what we may call a reflective theology. Such a theology allows one tradition, however incongruous it might at first appear, to reflect - that is, to throw light upon and to be illuminated by - another. Such a discipline would obviously have its pitfalls, and would have to be undertaken with consummate reticence. Nevertheless, it may itself represent a preamble to dialogue between quite diverse or disparate religious traditions. (Bowen, 1988: 8-9).

This indicates that the phenomenological approach, which is articulated throughout the early monographs, was tempered by a theological engagement and interest in what we may describe as the 'Comparative Religion' approach, and an assumed relationship between comparative religions and interfaith dialogue. These tensions in the application and interpretation of the phenomenological method were recently highlighted by a particularly able undergraduate student who currently has a position as research scholar within the School, and chose to do some self-directed exploration of the monographs as part of assessed work for a module on method and theory. She mapped the five stages of phenomenological studies, as identified by Sharpe (1986), onto all of the monographs, noting the ways in which phenomenological method developed over time as a result often of changes and challenges in the field rather than in the theoretical framework. She particularly noted the issue of epoche, or bracketing, and the challenge of balancing this with a need for reflexive awareness of positionality, especially in relation to the 'subject's' understanding of the researcher's account. (Merrygold 2013:5)

The concern expressed by many monograph writers to give an account which their respondents feel is accurate indicates an extent to which the immersed engagement in the field, when the outcome is purely academic, can be difficult to justify to participants. There is an oft repeated question which those undertaking studies in Leeds have to respond to: 'is this just going to go on a library shelf and gather dust?' Later studies have taken a broader view of these issues, engagement with methodological work in the area of reciprocal research relations and latterly emancipatory research, which seeks to empower research participants, has developed the scope of fieldwork studies, and their potential benefit. Method then has evolved in response to the experience of fieldwork studies in diverse local communities. How a community is described matters to those who live in the area, and participants invest in research in ways that are not always immediately evident to the

researcher. My own experience of research in an area of Leeds where the 2005 London bombers had lived revealed the extent to which locality studies must be sensitive to the community being studied if they are to be ethically robust – ‘risk’ can be palpable in communities dealing with controversy. Undergraduate students also experience this concern about representation, with a recent Mapping group being required by interviewees to share their findings prior to the completion of the report because of their respondents’ concerns that an inaccurate account of their work may impact on their future ability to access public funding. Equally, the ‘hidden’ work of religious institutions in local communities and with their members becomes more significant as questions are asked about why this work is hidden. The same Mapping project noted the internal support offered to community members within an African Christian community in Leeds. This work is hidden, and the community wish it to remain hidden, because it is in large part concerned with ameliorating need in the face of destitution for asylum seekers, and finding ways to support claims for asylum. When locality studies demand the identification of the locality, as is often the case with CRP projects, the risks of harm and distress are more evident. Engagement with a local field is ethically significant, and this is particularly significant when the research is being undertaken by undergraduate students.

It is clear from the issues already identified that there are key ways in which the methodological and theoretical framework for the CRP subtly shifted in response to both need and interest. The interaction between ethnicity and religion has become less pronounced in academic studies as the super-diversity of neighbourhoods and within religions becomes more evident. However, the interaction between ethnicity and religion became a prime model of knowledge exchange or ‘impact’ for CRP projects – where helping local partners to move away from limiting models of religion, identity and community is a significant challenge. This was evident in work on policing where the move from concern with ‘boots and handshakes’⁶ to talking to people in the community matched closely the experience of officers involved in local work but did not match the equality and diversity measures which require officers to record the religion of victims (McFadyen and Prideaux, 2010).

However, there is also an underpinning which subtly shifted towards internal discourses particularly of the Christian communities, rather than outsider ‘observation’. Theologians are now increasingly engaged with empirical research at Leeds (Muers with Britt, 2012). This relates to a variety of shifts in the nature and practice of theology, and relates both to questions about the nature of religious studies as a discipline but also to questions about diversity and plurality. Whereas for the social scientist diversity and plurality are terms related to models and maps of localities and people within those localities, for theologians they are theologically engaging concerns. This is evident in the growth of postgraduate research projects which are primarily theological but engage with social scientific work on religion to extend and develop analysis. A current example for instance sees a Methodist minister using the work of Tweed (2009) as part of a theological enquiry into the nature of perceived boundaries in Methodist ecclesiology. This boundary crossing within the subject

⁶ The concern about whether to take off boots when entering a place of worship, and whether to shake a woman’s hand, was a distinctive concern for police officers and staff who were fearful about engaging with religion in their work.

area is new and hugely exciting, providing an important background to a new focus on learning and teaching in this area.

Conclusion: Engagement with Diversity is changing the way we study religion in the UK

It has been evident throughout this discussion that diversity and plurality has been at the heart of the work of the CRP, and the material gathered under the umbrella of the project evidences a significant range of issues in terminology, theory and method. As the CRP repositions itself for a new emphasis on learning and teaching and the development of new approaches to the study of religion in locality, it is significant that the experience of diversity remains central. This is no longer expressed primarily in terms of 'ethnic minority religion', but instead looks to religion as a facet of public life which has a significant impact on super-diverse neighbourhoods and indeed the UK as a nation state. The CRP's new website serves as a window onto the intellectual history of one particular model of study of religions, as well as a repository for material which is 'useful' for policy makers and others.

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