

Conference Report

Religion and Locality Conference

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A two-day (September 8–10, 1998) international conference, "Religion and Locality," took place at Leeds University, organized by the Department of Theology and Religious Studies. The conference participants addressed various emerging issues related to the relationship between religion and locality, religious mapping of a locality, and the effects of globalization on local manifestations of religious practices, ideas, and movements.

The first day of the conference was opened by a lengthy discussion in an agenda-setting session led by Kim Knott and Haddon Willmer (both of University of Leeds, UK). Knott and Willmer raised important theoretical questions in the study of religion and locality. They argued that locality cannot always be confined to a physically identified place, for a shared culture also constitutes a form of locality. Addressing methodological issues, Knott and Willmer stated that anthropology, sociology, geography, history, as well as religious studies can provide insightful approaches and useful theoretical perspectives to explore different aspects of religion and locality. Conference participants contributed to the agenda-setting session with a number of suggestions. For example, it was suggested that the study of concepts such as diaspora, state, and citizenship might refine approaches to minority religions, which are often seen as monolithic and as fixing belief systems. It was also suggested that new religious movements, contextual and situational factors, and sacred on the cyberspace should also be taken into consideration, as well as global and international developments, for no locality is isolated from external encounters in the information age. Following the closure of agenda setting, Michael Pye (University of Marburg, Germany) gave a paper, "Religious localization in Sacred and Secular Space." Pye argued that religious focus and pathways are intertwined with social realities. Religious focusing takes place within a secular/general space. Drawing upon his observations on Indian, Japanese, and ancient Egyptian religions, he drew attention to the influence of secular and

political agents in the construction of religious sites and in the localization of religion.

The second day of the conference had concurrent sessions on Islamic and other faith traditions. The session "Islam and Localities" gathered considerable attention. Simon O'Meara's (University of Leeds, UK) paper "Architecture and the Place of Fes" addressed the symbolic meaning of different forms of architecture in Fes and their relations to Islamic Law. In his conclusion, O'Meara suggested that "being in place is integral to being Muslim." I (Talip Küçükcan, University of Warwick, UK) analyzed "Islam and Symbolic Religiosity among the Young Turkish Generation in London." Dealing with a specific Muslim group in a specific location, I argued that Muslim communities all over the world express their religious thought and spirituality very diversely. Drawing upon well-established sociological theories on dimensions of religiosity, I analyzed a survey on Belief in God; Intellectual Dimension: Knowledge of the Basic Tenets of Islam; Ritualistic Dimension: Religious Practices; and Experiential Dimension. The analysis of research findings on religious beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of young Turks indicated that an overwhelming majority of them believe in God. I found that parents play the primary role in the development of belief in God among young people. Yet, survey results showed that there was not a sufficient religious education given to children in the family, in the schools, or even in the mosques. Young Turkish Muslims knew little about their religion, and only a small number of them fulfilled the required rituals. This led me to conclude that a symbolic religiosity was developing among the Turkish youth in London. William Myer's (School of Oriental and African Studies, UK) paper "Scholarly Perspectives on Islam in a Central Asian District" included a review of writings on Islam in Central Asia before the end of the cold war era. Myer criticized a number of scholars who mostly relied on Russian sources without questioning their authenticity. Myer concluded that some Western experts were badly misled and misunderstood Islam in Central Asia due to not having had direct access to the region before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Papers at the concurrent session "Church and Locality in England" were concerned with Christianity.

"Multi-religious Locations" was the title of the second session, which included papers on religion among South Asian communities in different localities. In her paper "In the Land of Milk and Honey: Hindus, Hindu Temples and Hinduism in Canada" Radhika Sekar (University of Ottawa,

Canada) illustrated the establishment of the Hindu community and Hinduism as a religion in Canada. Sue Arblaster's (University of Wolverhampton, UK) paper on "Being, Believing and Belonging: South Asian Ethno-religious Groups in Walsall" drew a comparative picture and indicated that co-existence of different ethnic minorities changed the cultural and religious landscape of this town. Arblaster's paper was based on field research among Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs in the town of Walsall where she collected her data to understand the relationship between religion, ethnicity, and community formation among South Asian immigrant groups. Muslim are the largest minority group, having more than ten mosques, while Hindus and Sikhs are also well represented. Arblaster showed in her paper that these minority groups had had bad experiences. She argued that policymakers have only lately started to address special religious needs of Muslims and other minorities—such as marriage customs, death, funeral arrangements, religious education, and care for the elderly. Julia Iprgrave's (University of Warwick, UK) paper "Muslim and Non-Muslim Children in Leicester" raised interesting questions regarding primary school children's perception of religion in general and Islam in particular. Iprgrave based her paper on her observations as a teacher in a primary school located in the Highfields area of Leicester. She argued that this area was being Islamized by predominantly South-Asian Muslim immigrants who changed the social environment and context. The social environment is now marked by Islamic style of dress, mosques, and educational establishments for religious teaching. Non-Muslim children find themselves living as minorities in a Muslim environment, and the presence of Islam influences their thinking. The concurrent session "Local and Global: Particular and General" included papers on religion in the Caribbean and Uganda.

The session "Mapping Religions" included papers on the relationships between religion, ethnicity, and the local impact of global events on religious communities. Simon Naylor and James Ryan (both of University of Oxford, UK) introduced their project on "Ethnicity and Cultural Landscapes" which aims to address the cartographic invisibility of Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu sites of worships in England and Wales through a survey of 1,000 certified sites. Naylor and Ryan noted that the number of registered mosques rose to 614 in 1998 from 13 in the 1960s. Joanna Fox (University of Leeds, UK) talked about her involvement in the "Religious Mapping Project" at the same university and shared her experiences with

the audience. Greg Smith (East London Atlas of Faith) gave an excellent presentation, "The Local Impact of Global Events: The Religious Regeneration in East London" where sizeable ethnic communities with different religions reside. Smith showed how religions flourished in the area by a historical as well as current evaluation of the religious scene. He also drew attention to local/transnational dimensions of religious communities and argued that "glocalization" was taking place. The corresponding session "World Religions in New Localities" focused on Buddhism in Ireland and Christianity in Ikitsuki.

The last two concurrent sessions "Localities, Religious Change and the Reinterpretation of Place" and "Religion and Localities: Relationship and Attitudes," included several important papers, discussing religion and sacred space in Finland and UK. The last two papers were concerned with religious attitudes and behavior in Turkey and in an English town. Ahmet Onay's (University of Leeds, UK) paper, "Religious Attitudes in Erzincan," was particularly interesting. Onay analyzed religious life in the city of Erzincan, focusing on gender differences and Sunni-Alawi interpretations of Islam in modern Turkey. The last day of this successful and thought-provoking conference was assigned to the discussion of theoretical issues and further suggestions in the study of religion and locality. A number of ongoing projects were introduced, and all participants were able to receive constructive feedback from the audience. Prof. Kim Knott worked hard and succeeded in making this conference a huge success by bringing together young and experienced scholars for challenging intellectual exchanges.

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