[FIR 1.3 (2005) 213-217]
Fieldwork in Religion (print) ISSN 1743-0615
Fieldwork in Religion (online) ISSN 1743-0623

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Editorial

Welcome to this themed edition of *Fieldwork in Religion* devoted to the sociology of religion.

The five articles in the edition have as their organizing theme the connection between fieldwork within the sociology of religion and wider debates within social theory and sociology. As James Beckford (2000) has recently noted in an insightful discussion of the relationship between the sociological study of religion and its parent discipline, the last century may be characterized as one of starting and finishing together, but with a long period of mutual silence—and often antagonism—in between. The 'Founding Fathers' of the discipline, although they all believed that they were witnessing the twilight years of religion in the modern world, all viewed religion as a significant social force—for better or worse—in the formation and maintenance of modern societies. For Weber, the this-worldly asceticism of Calvinism was instrumental to the emergence of Capitalist modernity; for Marx, religion (as false consciousness) was one important factor in the persistence of that social order; whilst for Durkheim religion was itself society writ large.

Over the course of the last century, however—possibly as a result of the growing academic division of labour, possibly as a result of the belief that western societies are increasingly secular and that *ipso facto* religion was less important as an area of sociological investigation—there was a gradual divorce between sociology and the academic study of religion. Thus, on the one hand, 'mainstream' sociology addressed itself less and less to the place of religion in society, and focused more on debates over social class, status and power. On the other hand, the sociology of religion became increasingly a 'theoretical side-show' (Turner, 1999; see also Beckford, 1985), focusing on insular debates such as secularization or Church-Sect-Cult typologies, and did not address itself to wider debates or, more importantly, relate wider debates within the social sciences to its subject matter. Indeed, in some quarters

there was a marked hostility to the 'mainstream' and a keenness to concentrate instead on the perceived strengths of the sub-discipline—such as its emphasis on the micro-level of social life. Thus, in their late-1980s assessment of the British contribution to the sociology of religion, Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce were contemptuous of the abstraction of high-level theory, stating that

> It remains for proponents of contemporary sociological 'theory to display—in the sociology of religion as elsewhere—that obscure and abstract conceptual elaboration, and vague social philosophising, can articulate in a fruitful and revealing way with the material of the real world... The enthusiasm for these exercises in sociology is scarcely a guarantee that they will prove productive, there or in the sociology of religion. Indeed the evidence is heavily the other way (Wallis and Bruce, 1989: 511).

Nevertheless, in recent years there has been the beginnings of 'partial re-synchronization' between the sociology of religion and 'mainstream' sociology and sociological theory (Beckford, 2000). This is being expressed in several key ways. First, there is growing interest in aspects of contemporary religiosity within more 'mainstream' work—typically in forms of 'fundamentalism' or 'postmodern' forms of religious pastiche and pluralism (see, e.g., Bauman, 1997; Castells, 1997). Linked to this, in the aftermath of 9/11 and, as the London tube bombings have come to be known, 7/7, there is increasing interest in the influence of faith communities in the public sphere and the role that such communities play in the formation of identities (particularly militant identities). Secondly, sociologists of religion and religious studies scholars have begun to explore the relationship between religion and issues within social theory, using social theory as a lens to try and understand aspects of the contemporary religious landscape. To give but a few examples, there have been explorations of the 'religious dimension' within the work of contemporary social theorists (see, e.g., Carette, 1999; Carette, *et al*., 1999; Vattimo, 1999), responses to the manner in which religion is discussed within social theory (Beckford, 1992, 1996; Mellor, 1993; Walliss, 2002), and discussions of the relationship between the 'postmodern condition' and religion at both the societal (Flanagan and Jupp, 1996; Heelas, *et al*., 1998; Lyon, 2000) and more individual level—see, for example, Lyon (1993) and Heelas (1996) on the New Age Movement.

The authors of the articles contained within this themed edition have all addressed themselves to this broad question of the (re)emerging dialogue between fieldwork in the sociology of religion and wider debates within social theory and 'mainstream' sociology. Graeme Lang and Lars Ragvald in their contribution seek to understand the resurgence of folk religion in China in recent years through the theoretical lens provided by 'religious economy' or rational choice theories. In particular, they highlight the ways in which the various temples that they have studied

compete with each other by, for example, co-opting or merging local hermit-saints, renovating and in some cases rebuilding long-destroyed temples, and, in one case, inviting a spirit-medium to move her practice into the temple with the hope that her clients might follow her into the temple, in order to increase their respective share of the religious 'market'. Indeed, the authors note that it is often those temples whose builders and managers are as equally skilled in entrepreneurship as they are in matters religious that tend to thrive in the emerging temple economy.

Matthew Wood in his article draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with black majority Methodist congregations in London to critique high-level theoretical discussions of religion found within the work of certain writers (he singles out the work of José Casanova and Peter Beyer on the role of religion in the public sphere for particular attention). In particular, he argues that, when looked at ethnographically, the neat theoretical distinctions central to these and other theorists' work between 'the religious' and 'the secular' break down, and the two become difficult to disentangle. While still maintaining their respective congregations and their 'religious' concerns, he notes how Methodist resources were also devoted to assisting in 'secular' projects, such as youth clubs, hostels, and after-school clubs. Linked to this, he argues that, far from being displaced by the forces of globalization, the nation state (and its associated inequalities and forms of stratification) still plays a crucial role in defining the context (or religious field) within religious groups operate. Thus, the black Methodist churches that he studied had to operate within a broader church hierarchy characterized by a degree of racial inequality, where, for example, there was the perception that the views of black Methodist's views were being marginalized.

The next two articles focus on the issue of being an 'insider' of one sort or another studying religious communities. Increasingly researchers are becoming aware of the 'situatedness' of social research and how the researcher's own values, beliefs and, in some cases, political agenda may influence how they undertake and subsequently make sense of fieldwork (see, e.g., Coffey, 1999; McCutcheon, 1999; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Following on from Matthew Wood's article, Afe Adogame and Ezra Chitando discuss their experiences of conducting fieldwork among the new African religious Diaspora in Europe and the USA. Writing as relative 'insiders', in the sense that both are Africans and Christian, they highlight the various problems encountered in maintaining their role as 'outsiders' among those who might view them as actual or potential 'insiders'. Thus, they describe how they faced requests to establish branches in their locales, to participate in fundraising activities, and even how their advice, as religious specialists, was sought by the leaders of the congregations for how they might enhance their respective religious performances. Linked with this, they also draw on their experiences to discuss the

extent to which the researcher should become advocates for those whom (s)he is studying. As they note, their 'insider' position as Black Africans, made them aware of the various forms of discrimination encountered by the Black migrants that they studied, while their 'outsider' position in the academy made them ideally suited to take on the role of 'public intellectuals', campaigning against discrimination and marginalization. The question, then, for them was whether and to what extent they should take up these causes on behalf of those they were studying, and, if they did, what impact this would have on their desire for a degree of academic objectivity. Finally, while recognizing their position as 'insiders' to some degree, they also discuss the ways in which they are still 'outsiders' from those they are studying in terms of gender and social status. In particular, they discuss how, although as 'insiders' they faced the same racial prejudices and discrimination as those they were studying, they nevertheless recognized how their position as 'outsiders'—as professional Africans working legally in Europe within the 'ivory towers' of academia—gave them significantly more options in dealing with these issues.

Similar issues to those discussed by Adogame and Chitando are also raised by Andrew Yip in his article on researching British Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) Christians and Muslims. Reflecting on over a decade of researching the topic of the lived experience of LGB Christians and, more recently, Muslims, and writing as an 'insider' within the gay community, Yip provides an insightful discussion of the issues involved with 'researching the personal'. In particular, he explores the ways in which for him the personal and professional have merged, and his views on the extent to which a research agenda may relate to a political agenda. Like Adogame and Chitando he notes how there is often an expectation by those whom he studies, that his research will serve a political end as a form of 'advocacy research'. Thus, there can sometimes be a tension between his own commitment to documenting lived experience with the political agenda of some groups. Linked to this, he discusses his own experiences, and those of whom he has studied, on the question of why LGB individuals choose to stay in what is perceived to be a homophobic institution; namely institutional religion. In doing so, he explores the relationship between spirituality and sexuality and what he terms 'the politics of spirituality/sexuality'; that is, the ways in which LGB spirituality/sexuality may act as a political tool in challenging 'compulsory heterosexuality' and disrupting perceived institutional homophobia. In conclusion, he offers some thoughts on how, while maintaining an awareness of religio-cultural differences, LGB Christian identity politics may be expanded to encompass the experience of British LGB Muslims.

Finally, Greg Smith's contribution links together the dual themes of identity and globalization explored in the previous four contributions. Drawing on the work of Manuel Castells (chiefly Castells three-volume magnum opus *The Information Age*),

Smith reflects on his experience as lead researcher on the East London *Atlas of Faiths* project (a directory of religious organizations in three London boroughs). In particular, he explores the relationship between, among other things, religious identities, globalization, networks, and social movements—themes central to Castells' work—and their implications for how one undertakes and subsequently makes sense of fieldwork. Linking with themes explored in Adogame and Chitando's and Yip's respective contributions, he discusses in particular both the role of the researcher's identity in negotiating the field as well as the politics of fieldwork, particularly when working with marginalized religious groups and communities.

Each of the contributions, then, to this themed edition, offers insights into how wider debates within the social sciences and social theory can impact and influence how we *do* and *make sense* of fieldwork in the sociology of religion (and, indeed, in the wider academic study of religion). In doing so, they seek to both build a bridge between theoretical insights and the practice of studying religion in the empirical word. As yet it is too early to know whether this will be a fruitful endeavour, but, as the contributions to this edition show, the initial forays are encouraging.