

Religious diversity: rethinking religion



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Introduction

Religion is not necessarily what you think it is! This free course, *Religious diversity: rethinking religion*, will present a selection of the vast variety of religious practices and beliefs in Britain today. Having familiarity with religions is increasingly required to make sense of issues of local, national and global importance.

This course will introduce skills that enable you to better understand and interact with people whose ideas and actions have been influenced by religion. Understanding religion will also help you have a deeper appreciation of ideas about the secular and how secularity functions in British society today.

This taste of religious studies as a discipline will begin to enable you to interact with religious diversity in today's world in a more confident, informed way.

This course will also give you a taste of the Open University course [A227 Exploring religion: places, practices, texts and experiences](#). This short free course focuses on a selection of religious places and practices in London. However, the full course explores religion in a more global context, with a focus on how religion is actually lived and practiced.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- recognise the variety and vibrancy of religion in contemporary Britain
- appreciate the importance of recognising diversity within religious traditions
- recognise how 'religious literacy' contributes to civil society.

1 What is religious studies?

Before we start exploring religion itself, let's clarify the approach and aims of religious studies. Religious studies is not the study of a single religion or a search for religious 'truth'. Religious studies uses a variety of ideas and methods to develop a better understanding of the diversity of human beliefs and practices, which may relate to the category 'religion'. This includes religions like Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism, and many others.

But religious studies is also interested in the beliefs and ritual practices of indigenous peoples and popular mythologies, such as those expressed in the *Star Wars* films. Religious studies explores the boundaries between the secular and the religious, which are categories not always as bounded as they may appear. Religious studies is interested in how our ideas of being 'secular' developed. It seeks to understand the underlying assumptions and rituals that structure human behaviour. It looks at experiences that may be described as mystical or spiritual rather than religious. It is very much interested in exploring the diversity of religion 'as it is lived'.



Figure 1 Banner of Mary holding a big teddy bear, surrounded by many toys. Photo: © Suzanne Newcombe

Before we continue with the course, take a moment to consider the following questions:

Activity 1

What does 'religious literacy' mean to you? Why might it be a valuable skill to have? Jot down a few of your thoughts in this text box, then you will be able to reveal the discussion to find out more about religious literacy.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

There is no single definition of 'religious literacy'. The term 'religious literacy' implies an appreciation the diversity of human religiosity. It also relates to having a set of tools to use when encountering others' religion in everyday life. For some people, the idea of religious literacy is more related to the idea of understanding their own religious tradition better. However, in religious studies, we understand this idea much more broadly.

Religious literacy has been described as a 'civic endeavour ... aimed at enabling people of all faiths and none to engage with the increasing plurality of religion and belief encountered by everyone as a result of migration and globalisation' (Dinham and Francis, 2015, p. 16).

It is the importance of religious literacy in this sense that we hope to promote with this course.

We hope that you will come away from this short course with a greater appreciation of the variety and vibrancy of religion in contemporary Britain. We also hope you'll have a growing appreciation of the diversity within any religious tradition: no single tradition is homogenous.

Religious studies is an interdisciplinary subject. It draws particularly strongly on the disciplines of history, sociology and anthropology. Many of the skills developed – such as critical thinking, questioning common assumptions, and making evidence-based arguments – are also highly valued in employment and are useful in negotiating life more generally.

Religious studies develops ways of understanding and relating to others whose deeply held positions are very different from your own. These skills can help you establish and maintain a dialogue with those you encounter, in many different situations.

1.1 Who is religious in Britain?

Religion in contemporary Britain appears to be something of a contradiction. The percentage of the population who are active religious adherents is falling. The number of people identifying as 'non-religious' accounts, by some estimates, for nearly half of the British population (NatCen Social Research, 2016).

Yet religion retains immense cultural influence, and the absolute numbers of religiously motivated people remain significant enough to require consideration in local and national

policy decisions. A variety of religiously committed people are also regularly encountered on high streets and neighbourhoods throughout Britain.

The figure below compares how the population of England and Wales defined their religious identity in the 2001 and 2011 censuses.

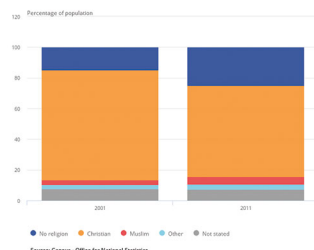


Figure 2 Change in religious affiliation, 2001– 2011, England and Wales, in 'Religion in England and Wales, 2011', Office for National Statistics, December 2012. This chart is licensed under the Open Government Licence 3.0, <http://reference.data.gov.uk/id/open-government-licence>

The largest section of the population is represented in orange, those who identify with the general label of 'Christian'. This included 69% of the population of England and Wales in the 2011 census (White, 2012). In Scotland, 54% of the population identified as Christian (National Records of Scotland, 2013a).

The most noticeable change between 2001 and 2011 is the increase in the blue 'No religion' identification. In 2011, nearly 25% of the population of England and Wales were happy to identify with this label (White, 2012). In Scotland, 37% of the population identified as non-believers in the 2011 census (National Records of Scotland, 2013b).

Yet what exactly it means to self-identify as 'non-religious' is a subject that is not very well understood. Recent research suggests that being 'non-religious' does not usually equate to being a committed atheist or humanist. Rather identifying as 'non-religious' might signify a position of personal disinterest about matters relating to religion (Lee, 2016).

Reinforcing the continuing cultural influence of Christianity, the Church of England has been established in law since 1534, and the national churches of Wales and Scotland still have significant political and popular influence in their respective areas.

The Christian religion underpins much of Britain's legal and cultural assumptions. The Church of England exerts influence on legislation through the 'Lords Spiritual', 26 bishops who sit in the House of Lords.

Where religion ends and culture begins is not necessarily straightforward. This is one of many things the study of religion exposes. The unique history of Northern Ireland creates a very different religious landscape. Here 41% identified as Catholic and 42% identified with Presbyterian, Church of Ireland or other Protestant denominations. Those identified as non-religious made up less than 17% of the population in 2011 (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2012).

Despite the continued legal and cultural significance of Christianity in Britain, it is also clear that only a small proportion of the British population attend church on Sunday. Recent counts put this number as less than 6% of the British population. Yet the absolute number of regular churchgoers still total over 3 million, a significant section of the population. (Brierley in McAndrew, 2016)

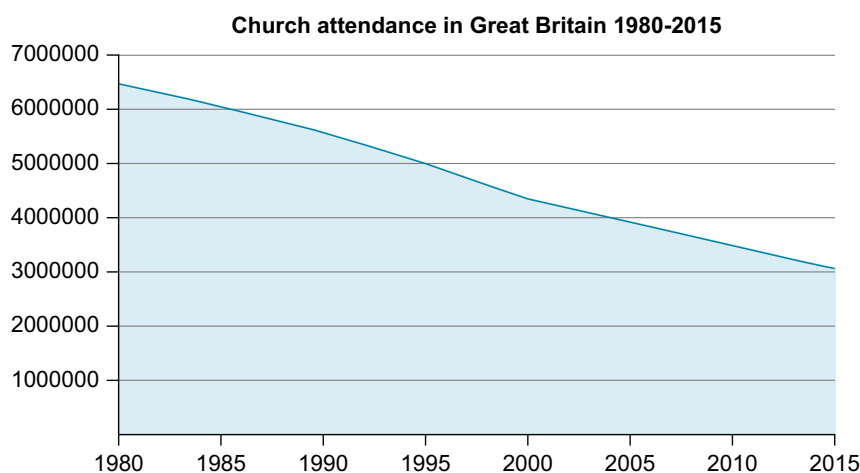


Figure 3 Church attendance in Great Britain, 1980 – 2015. Data from Religious Trends edited by Peter Brierley, <http://www.brin.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Estimated-Church-Attendance-1980-2015-Brierley.xlsx>

1.2 What is secularism?

What secularism means has been interpreted differently in different national and legal contexts. For example, in France, the development of secularism (called *laïcité*) has led to the ownership of all religious buildings being transferred to civic authorities. Thus the state directly subsidises the upkeep of historical religious buildings.



Figure 4 The motto of the secular French republic ‘Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité’ inscribed on the arch of a church door to show that this church building is owned by the state. Photo: © Graham Harvey

Since the 1960s, in particular, many individuals within European cultures have questioned established authorities and institutions. Adherence to church doctrine and moral or ethical expectations and attendance at Christian services fell in most of Europe (Brown, 2009 and McLeod, 2007). There is considerable disagreement amongst some scholars about how long and why Christianity has been in decline in Britain. Some have traced a decline in Christianity throughout the nineteenth century. However the 1960s do seem to have been a key decade, from which secularism appeared to be in the ascendant.

Still, most of the world, and a significant minority of people in Britain continue to be deeply religious. In any large British city, many will have backgrounds from around the world. Many immigrants have brought their faiths with them and these often continue among second and subsequent generations.

The numbers of any single minority religion are small relative to the general population. But a religion does not need many members to attract controversy. For many reasons, Muslims in Britain often find themselves discussed in the press. Yet in 2011, Muslims made up less than 5% of the population (White, 2012). However in some areas concentrations of minority religions are much higher; for example, Muslims make up 38% of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (Tower Hamlets, 2015).

British law enshrines a respect for religious freedom, balanced with other rights and restrictions. Increasingly, religious diversity impacts on employment practices and decisions about local buildings and community centres.

2 Variety and vibrancy of religion in London

In the 2011 England and Wales Census, 817,000 individuals (or 1.5% of the population) identified as Hindu (White, 2012). But Hindus are not distributed equally across England and Wales. In fact, over half the Hindu population of England lives in the greater London area, with a concentration in the north and west (GLA, 2012).

Near the North Circular ring road around London is one of the largest Hindu temples to be found outside of India, the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir. This impressive structure is popularly known as the 'Neasden Temple' and was built between 1992 and 1995 with materials and craftsmen imported from India.

Activity 2

For your next activity you will watch a video tour of the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in London given by Yogendra Narendra Shah.

As you watch, think about the reasons the Indian community made such an impressive temple at this location. What are they saying about their culture and beliefs? What kind of statement is this community making about their residence in Britain?

This video activity has been filmed in Google 360 – it is best viewed in Chrome, Edge or Firefox browsers. In these browsers you can change the camera angle to pan around the scene and explore the building more fully. In other browsers, you can still watch the video but it will look distorted and you will not be able to change the camera angle.

[Google 360 video of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir](#)

Right click on the link and select 'Open link in new tab'.

Discussion

What struck me most was the immense size of the building, as well as the intricacy and care of the artwork both inside and outside. The temple was built at great expense and using logistical ingenuity. This is a community that is making a statement about its permanence in Britain. These ethnic Indians are establishing their commitment to Britain, and to their own religious beliefs and culture, in a very visible way.

Yet it is not an entirely inward-looking community. The Neasden Temple also goes out of its way to welcome thousands of school children and other visitors each year. It invests in making its world view more understandable and accessible to those outside of their community.

How are we to read these big religious public spaces? What meaning do they hold for their associated believers and practitioners? And what messages do they give to those who are not part of their community? These are some of the issues you will be introduced to briefly in this short course. They are explored more fully in

[A227 Exploring religion: places, practices, texts and experiences.](#)

2.1 St Paul's: a national church

We will now consider one of the most iconic symbols of Christianity in Britain – St. Paul's Cathedral in London. This is also a place where the continuing, though changing, importance of religion in British society is evident.

St Paul's continues to hold a conspicuous place in the London skyline, despite there being a recent proliferation of much larger skyscrapers. One reason it continues to hold a central visual place is that it was built on the highest ground of the City, simply because it was there first.



Figure 5 St Paul's Cathedral, City of London, from the Thames. Photo: © Vincent Abbey/Alamy

The first church on this site probably dates back to around 600. The medieval cathedral which replaced a series of smaller church buildings was destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666. This tragedy provided an opportunity for Sir Christopher Wren to design the present church. The current building was constructed between 1675 and 1708, when Christianity had an almost complete religious monopoly in Britain.

St Paul's Cathedral continues to be a strong visual statement of Christianity's dominance and persistence.

St Paul's grandiose interior hosts regular Christian worship with the formal liturgy of the Church of England. The cathedral employs a professional choir, prioritising a long tradition of promoting high quality music within the established Church.

But St Paul's also hosts services to mark major national occasions. Some of these significant national events have ranged from celebrating the military victories of Queen Anne's reign in the seventeenth century to Queen Elizabeth II's diamond jubilee in 2012. In 1852, 12,000 people filled the building for the Duke of Wellington's funeral (Keene et al., 2004). For Sir Winston Churchill's funeral only about 3,000 mourners were allowed

in the cathedral itself, but it is estimated that 350 million watched the St Paul's service on television (Klein, 2015).



Figure 6 Interior view of St Paul's Cathedral during the funeral of Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington in 1852, lithograph, height 67 cm. Engraved in 1853 by William Simpson from an original by Louis Haghe, published by Ackermann & Co. London Metropolitan Archives, La.Pr.460/PAU(2)int. Photo: © City of London

Activity 3

Now watch this [Google 360 video of St Paul's Cathedral](#) as introduced by David Ison, the Dean of St Paul's. As you watch this video, take some notes about the various reasons why people use the cathedral. What does Ison present as the most important purpose of St Paul's today?

As you will remember from exploring the Neasden Temple, by clicking on the video and moving your mouse, you can change the camera angle to pan around the scene and explore the building more fully. Google 360 videos are best viewed in Chrome, Edge or Firefox browsers.

2.2 St Paul's: diverse visions



Figure 7 St Paul's Cathedral, London, 1675–1710, photograph c.1865–1885. A. D. White Architectural Photographs, Cornell University Library Accession Number: 15/5/3090.01143

Because St Paul's is a powerful national symbol, the meaning and role of St Paul's are contested. Now read these three short extracts which offer different views.

For each extract, try to summarise the article's views about the cathedral in one sentence. Then reveal the discussion to reflect more on how each extract reveals a different understanding of St Paul's as a significant cultural symbol.

Activity 4

Extract 1 Who We Are

The vision and values of the Cathedral Church of St Paul in London

Our Vision

- St Paul's Cathedral seeks to enable people in all their diversity to encounter the transforming presence of God in Jesus Christ.
- As a community of worshippers, staff and volunteers we work with care and imagination to be a centre for welcome, worship and learning

which inspires successive generations to engage with the richness of the Christian faith and its heritage.

- We aim to do this with confidence, compassion and creativity, promoting dignity and justice for everyone.
- We work with the Bishop and Diocese of London and the wider church, as a spiritual focus for London, the nation and the world.

Our Values

- Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control;
- To uphold integrity, honesty and openness in what we do;
- To aim for the highest possible standards in everything we do, acknowledging that we cannot do everything;
- To make our operations as just and as sustainable as we can;
- To foster and encourage diversity, being inclusive and challenging to ourselves as well as others.

(St Paul's Cathedral 2017 'Who We Are' [Online]. Available at www.stpauls.co.uk/who-we-are (Accessed 01 August 2017)).

Provide your answer...

Discussion

This extract is from St Paul's own website. It states that its primary purpose is to promote the Christian faith by enabling people 'in all their diversity' to 'encounter the transforming presence of God in Jesus Christ'. In his interview on the video, Ison emphasised how he saw his role as to maintain St Paul's mission 'in a dignified and just manner'. This understanding pays less attention to the multiple meanings the church has for many in the nation. However, by maintaining the dignity of the church, and in emphasising the diversity of those who might enter its walls, one could argue that its place as a centre for the nation will be better preserved.

Activity 5

Extract 2 Prince Harry pays tribute to bomb disposal heroes during service at St Paul's

Prince Harry comforted a bereaved family and met wounded military veterans today after attending a service at St Paul's Cathedral marking 75 years of Bomb Disposal.

In suit and medals, the fifth in line to the throne joined some of the bravest of the brave - the men and women from all three Armed Forces who run towards the bombs - among a 1,500-strong congregation inside Sir Christopher Wren's architectural masterpiece.

Second world sirens and a tannoy announcement from Afghanistan of the words 'Op Minimise, Op Minimise, Op Minimise' to signify casualties on the way into base with a Medical Emergency Response Team sounded out across the cathedral to evoke their sacrifice.

Harry, a veteran of two tours of duty in Afghanistan, met the family of Corporal Jamie Kirkpatrick, a bomb disposal expert with 101 Engineer Regiment who was shot dead at the age of 32 in the Nahr-e Saraj district of Helmand province in June 2010.

Kirkpatrick, an Edinburgh-born Royal Engineer who lived in Llanelli, Carmarthenshire, was fondly remembered during the service, attended by his parents, brother, sister, and six-year-old daughter Holly.

His father, Ian, spoke of their grief.

'We recall many family celebrations and events that would, under normal circumstances, be a source of happiness, but which are now inevitably a source of sadness too,' he said.

[...]

As Harry, 31, met veterans after the service, he crouched down to chat to two ex-sappers in wheelchairs, Clive Smith, 30, and Jack Cummings, 27, who each lost both of their legs in bomb explosions in Afghanistan.

Both knew him from his work with injured veterans.

Mr Smith from Walsall, West Midlands, hopes to compete in cycling events at Harry's Invictus Games for wounded veterans in Florida next year after coming fourth in two events in the inaugural games in London last year. 'We were just chatting about my rehabilitation,' he said. The former sapper, who lost his legs in an explosion in October 2010, found the service moving.

'It was quite emotional. It brought back memories from times I'd rather forget but it was a very good service,' he added.

(Palmer, R. (2015) 'Prince Harry pays tribute to bomb disposal heroes during service at St Paul's', *Daily Express*, 22 October [Online]. Available at <http://www.express.co.uk/news/royal/613928/Prince-Harry-Bomb-disposal-service-St-Pauls-memorial> (Accessed 1 August 2017))

Provide your answer...

Discussion

This extract is a reporting on a service attended by Prince Harry in 2015. It presents St Paul's as a splendid setting for royal and military occasions. Here St Paul's provides a suitable context for reflecting on patriotic sacrifice. The role of Christian belief and worship is de-emphasised in comparison to St Paul's own presentation of its purpose. The testimony of the veterans and their families emphasises the importance of these public acknowledgements of loss and sacrifice for the nation.

Activity 6

Read the article '[Occupy Protesters Chain Themselves to St Paul's Pulpit](#)' which featured on the *Guardian* website in October 2012.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The Occupy protesters argued that in order to be true to the teachings of Jesus, the founder of Christianity, St Paul's should be doing more to help the poor and to challenge economic injustice. Emphasising Christian charity is sometimes at odds with representing the powers of the established, national church in Britain. In the video, you may remember Ison discussing the difficulties the cathedral leadership had in seeing themselves as having a duty to both the City of London and the protesters during this particular incident. Those representing Occupy clearly believe that St Paul's should be doing more for those less fortunate.

As you become more familiar with religion as a subject of study, you will discover many other examples of how a particular religious site, artefact, text, practice or experience can mean very different things to different people.

St Paul's is but one expression of an enormous diversity within historic and contemporary Christianity.

2.3 The variety of Christianity in London



Figure 8 Eternal Sacred Order of The Cherubim and Seraphim march through Walworth, London during their annual thanksgiving service, 28 July 2013. Photo: Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

The Church of England is perhaps the most familiar expression of Christianity to many in Britain. However, the world population of Christians is changing.

As recently as 1910, there were four times as many Christians in the 'Global North' as in the 'Global South'. By 2011, more than 61% of Christians worldwide lived in the 'Global South.' It may come as a surprise that among the top 10 countries with the largest percentage of Christians are China, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria (Pew Research Centre, 2014).

As scholar Philip Jenkins writes: 'Over the last century, ... the centre of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably away from Europe, southward, to Africa and Latin America, and eastward, toward Asia. Today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in those regions.' (Jenkins, 2002, pp. 1–2).

The Christian tradition – its beliefs and practices – have been translated to new geographical settings. And these new forms of Christian worship are also making their mark in Britain (Catto, 2012).

Global migration has had a huge impact on London's religious life. By far the largest area of growth has been in the so-called 'black majority churches'. These churches include a diverse range of traditions and spiritualities, but have congregations primarily of African and Caribbean heritage, though many of the members were born in Britain as the children and grandchildren of immigrants.



Figure 9 Members of a choir sing and dance during the Eternal Sacred Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church's annual Thanksgiving service, 2013, London.

Photo: Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

2.4 Pentecostal Christianity in London

Today, Pentecostal churches may account for half of London's Christian worshippers (Fesenmyer, 2016). Pentecostals emphasize the immediacy, power and present-day reality of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is recorded in the Acts of Apostles in the New Testament of the Bible and describes a great wind and tongues of fire descending during a gathering of Jesus' followers, several weeks after his death and resurrection. The apostles began to speak in languages unknown to themselves, but recognised by listeners in the crowd (Acts 2: 1-13). On this occasion, Peter preached that those who repented and committed their lives towards the teachings of Jesus would receive the 'gifts' of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2: 38).



Figure 10 Faith healing at Elim Pentecostal Church, Kensington Temple, London.

Photo: TravelStockCollection - Homer Sykes/Alamy

Contemporary Pentecostals typically demonstrate these gifts by:

- testifying to the power of their faith
- describing how God works miracles in their lives
- speaking in tongues
- practicing spiritual healing
- prophecy.

There is a wide variety of Pentecostal groups and denominations.

Jesus House

Jesus House is the main London centre of the Nigerian-headquartered Redeemed Christian Church of God. Founded in 1994 and located in an easily accessible part of north London Jesus House worships in a functional building that does not stand out from the commercial premises of the area. Despite its relatively recent origins, by 2014 Jesus House already had over 3,000 Sunday worshippers (Gledhill, 2014).

Activity 7

For your next activity, you will be watching a Google 360 video about Jesus House introduced by Ayobami Olunloyo. Remember that Google 360 videos are best viewed in Chrome, Edge or Firefox browsers. In these browsers, you can change the camera angle to pan around the scene and explore the building more fully by clicking on the video and moving your mouse.

As you watch, consider what is different about this space compared to the space at St Paul's? And what aspects are similar?

[Google 360 video about Jesus House](#)

Write down one similarity and one difference between Jesus House and St Paul's in the box below then reveal the discussion to read more.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Jesus House does not look like a church in the same sense as most Church of England buildings. It looks like a conference centre. However, it is regularly filled with an enthusiastic congregation. The music is modern and most of the faces of the congregation are African in origin. Olunloyo, the narrator, emphasises the church's plans for expansion and regular gifts to a variety of charitable causes. Here it is how the congregation worships, rather than the setting of worship, that is its essential element.

Olunloyo also emphasises that the church attempts to make worship easy to attend. It is located at the centre of a major transportation hub, meaning many can attend Jesus House in person. But Jesus House also emphasises a variety of internet-based communication and modern social media. The church seeks to be engaged with the wider culture of its largely black congregation. In particular, it seeks to appeal to younger people.

St Paul's Cathedral was built with the purpose of impressing God's greatness on those that see it. The current St Paul's was built to host events of national significance. It emphasises dignity rather than youth engagement. As Ison notes, St Paul's has a relatively small number of regular worshippers, especially considering its vast size.

However, many visitors pass through the doors and Ison believes that many of these stay and use the space for prayer or quiet contemplation. St Paul's is expensive to maintain and the Cathedral charges visitors to help maintain the building. But as Ison noted in the video, it is a priority of St Paul's to be a place where people from any background can have 'an experience of God'. It is the setting rather than the sermons that create this experience.

St Paul's and Jesus House are both Christian churches. Yet it is clear that they serve very different purposes and tend to attract different followers.

Pentecostals make up a third of London's active Christians. However as we saw with Jesus House, their buildings are inconspicuous compared to those of the longer-established denominations. Smaller and recently formed Pentecostal churches often meet for worship in any space they can find. New churches can be found even in residential settings and in spaces on industrial estates. Sometimes these new churches find themselves at odds with planning regulations.



Figure 11 The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Higher Ground Assembly, Croydon, London. Photo: © Kate Pugh

Historically this parallel's the experience of Nonconformist churches, such as the Methodists and Unitarians, in the nineteenth century. They also initially had to improvise spaces for worship. Eventually, these denominations were able to gather enough resources to build permanent churches.



Figure 12 The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Finsbury Park, London.
Photo: © Ewan Munro

The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) is a Brazilian Pentecostal church. It has acquired the Rainbow Theatre in Finsbury Park as a house of worship. This building was erected in the 1930s as a cinema and, in the 1970s the Rainbow Theatre hosted rock concerts. Contrary to many assumptions about inevitable secularisation, churches remain relevant and even continue to use or negotiate more secular public spaces in some contexts.

Recognition and understanding of diversity within as well as between major religious traditions is an essential part of the academic study of religion. Understanding the beliefs and practices of a new congregation can help local communities and policymakers more constructively dialogue with unfamiliar churches establishing themselves in their areas.

A good example of the importance of this dialogue is can be demonstrated by some research conducted at the University of Roehampton on what they describe as 'new Black Majority Churches' in the London Borough of Southwark. Their report highlights continuing tension as these groups try to establish new churches in the area, but also encourages developing good practice in communication with local business and council planners, so that all local communities can benefit ([Being Built Together](#), 2013).

2.5 Summary of Section 2



Figure 13 Private Paul Oglesby, 30th Infantry, standing in reverence before an altar in a damaged Catholic Church. 23 July 1943 in Acerno, Italy. Unknown photographer. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, (NAID) 531181, Public Domain

Churches continue to be powerful and evocative images in British culture, even as their meanings are complex, church attendance is declining and immigration and global Evangelical and Pentecostal movements are changing the shape of popular Christian worship.

Long-established religious buildings, like St Paul's Cathedral, are an unquestioned part of the fabric of the city. They still evoke a power to move many, even those not formally identifying with Christianity or the idea of religion. The meaning and significance of such spaces is contested and deeply important to many.

Newer and adapted religious buildings can be controversial. Sometimes this is primarily due to practical concerns around parking and noise, but often there are more ideological concerns, because a Pentecostal church, a temple, or mosque is seen to be 'out of character' and unwelcome to neighbours.

If such potentially divisive issues are to be resolved in a mutually acceptable manner, it is essential that religion itself is more fully understood.

3 Religion as lived

Believing is one of the things religious people do. People often cite religious texts and teachers as authoritative. However, attention to the lived realities of religious people reinforces an understanding that we are dealing with changeable and contested phenomena. This is part of what makes studying religion exciting. In this section, we will look more closely at the diversity of religious practices. We will be looking at religion as it is lived.



Figure 14 Whirling Dervishes of the Mevlevi Order, Sema ceremony, Saruhan Caravanserai, Sarihane, near Avanos, Cappadocia. Photo: Image Broker/Alamy

In religious studies, we apply methods that would be familiar to colleagues in disciplines like history, anthropology, folklore, literature, sociology and others. These aid us in understanding and discussing the varied phenomena of religion in its historical and contemporary, but always lived, contexts.

3.1 The East London Mosque

To start this process, we will return to a specific place, but this time to consider how it is used by those who go there.

Here we are going to look at the East London Mosque on Whitechapel Road. London's Muslim population originated from the Muslim seamen who arrived in the nineteenth century. Often they were paid off from their ships and obliged to seek accommodation until they could find new employment or passage home. Sometimes they ended up remaining in London.

Since then, there have been several other waves of Muslim immigration to Britain. In London, many immigrants settled in the East End and the first provisions for communal

Muslim worship were in converted residential spaces in the area. Today's purpose-built mosque was completed in 1985.



Figure 15 East London Mosque, Whitechapel, London, aerial view. Photo: © A.P.S. (UK)/Alamy

Mosques are primarily a place where Muslim communities can gather for prayer. However, mosques are also used for a wide variety of religious instruction and other communal activities. As scholar Sophia Gilliat-Ray explains, mosques:

Exist at the heart of the community and all the obligations associated with the five 'pillars' of Islam involve mosques in one way or another. ... Mosques are spaces for discussion and debate, for the settlement of disputes, for the performance of rites of passage, for education and for social welfare.

(Gilliat-Ray, 2010, p. 182f)

The East London Mosque has sought to expand its ability to serve a variety of functions for its community. It added a building to host more community services, the London Muslim Centre, in 2004. It completed building the Maryam Centre, making specific provision for women, in 2013.

The London Muslim Centre and the Maryam Centre



Figure 16 The position of the Maryam Centre in relation to the East London Mosque and London Muslim Centre. Photo: Roshni Amin

The London Muslim Centre hosts a large range of community services, including education for children in supplementary schools and education in Islam and Arabic for all members of the community. There are also a number of culturally specific charities hosted by the Centre. These include the Somali Development Association (Al Shafie Institute) and the North African Community Association (NACA). The Centre offers pro bono legal advice for members of the community. It also includes a library and archives documenting its history and activities.

Historically, Muslim women's use of mosques has been significantly different from that of men (Katz, 2014, p. 7). Women are not required to attend collective prayers in mosques on Friday. There are also regulations regarding modesty, dress codes and the avoidance of sexual temptation by separating the genders, particularly during prayer time.

Although the primary purpose of the Maryam Centre was to provide prayer facilities for women, it has come to hold a much broader role.

Activity 8

Take a moment to reflect upon your assumptions on the separation of women and men in religious contexts.

Now, listen to this interview with Sufia Alam the manager of the Maryam Centre at the East London Mosque, who will explain how the Maryam Centre is used. As you listen, reflect on if your assumptions about women's spaces – does Sufia Alam say anything that surprises you?



Figure 17 Sufia Alam, East London Mosque, October 2016. Photo: Roshni Amin

Audio content is not available in this format.

Discussion

The Maryam Centre may be primarily a prayer space, but it also offers a variety of other services. It offers a women's only gymnasium and exercise area, educational facilities specifically reserved for women and free counselling with professional female therapists. Although not mentioned in this short interview, Sufia Alam also works closely with the local council on issues of child welfare and domestic violence. She is able to make interventions within the community by communicating with the women in what is perceived by the community to be a safe space. The Maryam Centre allows the women of the community space to network and make decisions about their needs without involving the men of the community.

3.2 Judaism and kosher food

Many religions have rules about food or its avoidance. According to a phrase in widespread use, 'you are what you eat'. Although this is most often used in reference to particular diets, it seems appropriate to the lives of many religious people. Some show that they are committed or observant members of particular religious groups by taking a lot of care about what they do and don't eat on a daily basis.

If you think of a religious festival or ritual you will almost certainly think of something to do with food. For example, for many people the following are almost synonymous: Christmas and turkeys, Easter and eggs, Pesach and matzah, Ramadan and iftar, puja and prasad. Of equal importance, most religions include practices to do with special ritual meals or fasts (periods of avoiding food).

Even the most 'spiritual' person needs to eat. What they choose to eat, and the people they choose to eat with, can be central to understanding religions.

Activity 9

Take a moment to consider what you are happy to eat, or what you may not be willing to eat. What beliefs (not necessarily religious) may have lead you to make these decisions?

Now watch this video with Rabbi Chaim Weiner who explains Jewish dietary restrictions, and how the requirements of a kosher diet affect his life. Then reveal the discussion below.

Video content is not available in this format.



Discussion

There is a lot to observe in this video. In particular, how keeping kosher structured so much of Weiner's life and experience. It involved enjoyment of what was permissible but David Salzman also talked about developing discipline and restraint when kosher food was unavailable. He believed that restraining himself in the face of temptation to break kosher restrictions was pleasing to God. I was particularly struck by Weiner's questions. He reflects that choices about what to eat and what not to eat are central to answering the questions: 'who am I?' and 'how do I live?' These are some of the main questions addressed by religions, and questions that most humans reflect on from time to time.

3.3 Islam and Ramadan

If we think about the function of food-related practices, we can probably agree that eating with other people who share the same dietary practices creates, maintains and strengthens communities. Conversely, people often avoid others who they know or suspect of not abiding by the same dietary rules. In some extreme cases, they might avoid them altogether, in all social contexts, not just those involving food.

In schools and businesses, in homes and religious venues, people from different religions (as well as those who consider themselves to be 'not religious') come together. It is a common human experience that people who eat together build friendships. They may gain mutual understanding more quickly than those who only talk with each other. Many rituals around food sharing in religious traditions are intended to serve just this function. In the film clip below, a group of Muslim friends talk as they eat in a small café in Brighton. They come from different countries (India, Pakistan, Turkey, Syria and Bangladesh) but now live and work or study in England.

They also come from different Islamic traditions: Sunni, Shi'i, Ismaili and Alevi. They do not pretend to represent what all Muslims from those countries or communities think or do. Their conversation is about the similarities and difference between their own experiences, attitudes, preferences and practices.

Much of the filmed conversation in the Brighton café is about the foods that the participants associate with the 'breaking of the fast', *Iftar*, that follows after the sun sets on each day of Ramadan.

Activity 10

Before you watch this film, consider what you might know about Ramadan practices. As you watch the film, listen carefully to the different views expressed. Consider if the opinions and practices expressed by the individuals are different from your expectations. Then reveal the discussion.

Video content is not available in this format.



Discussion

We learn a lot about the food preferences of families and communities in different places. As the friends talk, we learn that they object to the idea that particular eating or fasting habits, or particular clothes, define who is or is not a Muslim or what a 'good' Muslim should or should not eat or wear. They agree that what the restraints of Ramadan is intended to teach has more to do with being a responsible, decent and moderate person than specific food habits.

We gather hints about the influence of the diverse origins or backgrounds of the five friends. There are also some interesting comments about changes of diet and religious observance that took place when each of them moved to Britain. The fact that they are friends who happily share food together is, itself, worthy of note at a time when so much conflict seems to be generated by people from similar religious and national contexts.

3.4 Summary of Section 3



Figure 18 US military personnel in Iraq join in with locals for an Iftar meal, breaking the fast of Ramadan in 2007. Photo: Spc. Alexis Harrison 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division Public Affairs 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division Public Affairs. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

Too often we are encouraged to think of religion as being distinct from – or even opposed to – everyday matters. In practice, however, religious texts and teachings devote considerable attention to how to handle our human bodies in everyday situations. In fact, it is often difficult to know where religion stops and culture starts.

In religious studies we often find ourselves reflecting on beliefs and practices that other people take for granted, but may be strange to our own background. By doing this we gain a far richer sense of the world. We can also gain insights into our own habits and

assumptions. By turning our attention to some of these habits of diet, we learn about everyday, physical, material and sensual practices that are key elements of many people's religious lives.

By looking at the diversity of religious practices, we have emphasised that there is no fixed or unassailable barrier between putatively 'official' rules and lived reality. There is, rather, a dynamic and fluid continuum between what people are taught and what they actually do. Similarly, what people do may shift as they choose to join in more or less with particular traditions.

One reason for studying religious practices is that it can improve the chances of religious people getting a fair hearing in legal, political and media realms. In employment and educational contexts, the law requires respect and equal treatment for those who have religious obligations, such as fasting. When religions are imagined as 'belief systems' and thought to be defined by strict adherence to creeds or other official teachings, the actual living or doing of religion can be marginalised. Equally, when one person, group or text is taken to be definitive of how a religion should be lived, all other practices can be made difficult.

4 The importance of understanding religions

Active religious groups continue to have a substantial presence, both in the United Kingdom and in the world more generally. Diversity is both enriching and challenging. In order to effectively appreciate and manage migrants to Britain and international relations, the religious dimensions of this diversity need to be understood.



Figure 19 Sign at Heathrow Airport directing passengers to its multi-faith prayer room. Photo: Marion Bowman

Religion is often linked with membership of a particular community. It is extremely important to both individual identity and national politics. It arouses strong emotional and intellectual reactions. Individuals and groups frequently appeal to and identify with religion if asked to explain their motivations, aspirations and anxieties.

Religion is a key aspect of the social and historical experience of most people on our planet today. If we want to understand the world around us, then we need to understand religion. At the beginning of the course, we asked you to reflect on what 'religious literacy' meant to you and why it could be valuable.

Activity 11

Reflect again on these questions – do you now think of religion differently from how you thought of it before, after reading through this course?

Then play this short podcast in which some of the members of the Religious Studies Department of the Open University explain why they believe studying religion is important.

Video content is not available in this format.

5 End-of-course quiz

To conclude this short course, try this [End-of-course quiz](#) to test your memory and understanding.

Open the quiz in a new tab or window and then come back here when you have finished.

Conclusion

This free course, *Religious diversity: rethinking religion*, introduced you to a selection of the huge variety of religious beliefs and practices that are present in Britain.

If you are interested in learning more about religion as it is lived and how it influences culture and society, consider enrolling in the Open University course

[A227 Exploring religion: places, practices, texts and experiences](#). Watch the following video for a taste of this exciting and thought-provoking course.

Video content is not available in this format.



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