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Britain's changing religious landscape: Drowning or waving?

Zusammenfassung

Der folgende Beitrag analysiert die sich wandelnden religiösen Formen am Beispiel Großbritanniens, indem er der Frage nachgeht, wie die religiöse Landschaft in Großbritannien in den 1970er Jahren beschaffen war und wie sie heute beschaffen ist. Nach einem Überblick über den Stand der religionswissenschaftlichen, religionssoziologischen und religionsgeographischen Forschung in Großbritannien wird gezeigt, wie sich die zunehmende Diversifizierung von Religionen und Religionsgemeinschaften (Christen, Muslime, Hindus, Sikhs, New-Age-Anhänger etc.) in räumlicher Hinsicht auswirkt, welchen Einfluss sie insbesondere auf die gebaute Umwelt ausübt und welche neuen, sozial geprägten Räume entstehen. Dabei wird eine wachsende Präsenz des religiösen und spirituellen Diskurses in der Öffentlichkeit, dem Erziehungswesen und der Arbeitswelt festgestellt, die mittels Umwertung eine Verdichtung von religiösen und spirituellen Orten in der gebauten Umwelt nach sich zieht und so letzten Endes zeigt, dass auch in einer weitgehend säkularisiert erscheinenden Welt die Macht des Religiösen auf die Gestaltung von Räumen einen erheblichen Einfluss ausüben kann.

In the Reith Lectures of 1990, Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, invited his audience to imagine landing in Britain for the first time and asking themselves whether it was a religious country¹.

“Here and there you would notice large religious buildings, mainly churches and cathedrals, whose intricate grandeur suggested considerable prestige. You would discover that religious leaders, bishops in particular, were quoted in the newspapers and sat in the House of Lords. You would be struck by the fact that a large number of businesses stopped on Sunday and asking why you would receive an explanation that could hardly fail to

¹ The Reith Lectures are an annual series sponsored by the BBC on a contemporary issue which, in 1990, was religion, morality and society in a secular age. Sacks was the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation of the British Commonwealth and a renowned scholar of Judaism. Sunday closure of shops and businesses is no longer a legal requirement in England.

mention Christianity (...) Inquiring, you would find that four in five Britons still regard themselves as Christian, that there are ethnic minorities where different traditions are still strong, and that only a tiny minority of the population describe themselves as atheists or agnostics. You might conclude that you had arrived in a religious society.

But you could hardly fail to notice different indicators as well. Examining the city skyline, you might well suspect that the true cathedrals of the urban landscape are office blocks. You would notice that the arenas where crowds gathered and formed temporary communions were football matches and pop concerts. You would see far fewer people engaged in spiritual exercises than in physical exercises (...) You might be perplexed that so many churches had so few people in them (...) And you would be struck by the fact that the largest crowds visiting cathedrals were tourists, not worshippers. Religion might be, in Stevie Smith's words, not waving but drowning." (SACKS 1991, 29)

Sacks concluded by affirming the new arrival in thinking that what she saw were "survivals, residues of an earlier age in which religious institutions played a far greater part in our culture than they do today" (SACKS 1991, 29). But, inside those institutions, he suggested, she would find "a living relationship with the past" (ibid.). Throughout his lectures, Sacks conceded the march of secularisation, but stressed the persistence of faith as lived out in dynamic religious traditions and vital faith communities. In Britain, as elsewhere in the West, we were, he believed, "caught between two ages", discontented with modernity and its secularising process, but unsure of the way forward (ibid., 20).

In his presentation of the environment of faith, Sacks suggested that even a newcomer would be able to gain an understanding of the place of religion in a society from its location in the landscape. By referring to the words of Stevie Smith, however, he recognised the difficulty of reading the signs. Others have acknowledged this difficulty by referring to the landscape as a palimpsest, "a manuscript on which two or more successive texts have been written, each one being erased to make room for the next" (PARK 1994, 198; c.f. DE CERTEAU, 1984, 201f.). Interpreting the repeatedly over-written landscape (LEFEBVRE 1991, 142f.), not least of all its most recent text, requires geographical and historical knowledge, but also a sense of the social, cultural and political processes which produce it.

In this analysis of the changing place of religion in the British landscape, I shall use the terms "space" and "landscape" to refer to practices, artefacts, arenas and institutions with a material – as well as mental and social – dimension². By landscape I shall mean a physical space formed by both

² Following Henri LEFEBVRE's three dimensional view of space (1991, 11). Lefebvre speaks

nature and culture, socially inhabited, and prone to representation such that it is often known only by its representations¹. My main concern, however, will not be a consideration of the meaning of landscape or the nature of the British landscape as such, but a spatial examination of key aspects of the changing nature of religion in Britain, particularly since the 1970s. What was the nature of the religious landscape in Britain in the 1970s, and what is it now? How does a spatial approach help us to understand the process of change that has occurred? In the next section, I shall consider the work of scholars who have written about religion in Britain in order to assess its place and character in both the 1970s and more recently. Two cases will then be presented, featuring Britain's newer religious communities and the emergent interest in subjective spiritualities.

1 Scholars on religion in Britain, 1970 to the present

Unlike Sacks' new arrival, scholars who write about religion in Britain do so after a deep engagement with its historical developments, its forms, beliefs and practices, and the accounts of its adherents. Through this process, they have formed their own views about whether we are witnessing the "waving" or "drowning" of this aspect of British culture, society and way of life. Among sociologists of religion, the drowning school of thought is generally associated with exponents of the secularisation thesis, whose principal exponent is Steve BRUCE (1995, 2002) with his focus on decline and fragmentation; the waving school with those who either see flaws in this thesis and argue for the persistence of faith, or accept the thesis in some measure but see a process of re-sacralisation at work. Although scholars cannot be neatly divided into one or other of these two trajectories, we might place Grace Davie and Timothy Jenkins in the former category, with their respective ideas about "believing without belonging" (DAVIE 1994) and the "flourishing, decay and tradition" of English religion (JENKINS 1999, 38), and Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead in the latter, with their articulation of the "turn to life" within contemporary spirituality (HEELAS 2002; WOODHEAD 2002; KENDAL PROJECT, n.d.).

Arguments about decline, persistence or revival are difficult to evaluate because they are often argued on the basis of different premises and varying types and sets of data. Sociologists have been unable to agree either about what counts as legitimate evidence, or about the meaning of the sacred and

of "mental space", but includes within that an acknowledgement of the role of power and ideology. Although the inclusion of the material dimension may sound too obvious to be worth mentioning, JACKSON recently thought it necessary to call for a "re-materialisation" of social and cultural geography (2000).

¹ See MUIR (1999, 2–12) for a discussion of the interpretation of landscape.

the secular, and their associated processes. But there are other dimensions of religious change to consider as well as the social, and for a consideration of those I turn now to scholars of Britain's cultural geography, especially in its religious guise.

John Gay published his geography of religion in England in 1971, and began it with a review of the mutual effects of religion and the environment, particularly of the former on the latter, the proper domain, as he saw it, of geographers of religion⁴. As Gay never makes his own aims clear, we must assume that he shared the view of Isaac, that the geographer's task is "to examine the part played by the religious motive in man's transformation of the landscape" (ISAAC in GAY 1971, 18). In pursuit of this, after reviewing the sources available for such a study, he considered the major Christian denominations and the smaller Christian groups before moving on to discuss eastern religions and the Jews. Despite this open interest in the growing religious diversity of England, he seemed unable to imagine a religious future beyond secularisation, and – in the case of those of non-Christian religions – of assimilation. Of Hindus, he followed the lead of Rashmi Desai in concluding that they "leave their religion behind in India and fail to give their philosophy of life any organizational expression in this country" (ebd., 201)⁵. Of Sikhs and Muslims, he concluded that the youth will "quickly fall in with the norms and values of British society" (ebd.). Of Jews, after recognising their role in developing close-knit communities, he wrote, "slowly but inevitably the Jews are being absorbed into the prevailing national culture ... Eventually English Judaism is likely to become the concern of the historical geographer" (ebd., 220).

We need only look at the publications of geographers and other scholars with a concern for geography who have written about religion in Britain in the last decade to see that Gay's predictions were wrong. Hindus have certainly developed institutions in Britain since the 1970s (KNOTT 2000a ; NAYLOR and RYAN 2003). Muslims, especially, have defied the norms and values of British society and the process of assimilation by establishing purpose-built mosques (EADE 1996; NAYLOR and RYAN 2002), by pressing (though not unanimously) for their own schools (Dwyer 1993), and asserting their own styles of dress and performance in the public space (Dwyer 1999a, b; WERBNER 1996). And, whilst some Jews have focused upon their ethnic rather than religious identity, others have fought strongly to stress their difference, through separate communities of faith (VALINS 2003). It has been observed in recent research on many of these groups, that

⁴ He drew on the work of ISAAC (1965). Later contributors to this debate have included Manfred Büttner, David Sopher, Lily Kong, Adrian Cooper, and Petri Raivo.

⁵ See KNOTT (2000a) for a discussion of this view.

religion plays an important role in determining patterns of settlement (PHILLIPS n.d.; VALINS 2003), in being a new and significant determinant of identity (superseding race and ethnicity) (PEACH 2002, see also CHIVALLON 2001 on Caribbean Christians), and in affecting planning legislation and practice (GALE and NAYLOR 2002). Finally, the size of all these groups – except the Jews for whom emigration to Israel and some out-marriage have brought about a gradual decline in numbers – has increased⁶.

The key feature of religious change in Britain in the post-war period has been the growth of religious diversity, a process charted in several studies from the 1980s onwards (THOMAS 1988; BADHAM 1989; PARSONS 1993; WELLER 2001). Generally, this has been associated with a parallel development, the rise of identity politics. Commentators have explored the relationship between the two processes in terms of “community” (communities of faith, minority ethnic communities), “culture” (fundamentalism, multiculturalism), new forms of identity (hybridity, multicultural competence), and the redefinition of established loyalties and networks (transnationalism, diaspora)⁷.

It seems clear from the burgeoning interest of scholars in Britain's religious diversity that those religions to have arrived with post-war immigrants to Britain have not suffered the full consequences of secularisation (though they may have been affected by it in various ways). But what of the religion and spirituality of the majority of the British, those with English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish heritage, many of whom

⁶ This is shown in a comparison of figures for England and Wales for the late-1970s, estimated by KNOTT and TOON (1982), and recent Census 2001 figures (www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/):

	Muslims*	Hindus	Sikhs
1977	353,610	306,941	304,950
2001	1,591,126	558,810	336,149

(Figures for 1977 were based on information from the 1971 population census, updated for 1977, and the results of the 1976 labour force survey. * The 1977 figure for Muslims included only those with ethnic origins in the Indian sub-continent. The equivalent figure for 2001 exceeds one million, with more than 73% of Muslims professing an Asian or British Asian identity.) It is estimated that the Jewish population fell in the same period from about 300,000 to 266,740. Current research on religious community size and distribution based on an analysis of Census 2001 is being conducted at the University of Oxford under the direction of Ceri Peach.

⁷ On “community”, see BAUMANN (1996), SILK (1999), DWYER (1999a), KNOTT (2002); on “culture”, BAUMANN (1996), CAGLAR (1997), PAREKH (2000a), NYE (2001); on new forms of identity, DWYER (1999b), NESBITT (1998), CHIVALLON (2001); and on established loyalties and networks, VERTOVEC and COHEN (1999) and VERTOVEC (in press). This is just a selection of the many publications on these topics.

admit to a Christian identity? Gay, in 1971, was inconclusive about the future of Christianity in Britain, but Alan Gilbert a few years later was decisive in declaring, “unless there is to be some catastrophic breakdown of modern industrial society (...) the social and psychological pressures of modernization will continue to secularize an already “post-Christian” society” (GILBERT 1980, 157). And yet, in 2001, 71.6% of the population of England and Wales stated that they were “Christian” (www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/), with only 15.5% stating that they had “no religion”, and 7.7% declining to state a religion. Whilst it is known that most of those who declared themselves to be Christian were nominal rather than active participants, and thus arguably secularised, it is nevertheless important for us to try to understand the religiosity (or spirituality) of this “silent majority” (WOLFFE in PARSONS 1993)⁸.

From the late-1960s an unofficial and only partially institutionalised aspect of British religious life was noted by scholars, with particular reference made to “subterranean theologies” (MARTIN 1967), “common religion” (TOWLER and CHAMBERLAIN 1973), “the religion of the silent majority” (WOLFFE in PARSONS 1993), and “believing without belonging” (DAVIE 1994). Most saw these aspects of popular religious culture as the development of a long-standing and pervasive trend in British religious life rather than the direct result of post-Enlightenment processes of modernisation and secularisation. This popular “underside” was frequently forgotten, however, in the race to declare the demise of the nation’s churches and its Christian culture and values. It took several national incidents, such as the disaster in the football stadium at Hillsborough (DAVIE 1993) and the death of Princess Diana (WOODHEAD 1999), to provoke a broader interest in what came increasingly to be known as popular “spirituality”⁹. Although geographers of religion have generally ignored this area, other scholars of religion have given it some attention, often in relation to place, material culture and consumption (e.g. DAVIE 1993; BOWMAN 1993, 1994; HEELAS 1996, 2002), with the subjectivisation of the sacred, and thus its relationship to identity, becoming a matter of key concern. In 2000, researchers at the University of Lancaster declared their intention to test the claim that “body-mind-spirituality forms of the sacred are a growing force”, and the results of their work on the English town of Kendal attest to the importance of these forms, both in charismatic churches and in many new spiritual groups and services (KENDAL PROJECT, n.d.).

⁸ In the late-1990s, there were only about 6 million active Christians in Britain (BRIERLEY 1998, tables 2.6 and 10.12).

⁹ A demonstration of this interest was the BBC’s “Soul of Britain” series in 2000, and nationwide research carried out in association with it (HEELAS 2002).

2 Britain's changing religious landscape: A spatial account

Apart from the decline and fragmentation of Christian institutions, symbols and values, since 1970 scholars have focused on Britain's religious diversity and the contemporary interest in personal spirituality, both of which are pertinent for understanding the dynamic place of religion in the British landscape. Places of worship associated with religious communities new to Britain in the post-war period have had a striking impact on the appearance of the urban landscape and the way it is perceived by different groups of Britons. Additionally, the growth of religious diversity has begun to create a need for new spaces in which religions can represent themselves, be challenged by others, and work together to keep religion high on the public agenda. Additionally, new spaces of spiritual transformation, linked by people's needs for self-expression and belonging, as well as their pleasure in consumption, are evident in the British landscape, and together present a different spatial arrangement to the more traditional institutionalised religions.

In the two sections that follow, I shall look at the impact of, first, religious diversity, and, secondly, spiritual transformation on the physical, social and mental landscape of Britain. I shall attend in particular to the built environment – to places of worship and new spiritual outlets – to new social spaces (many of which have material dimensions), and to cultural products and their consumption. My spatial approach to these is informed in particular by the work of Henri Lefebvre, though I have not seen it as a priority to give an account of this here. I describe and apply this approach in my current research on the location of religion (KNOTT, forthcoming)¹⁰.

2.1 *Religious diversity: places of worship and encounter*

The growth of religious diversity since the mid-20th century has changed the physical landscape of Britain, notably its urban, and to a lesser extent suburban, settings. As John EADE noted of mosques, places of worship associated with religions new to Britain have become places “not only for prayer but for representation of the Muslim [*and Sikh and Hindu*] presence” (1996, 227)¹¹. NAYLOR and RYAN (2003) confirmed the scale of the change,

¹⁰ In “The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis” (KNOTT, forthcoming), I discuss Lefebvre's project on the dimensions and aspects of space and its production, and draw on this – in addition to the work of de Certeau, Foucault and Massey – in developing the terms of a spatial analysis for understanding relations between the religious and the secular in the contemporary West.

¹¹ Although the post-war period has seen the establishment of South Asian religious communities, there were in fact several mosques (1887, 1884, 1926) and a gurdwara (1911) opened before that time.

from 13 officially certified sites of worship (for Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs) in 1964, to 614 certified mosques, 109 Hindu temples or mandirs, and 193 Sikh gurdwaras by 1998. In many cases, and particularly in the period to 1980, new religious communities recycled buildings used for other purposes, such as houses, schools, factories and churches. Although building exteriors were sometimes modified, and communities often announced their presence with billboards featuring the name of the group, and other manifest symbols such as the Sikh *nishan sahib* or flag, the outward appearance of these places of worship generally made little overt impact on the environment (though the comings and goings of worshippers, particularly their use of local roads and parking facilities, sometimes attracted criticism). Inside, however, they often contained material secrets that many of those critics fearful of “an alien invasion of local space” (EADE 1996, 231) might have found profoundly challenging: the *qibla*, directing the prayerful attention of Muslims towards Mecca, Hindu icons or *murti* (including pictures of goddesses, divine animals, and Jesus), and the central presence in the gurdwara of the Sikh holy book to which worshippers paid obeisance. However, to quote a well-known British phrase, “What the eye doesn’t see, the heart doesn’t grieve over”. Thus, it was not the spatial practices and material features inside these outwardly familiar buildings that caused alarm, but more often the social and cultural challenges brought on by the construction of new buildings¹².

The responses of local people to purpose-built mosques, gurdwaras and mandirs often took the form of complaints about parking and traffic congestion (GALE and NAYLOR 2002, 392–394), but sometimes of more outspoken objections concerning the perceived threat to the appearance and ambience of the local area, whether through the islamisation of “the garden suburb” of Northolt (EADE 1996, 228), or the “inappropriate” erosion of the local community with the development of the Swaminarayan Hindu temple in Neasden (NAYLOR and RYAN 2003). In these cases, alien cultural traditions were seen by some to be transforming the English sub/urban landscape in an unwelcome way. Other local voices, however, embraced more positively the transition and its social and ethical possibilities for “welcoming the stranger”, “living together in harmony”, and for providing “equality of opportunity”¹³.

As NAYLOR and RYAN (2002, 2003) have suggested, colonialist impulses have often been behind the expression of opinions about the development of

¹² For exceptions, see EADE (1996, 221–223) on the Brick Lane Great mosque and complaints about changes to its interior by conservationists, and NYE (2001) on the legal battle over the status of Bhaktivedanta Manor, belonging to the Hare Krishna Movement.

¹³ These are all phrases used in recent publications on the contribution of faith communities to local civic life in Britain.

Islamic, Hindu and Sikh places of worship in Britain, together with a related nostalgia for “English-ness” which is interwoven into what it means to be “British”¹⁴. Unsympathetic discourses have not been confined to public complaints and challenges, however. They have also been enshrined in local planning law and decision-making which have, until recently, lacked any provision for religious freedom and have been conservative with regard both to changes in the use of buildings and to the construction of new places of worship, especially in terms of the endangering of “amenity” or what are perceived to be the intrinsic features of any given locality (GALE and NAYLOR 2002, 389).

Seen from a post-colonialist and anti-discriminatory position with regard to religion, the presence of new British religious landmarks is a positive sign in the transition to new British identities, not only of the hyphenated variety (British-Muslim, British-Hindu etc.), but of local multi-cultures in which people initiate civic projects which serve both their own and wider local interests. Purpose-built places of worship, as RIDOUT (2000) has shown, may quickly become part of the local, and sometimes national heritage, attracting interested tourists as well as worshippers, and becoming significant sites in the landscape. They can also be used for diverse social action projects, including multi-cultural gatherings. This negotiated process – in which a wide range of local groups, individuals and agencies participate – is in some parts of Britain supported by increasingly imaginative and inclusive planning practices, as GALE and NAYLOR have shown in relation to Leicester and Preston (2002, 395–405).

And, finally, seen from the perspective of the faith communities responsible for building these new mosques, gurdwaras and mandirs, they have the benefit of providing much needed local space, designed specifically for the purposes of ablutions, worship, education and social life. Simultaneously, they sacralise a space (CHIDESTER and LINENTHAL 1995; METCALF 1996) and make a statement about a faith community's place in and contribution to local life. Their spatial relationship to other places of worship – whether of the same religion or others – may well reveal issues of intra- or inter-community contestation and rivalry. Studies of particular localities, the places of worship within them, their inter-relationship, outreach, and socio-economic embeddedness can be informative for understanding the place of religion in local landscapes (KNOTT 2000).

The development of new places of worship has not been the only way in which religious plurality in Britain has affected the landscape. Increasingly,

¹⁴ The relationship between England and Britain, and between English and British identity has been much debated in recent years. See in particular PAREKH (2000b) and other articles in the same issue of *Political Quarterly*, and KUMAR (2003).

since the coming to power of “New Labour” in 1997, faith communities have found it useful to work separately and together to keep religion on the public agenda of multiculturalism, and to maximise the opportunity to obtain funding and support.¹⁵ One national network has been central in this process. The Inter Faith Network for the UK, founded in 1987 with a membership of representative faith bodies, national inter-faith organisations, local inter-faith groups, and educational bodies with an interest in multi-faith issues, has aimed, “to advance public knowledge and mutual understanding of the teachings, traditions and practices of different faith communities in Britain ... and to promote good relations between persons of different religious faiths” (WELLER 2001, 80). Although it occupies office space in central London, it is characterised spatially by networked communications with its member bodies, and by regular annual meetings in different locations (on common interests such as education, media, young people, faith and service to the community) at which representatives are present. Its other key role is in representing the issues facing faiths in Britain today and their contribution to public life to government and other statutory bodies, as demonstrated, for example, by the Network’s contribution to events during the year of the Millennium, its engagement with the Local Government Association, and its role in research on religious discrimination funded by the Government’s Home Office¹⁶. It has been an effective player in keeping religion “in the public eye”, in other words, in drawing attention to its place in the landscape.

Complex and differentiated arrangements exist locally and regionally for religions to meet, talk and sometimes work together (WELLER 2001). There are no permanent buildings for such engagement, but, typically, rooms are offered either in places of worship or community centres belonging to particular faith groups, or are hired from civic or other neutral bodies. Occasionally, good local relationships have issued forth in community development or social action projects between religious groups (BURLET and REID 1998)¹⁷. These new social spaces of religious encounter and cooperation are best described as faith-based or multi-faith rather than inter-faith, as separate groups or communities often seek to retain their independent interests and purposes. Government support for such interaction

¹⁵ National and local government initiatives on the place of faith communities in urban regeneration, community cohesion and regional development have encouraged increasingly close working. See BURLET and REID (1998), and reports listed on the following websites: www.interfaith.org.uk, www.lga.gov.uk, www.rayh.gov.uk.

¹⁶ This research has contributed to forthcoming changes (December 2003) in English law and public policy on religion, equality and discrimination.

¹⁷ Such joint action, with its mutual, cross-community benefits, is now a requirement in applications for government funding.

is strong, as faith communities, which include many in deprived and marginalised groups, are seen as central to its policy of social inclusion.

2.2 *The spaces of spiritual transformation*

In a recent article, Paul HEELAS (2002) explored the transition since the 1960s from “religion” to “spirituality” and asked whether “a spiritual revolution” had occurred. The evidence he provided for Britain, at least, was suggestive, showing that “whereas 26 per cent express belief in a personal God, 44 per cent believe in some kind of spirit or life force or that ‘there is something there’” (ebd., 365), and that belief in the soul had increased (from 59% in 1981, to 69% of those surveyed in 2000). He referred to this spiritual transition as a “turn to life” (see also KENDAL PROJECT, n.d.), with life being taken to mean “the spiritually-informed, personal, intimate, experiential, existential, psychological, self and relational-cum-self depths of what it is to be alive” (HEELAS 2002, 358f.). But how has this “turn to life” affected the British landscape?

First, there are many “new spiritual outlets”, including individual practitioners, shops, centres, publications, mail order and other services (HEELAS 2002, 363; see also BOWMAN 1993, 49–54; HEELAS 1996, 62–66; SUTCLIFFE 2003, 124–128). These cater for a range of interests, such as those commonly referred to as “New Age”, “holistic”, “green”, and “alternative”,¹⁸ but attracting both browsers and initiates, counter-cultural types and mainstream citizens alike. Principal attractions of such outlets include practitioner-led consultations and workshops, self-help guides and tools, meditational classes and aids, the arts and crafts of native peoples, personal readings and assessments, and a huge variety of publications. Although these can be found throughout urban and village Britain, key locations include towns and sites with a “sacred” heritage or a history of alternative culture, such as Glastonbury, Hebden Bridge, Kendal, Findhorn, Stonehenge and Iona¹⁹.

Such outlets are interconnected to the human bodies that serve and are served by them. Some spiritual transformations of the body are invisible to an observer of the inhabited landscape, such as the many internal spiritual changes wrought by healing practices. Others are more visible, or may be sensed in other ways, such as the coming together of fraternities for spiritual exercise (such as Tai Chi, Yoga or Pilates) or for neo-Pagan rituals, or of more amorphous interest groups for “mind-body-soul” events and arts

¹⁸ For a discussion, see SUTCLIFFE on the idiom of the New Age (2003, 122–30).

¹⁹ Such towns have not attracted substantial international migration or settlement, though they have been a magnet for spiritual seekers within Britain. Thus, the two landscapes – of religious diversity and spiritual transformation – rarely overlap.

festivals. The wearing of crystals, Celtic symbols, essential oils, and particular forms of dress, and the transformation by people of their domestic and working spaces by Feng Shui provide other examples. With no less a personal and social purpose and investment are those spontaneous public episodes of shared grief witnessed in Britain since the early 1990s, whether at the Anfield football stadium after the Hillsborough tragedy in which ninety-four Liverpool supporters lost their lives (DAVIE 1993), at the death of Princess Diana (WOODHEAD 1999), or at smaller scale events in response to the murder of children or the death of victims of car or train crashes. At these times, local, and occasionally national, public spaces are transformed by the press of mourners – many of whom never knew the deceased – who share a desire to express their horror, and to experience the transition from loss and meaninglessness to catharsis and closure, through *communitas*. The temporary physical transformation of everyday places into shrines is achieved with the laying of carpets of flowers, personal cards and messages, and, depending on the deceased person/s and their context, appropriate items from football scarves to children’s toys, windmills and dream-catchers. Such shrines, as their Books of Condolence show, attract visitors from the local area and further afield, as well as messages of support from beyond Britain.

Experienced by many for the first time, and re-experienced by pilgrims, through their media representations, such deathscapes are arguably a means by which the British have begun to re-incorporate death and its sacrality into social life. But the language and practice of “spirituality”, with its focus on healing, holism, empowerment, self and life, has invaded other mainstream discursive and material spaces as well as those of death. Curricula developments in education (in personal and social, as well as religious education), and the rise and legitimation of “complementary medicine” within Britain’s National Health Service attest to the infection of public institutions and practices with the new spirituality. Furthermore, as HEELAS’s many examples illustrate (1996, 62–66), the transformation and empowerment of the self as “a magical producer” not only of personal but also of social and economic growth has been at the heart of business, management and training ideology since the 1980s. Many companies and public agencies have hired New Age and other spiritually motivated practitioners to train their employees. Business schools have experimented with innovative humanistic and transformational ideas and practices in reconceptualising the manager, business strategy and the workplace.

These spatial manifestations of the “turn to life” have demonstrated the drive of many British people in late-modernity to find a means of self-expression, whether in terms of lifestyle, emotional effervescence, fraternal association, or work and prosperity (HEELAS 1996; HETHERINGTON 1998). They also represent a reconciliation of the spiritual and the material

(BOWMAN 1993, 52; SUTCLIFFE 2003,183), with consumers enjoying their bodies and things, their power to consume and to prosper, and with businesses making the most of this re-engagement of matter and spirit. Additionally, they suggest a new, web-like spatiality (SHIELDS 1992, 16) with the embodied self at the centre, like-minded (but often unknown) others connected in a network, all supported (and reproduced) by an array of spiritual services and outlets. This exists in tandem with those spaces of association still found within religions which continue to express traditional ideas about the relationship between God, the community and individual humans, though moderated by changing local and global contexts.

3 Drowning or waving?

Religiously and spiritually motivated people have obviously affected the British landscape, but not always in straightforward ways. Changes are sometimes contested, as in the case of the establishment of new places of worship, and are often difficult to interpret. When one faith group recycles a building once used by another, how are we to understand the place of religion therein? The symbols and meaningful physical arrangements of the first are overlaid by the second, and may either be forgotten or reinterpreted. These are the “imbricated stata” referred to by DE CERTEAU (1984, 200), the “piling up of heterogeneous places” (ibid., 201) which overlap, poke through, and provide directions to separate historical landscapes.

And what of those new spiritual outlets, are they a sign of the retreat of Christianity into a shallow and socially insignificant secular spirituality or of the “turn to life”, the emergence of new opportunities for healthy living, self-realisation and cultural affinity? As LEFEBVRE suggested, we fail to do justice to the nature and complexity of space if we believe it is just a matter of “reading” what is inscribed there (1991, 142). The inherent dynamism of a place (even a new spiritual outlet) encompasses the story of its production and evidence of the forces at work within it that command those who enter it to act in specified ways, whether in answer to the call of spiritual consumption or ritual. My own observation of the contemporary British religious landscape, in failing to penetrate such depths, is thus rather cursory and shallow. In order to understand more fully this dynamism, it is necessary to narrow our gaze and focus on a smaller area, on religion and spirituality within a locality, and on the historical, social, economic and political processes that have contributed to its place and relationships. But that is an exercise for another occasion.

What can we conclude, if anything, from our cursory and shallow glance at the bigger picture? Is religion drowning or waving, or does the answer remain a matter of scholarly interpretation? Certainly the landscape does not

speak clearly either in favour of or against “secularisation” in Britain for the reason that the meaning and application of that sociological concept continues to be unresolved. However, signs of religion and spirituality in the contemporary landscape do seem to support an argument for the vitality, transformative ability and ingenuity of many religious and spiritual collectivities and individuals.

What we see suggests four possible areas of change. The first involves religious and spiritual literacy, that is, the awareness and knowledge of all people about religions, their communities of faith and the broader spiritual culture of Britain. With fewer attending churches and nurtured in Christian values and teachings (and here we must concur with the secularisation thesis), there is a significant gap in many people’s knowledge and experience of religion. The making of a religiously diverse landscape and the transformation of familiar everyday spaces (streets, parks, shops, homes) into temporary, and sometimes permanent, spiritual sites gives public acknowledgement to the place of religion, helps to make people aware of religious plurality, and opens up the possibility of their participation at some level in spiritual culture.

Secondly, such a religious and spiritual presence in towns and cities, from the perspective of committed practitioners, denotes the sacralisation of urban spaces, of a landscape which is commonly held to be industrialised, commercialised, secular and material. In an article on a Sufi procession in Birmingham, WERBNER speaks of Muslims “stamping the earth with the name of Allah” (1996, 167). Whether it is through the ritual performance of processions or festivals, the erection of new places of worship, the opening of new spiritual outlets, or the spiritual transformation of public and private spaces, the march of sacralisation – as opposed to secularisation – seems to be in evidence among Britain’s Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, new Christians, neo-Pagans and spiritual seekers.

Thirdly, as we witnessed in new multi-faith gatherings and partnerships and in innovative spiritual affinities, the social spaces of religiosity are changing. This invites us to think beyond the over-used categories of “membership” and “attendance” as indicators of participation in religious and spiritual life, to such things as encounter, joint socio-religious action, common patterns of spiritual consumption, and shared experience (whether of grief or personal empowerment) as a way of better understanding the social nature of religion and spirituality in Britain.

Finally, on the basis of what we have seen of the emergence both of a new discursive space of spirituality in public policy, education, health, business and the workplace, and of new forms of mainstream spiritual consumption, we should ask ourselves whether what we see is solely the work of effective, self-conscious spiritual actors, or whether it also signifies

an active response from within the heart of the secular in recognition of its own lack – its failure to acknowledge and harness the non-material, the symbolic, the power within the self, the whole person, and the transformative power of people acting together.

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