

## Ethnicity, Religious Belonging, and Inter Faith Encounter: Some Survey Findings From East London<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** *Mainstream religion in contemporary middle England has been described as a matter of believing without belonging (Davie, 1994). In multi-ethnic inner city districts, however, religious belonging remains significant; indeed it is probably growing as a key dimension of ethnic and communal identity. Recent survey research in East London offers empirical evidence for this thesis and shows that both fundamentalist proselytising forms of religion and pluralist syncretistic forms are to be found. Detailed statistical analysis of the data suggest that each of these are associated with other variables, such as ethnicity, religious affiliation, and age. The patterns which emerge are complex. There can be no doubt, however, that they illustrate the continuing importance of religion as a significant variable in the daily lives of many East Enders.*

### Introduction

#### *Believing and Belonging, Religion and Ethnicity*

Much comment on religious belief and affiliation in contemporary Britain takes for granted the notion of secularisation and assumes that religious organisations continue to decline in both numbers and influence along with orthodox belief and the practice of traditional spirituality (Bruce, 1995). An alternative emphasis is that even though belief persists, usually as a vague, but broadly Christian variety, it is increasingly privatised and fragmented. For mainstream middle England at least, the notion of "believing without belonging" (Davie, 1994) seems to capture the mood. A recent case study from rural England reported in the *British Journal of Sociology* (Winter & Short, 1993) broadly fits Davie's paradigm while suggesting that in the rural context, religious belonging, if evaluated by criteria other than formal membership and church attendance, is also far from extinct. In various parts of the UK, notably the Celtic fringe, the situation may be rather different, with slightly higher, and in the North of Ireland much higher, rates of religious practice linked to a stronger sense of national identity and tribal belonging.

This paper presents a further case study within Davie's paradigm, with evidence from a very different social context. Survey findings from a multi-cultural inner city borough in East London suggest that the local situation represents another deviation from the national norm. Studies of religion in the inner city are few and far between; the conventional wisdom from a mainstream church perspective, endorsed by the *Faith in the City* report (ACUPA, 1985) is that the working classes since the industrial revolution have been unchurched and unchurchable, with the result that the inner city is inevitably seen as the

'graveyard of the church' (Wickham, 1957; Marchant, 1974; Sheppard, 1975). Academic work since the mid-1980s either tended to confirm the (for the churches) pessimistic view (Ahern, 1987) or commented on the emergence of Pentecostalism as a religious and social force in black British Communities (Johnson, 1985; McRobert, 1989). The 1989 Church Census identified Black Pentecostalism alongside charismatic evangelicalism as one factor in substantial numerical growth in urban areas, especially in Inner London (Brierley, 1991). This has been confirmed by the findings of writers within the Christian Urban Mission networks (Marchant, 1986; Smith, 1988, 1996; Ashdown, 1991; Oliver, 1992).

### *Personal Involvement*

The author writes as one involved personally in these networks and as a resident and local community worker in Newham for over 20 years. Comments in this paper are informed by extensive participation and reflection as well as formal research. In this paper, I will present evidence to show that the contemporary inner city is an atypical and increasingly religious community. These trends in themselves are insufficient to overturn the main thrust of the secularisation thesis, but do pose a challenge to the received wisdom that urban life is by nature inimical to religion.

### *An Innovative Research Project*

The discussion will centre on ethnicity and religious belonging and on local people's perceptions about the relationships between the different faith communities. Standard surveys of religious belief and practice generally confine their questions to the concerns of mainstream Christendom, with variables, such as belief in God or the afterlife and church membership or attendance. Several descriptive studies of minority faith communities (Cole, 1989; Knott, 1989; Nielsen, 1989; Scantlebury, 1995) and some accounts of the process of inter-faith dialogue (Wingate, 1988) do exist. The ongoing work of the University of Derby in documenting the presence of different faith communities in a directory (Weller, 1993) is an important project, to which the work in Newham has contributed. However, an extensive literature search and conversations in appropriate networks uncovered no-one else who has asked a large sample of the general public about inter-faith attitudes and cross-faith contact, and it appears that the issue has hardly been raised within the sociology of religion. The survey conducted by the Newham Association of Faiths, on a shoe string budget and almost entirely by voluntary effort, is therefore a substantial and pioneering contribution to a much under-researched corner of the discipline.

### **Religion in Newham: The Background**

According to the 1991 Census, Newham is the most deprived and second least 'white' local authority district in Britain (Griffiths/LBN, 1994). The 42% of its population categorised as ethnic minorities are unparalleled in their diversity, with large communities tracing their roots to most of the nation states of Europe, Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. Some 275 religious groups are present in the

borough, of which about 200 are congregations which meet regularly for worship or prayer, and 160 are recognisably Christian churches. It is estimated that of a population of 217,000, over 15,000 attend a Christian church, a rate that stands up well to the national average for England (about 9%), especially given that up to 30% of the population are affiliated to World Faiths outside Christendom. There are at least 25,000 Muslims (there are over a dozen mosques), around 20,000 Hindus and 5,000 Sikhs. Table 1 summarises the statistics about religious organisations and attendance compiled for the second edition of the *Newham Directory of Religious Groups* (1994).

The religious sector accounts for nearly a third of the 820 or so voluntary sector and community groups listed in a local directory (LBN, 1995). The involvement of religious organisations and people in 'community projects' and in the networks of public life is highly significant. Indeed, religious membership is several times more popular than political membership. Newham is virtually a one-party borough with 60 Labour Councillors and no opposition. Yet, before the recent revival of party membership under Tony Blair, membership of the Labour Party in Newham probably stood at nearer 500 than 1000 (of whom at least 25 could be described as Christian friends of the author!).

## **The Newham Association of Faiths Survey**

### *The Sample*

The core data for this article are taken from a Survey of Inter-faith Attitudes carried out by the Newham Association of Faiths, with the technical assistance of the author in the summer and autumn of 1993. Over 500 people were interviewed mainly by volunteer interviewers and students on placement. The respondents were selected according to a quota sampling scheme and for the most part were approached in the street in local shopping centres. About 15% of the interviews were arranged as a booster sample to ensure that sufficient numbers of certain faith groups were included, and these interviews were conducted in religious centres or, in a few cases, in respondents' homes. Given this design and the areas of the borough where interviewing took place, Asians are—compared with the borough's population as a whole—over-represented, while whites are under-represented in the achieved sample.

### *Response Rates and Possible Biases*

Interviewers recorded that 1502 people were approached in order to obtain 513 interviews. This represents a crude response rate of 34.2%. Most non-respondents simply said they were too busy when accosted in the street. Detailed analysis suggested that a bias may be present in terms of the high numbers of non-white non-Christendom<sup>2</sup> women who were unable or unwilling to be interviewed on the grounds of limited English language ability. Two further possible biases may require caution when drawing conclusions. Firstly, the religious topic of the questionnaire may have encouraged self-selection of religiously active people, while those hostile to religion could have been excluded. Secondly, a surprisingly high proportion of respondents (26%) were categorised from their occupations as 'professionals', which may make the

Table 1. Religious organisations in Newham.

Denominations within Christian tradition	Congregations	Organisations	Congregations owning building	Estimated attendance
African	7	0	4	882
Baptist	12	1	12	972
CofE	28	10	27	2072
Ecumenical	2	17	2	100
Independ.Evang.	17	5	8	1268
Methodist	6	2	6	372
Moravian	1	0	0	N/A
Orthodox	2	0	1	300
Pentecostal	56	4	7	3416
Quaker	0	1	0	N/A
Roman Catholic	12	15	8	7812
Salvation Army	3	0	3	51
7th-Day Advent.	3	1	2	480
United Reformed	4	2	4	164
Total				17929
Non Trinitarian	11	0	8	
None	0	5	0	
<i>Other Faith Communities</i>				
Baha'í	1	0	0	
Buddhist	2	0	1	
Hindu	8	4	5	
Ravidassi	1	0	1	
Universal	2	0	0	
Jewish	1	0	1	
Inter Faith	0	4	0	
Muslim	14	5	13	
Pagan	1	0	0	
Sikh	5	0	4	
Total	198	77	117	

**Note:** Estimates for attendance are based on the replies of church leaders to the question: "How many people usually attend the largest meeting/service you regularly hold (e.g. for Christians this would be the main Sunday Service, for Muslims Friday prayers)." The 'high' estimate is given here which assumes non-responding churches to have the mean attendance for their denomination.

Source: Second Edition of the *Newham Directory of Religious Groups*, 1994.

sample out of line with the predominantly working /non-working class profile of the borough's population (only 2.8% in Social Class 1 and 19.3% in social class 2, according to 1991 Census). The combination of these biases seems most likely to skew the results slightly in the direction of more religious and/or liberal.

However, the large number in the sample and the fact that all major faith groups are covered in relatively large numbers make the data set uniquely valuable and enable useful statistical comparisons to be made between sub-groups in the sample. Table 2 sets out the composition of the sample in terms of the independent variables used in the analysis and is the essential background for understanding how the data was analysed.

**Table 2.** Respondents Association of Faiths Survey. Breakdown of the 513 respondents in the sample by key independent variables

<b>Gender:</b>			
Male	234		
Female	278		
No information	1		
<b>Religious backgrounds:</b>			
in Christendom	335		
other world faiths	178		
<b>Stated affiliations:</b>			
Christian	230		
No religion	105		
Muslim	76		
Hindu	47		
Sikh	27		
Baha'í	11		
Jewish	2		
Buddhist	5		
Other	8		
<b>Detailed breakdown of the 230 stating they were Christians:</b>			
<b>by ethnicity:</b>			
White UK	123	Black African	28
White Irish	18	Black Caribbean	28
White other	11	S. Asian	10
		Other	10
<b>By denomination and ethnicity:</b>			
	White	Black/Asian	Total
CofE	84	14	98
RC	43	29	72
Free Church or Pentecostal	25	39	64
<b>Of 105 claiming no religion:</b>			
White	74		
African	2		
Caribbean	11		
S. Asian	3		
Other	4		
<b>Social class of whole sample:</b>			
Professional	26%		
Other	74%		

## Data Analysis Procedures

### *Factor Analysis*

The analysis took place in a number of stages. After examination of the marginal frequencies for each variable and some initial cross-tabulation, the key variables were subjected to factor analysis. This enabled the grouping together of questions where the responses are highly correlated and thus reduced the complexity of the data set to a small number of indexes. The factor solution proved to be both orthogonal and easy to interpret and accounted for about 55% of the variance. On the basis of the factor analysis, six indices were created, some of them by simple combination of highly correlated variables (where they were more or less equally weighted in the rotated factor matrix), the rest by a slightly

more complex scoring system in which the factor weighting of the variables was reflected. It is these six indices that provide the framework for the remainder of this paper, although two of them will not be covered in any great detail as they add little to the overall picture.

### *Multiple Regression Analysis*

The six indices were used as dependent variables in a series of multiple regression analyses. Although Multiple Regression is a predictive technique, it was applied in this analysis in a very open exploratory manner. The purpose of this was to test significant differences on the index scores between sub-groups of respondents in the sample and to build models in which the influence of independent variables, such as religious affiliation, age, gender, and social class could be assessed when each of the others were controlled. Some exploration of ethnicity as an independent variable was carried out, but it soon became evident that ethnicity and religious affiliation were closely associated, especially for non-Christian faiths. Therefore, the only analyses in which ethnicity played a part were those involving the 'Christendom' sub-sample.

The Indices (dependent variables) were each subjected to a systematic series of multiple regression analyses based hierarchically on the structure of the sample shown in Table 2 (i.e. first a regression analysis was run on the whole sample, then on increasingly smaller subsets within it). In every case, gender, age, and social class (those in professional occupations v. the rest) were included as independent or control variables. Religious activism as measured by the first index was also included in the analysis for indices 2–6. Other independent variables were introduced as appropriate for regressions on specific subsets of respondents. For example, the Christendom sub-sample was tested for ethnicity (white UK v. the rest) and religious commitment (no religious affiliation v. the rest). The Christians were divided into white and black sub-groups and each tested in terms of denomination (Church of England v. Roman Catholic v. Free Church/Pentecostal; 3 binary dummy variables). The outside Christendom sub-sample regression models were built around (binary dummy) variables for the larger faith groups (Muslim v. Hindu v. Sikh).<sup>3</sup>

## **Findings and Interpretation of Results**

### *Religious Activism—Own Faith Community*

The respondents' replies to these fairly 'standard' survey questions shown in Table 3 give the impression that they are considerably more religious than the average British person. Over three quarters claimed to have a religious faith, over half claimed to belong to a local religious community, and over a third claimed they attended at least weekly. While it is wise to maintain some caution because of the limited representativeness of the sample and known tendencies of survey respondents to over-estimate their practice, the rates compare well with national data. For example, in the British Social Attitudes Survey, 16% claimed to attend church at least two or three times a month (Greeley, 1992) and the MARC Europe census of 1989 estimated attendance on a given Sunday at around 9% (Brierley, 1991). The data serves to confirm the picture outlined in

**Table 3.** Responses to items contributing to index 1. Religious activism: own faith community (in % of whole sample)

<b>Do you belong to or attend a local church/mosque /temple?</b>					
n = 513	yes 54.2%		no		45.8%
<b>How often do you attend:</b>					
daily	2+ per week	weekly	2-3 a month	less often	never
<i>public meeting for worship/prayer? (n = 511)</i>					
6.3	5.9	20.9	14.1	12.1	40.7
<i>a small group for prayer/scripture study etc? (n = 511)</i>					
6.3	3.7	11.4	7.0	6.8	64.8
<i>How often do you visit a church/temple/mosque privately? (n = 510)</i>					
4.9	4.9	12.5	9.8	16.1	51.8
<i>Do you have any office or leadership role in a religious group? (n = 510)</i>					
Yes	12.5%				
No	87.3%				
<b>Additional relevant questionnaire items not included in the index</b>					
<b>Do you have a religious faith or belong to a faith community? (n = 511)</b>					
Yes	77.9%				
No	20.7%				
Not sure	1.4%				
<b>Have you attended a church, mosque or temple in the last three years for a family event, such as a christening, wedding or funeral? (n = 511)</b>					
Yes	81.2%				
No	18.8 %				

Smith (1996) that Newham, with its multi-cultural community, is a place with strong, and probably growing religious activity.

*Factors Influencing Religious Activism*

Index 1 combines a number of questions into a single measure of religious activism. A breakdown of the mean scores for the index by faith/denomination suggests high levels of nominality among Church of England adherents and rather more activism among Roman Catholic and especially Free/Pentecostal church adherents. There appears to be little variation between the other world faiths which are around the Roman Catholic level, although—as we shall see—this index is not the best measure to use because of strong gender differences in participation in these communities.

The multiple regression analyses on this index are quite successful in explaining the variance within the sample (as much as 31% is explained by the independent variables in the Christendom sub-sample). The regression on the whole table suggests significant contributions to the level of religious activism ( $r^2 = 0.15$ ) are made by the variables

**Christendom** ... respondents outside Christendom are more likely to be religiously active (beta = 0.33)

**Social Class** ... Professional respondents are more religious than others (beta = 0.16)

**Gender** ... men are more religiously active (beta = 0.14)

**Age** ... religious activism increases with age (beta = 0.011)

*Men More Religious?*

The most surprising feature of the model is that the gender difference is the reverse of the usual trend in British religion, where women are much more likely to be religiously active than men. The reversal in the Newham sample can be attributed largely to the Asians in the sample (see below). Indeed, an earlier piece of research in a local parish, where the respondents were almost entirely within Christendom, did find that women were significantly more likely than men to attend church (Smith, 1996).

Within the Christendom sub-sample ( $r^2 = 0.31$ ), the social class effect is maintained ( $\beta = 0.18$ ), while the group claiming no religion, also have—not surprisingly—low religious activism scores ( $\beta = 0.46$ ). More interestingly, ethnicity appears to have an independent effect, with white UK respondents being less religiously active than others ( $\beta = 0.21$ ). Among those claiming a Christian affiliation ( $r^2 = 0.24$ ), activism is lowest among Church of England members ( $\beta = 0.32$ ) and highest among the Free/Pentecostal group ( $\beta = 0.16$ ), while age also plays a significant part, with older people being more active ( $\beta = 0.12$ ). Dividing the Christians by ethnicity shows that among whites, Church of England nominalism is high, while Black Free/Pentecostal group members are most religiously active.

*Ethnicity and Christian Practice*

Overall, white working-class people in the sample conform to Davie's mode of believing without belonging, with nominal Church of England allegiance being the most common form of religious inactivity. The lower activism of younger people does seem to endorse the secularisation hypothesis, although it could conceivably be the case that people tend to join a church when they grow older. Life-cycle reasons for religious expression could include heightened spiritual awareness as death approaches, nostalgia for the traditional values and culture represented by the church and the search for companionship and support at a time of life, when children have left home and time pressures are less intense.

The evidently higher level of religious activism among black Christians is evidence of the greater cultural significance of religion and the church for this group. It is hard to judge whether this mainly reflects greater religiosity and less advanced secularisation imported from their countries of origin or whether this derives from the important role of ethnic networks focused on churches as community meeting places. The evidence of anecdote and the author's experience of church life in Newham over two decades suggest the importance of church as community. In less than five years, for example, several hundred Zairean refugees have gathered together in networks based around their Kimbanguiste church; the story could be repeated for Ghanaians, Nigerians, Zimbabweans, and Tamils. However, judging from my observations of fervency, in Bible study, evangelism, public prayer, and testimony, Black Christians are about five times more overt in their religiosity than even the most evangelical whites.



**Table 4.** Responses to questions about religious activity outside own faith community contributing to index 2 (in % of whole sample)

	Have you attended:			
	Never	Once	More than once	Often
... their normal public worship/prayer? (n = 510)	69.2	8.4	16.7	5.7
... a wedding, 'christening' or funeral? (n = 507)	48.9	15.2	29.6	6.3
... a ceremony marking a festival? (n = 508)	66.5	11.8	16.1	5.5
... visited their church/mosque/temple. (n = 509)	50.1	15.5	27.3	7.1

### *The Practice of Other World Faiths*

Among the other faiths sub-sample sample ( $r^2 = 0.14$ ), the only significant effect in the model is gender ( $\beta = 0.14$ ), with men scoring higher on activism than women. A regression on the Muslim group alone produced even clearer evidence for the gender effect ( $r^2 = 0.47$   $\beta = 0.69$ ). This is most likely the result of the widespread cultural norm in South Asian society (most notable in Islamic groups), whereby women play little part in formal public or religious life and in the leadership of public organisations. This does not, of course, imply anything about their religious beliefs or attitudes or even about levels of informal participation in the religious sphere, which were barely touched on in this research. However, it is significant that 91% of 80 non-Christendom women said they had attended for a family event and 85% for a festival in the last three years. This suggests a higher level of 'belonging' than may be at first apparent.

### *Attendance at Other Faith Activities*

We now move on to present findings based on questions unique to this survey, in which respondents were asked about their participation in the activities of faith communities other than their own. The key findings are shown in Table 4.

The first noticeable feature of the results for the questions contributing to this index is the surprisingly high proportions of respondents who had attended some religious activity outside their own faith group. About 30% had been to normal public worship and around half had been to a family rites-of-passage event and/or paid a visit to a religious building. Even in multi-cultural Newham, these figures are suspiciously high. Possibly, it reflects bias towards religiously liberal people in the sample. Perhaps there has been a misinterpretation of the question by some respondents (despite clear instructions to interviewers) whereby different 'denominations' or even 'congregations' were taken as 'other faiths'.

*Factors Influencing Inter-Faith Activity*

A breakdown of the index scores by religious affiliation shows little variation between the groups. The exception are the extremely high scores of the Baha'í who were included in the sample as a group precisely because they were active participants in the Newham Association of Faiths. Furthermore, Baha'í religious views are likely to encourage them to be involved in such activity. Church of England and no religion respondents scored slightly lower than the other groups.

The regression models for this index were moderately successful in explaining the variance in the scores (reaching at best 17% for the sub-sample with Christian affiliations). A consistent effect through most of the sub-samples is that of Index 1 (beta values mostly around 0.30), our measure of religious activism. It seems clear that people who are most religiously active in their own faith will have more interest and opportunity for meeting with people of other faiths than their own.

In Christendom and among Christians, people of professional social class were more involved in inter-faith activity than others (beta values both = 0.17). The only significant effects of religious affiliation are that in the whole sample, other faiths respondents are more likely than the Christendom sample to be active in inter-faith activities (beta = -0.09) and that among the Christians, Roman Catholics are more likely than the rest to cross the boundaries of faith communities (beta = 0.12).<sup>4</sup>

Among the 'other faiths' sample, gender again has a significant effect in the regression model, with women more likely to be involved than men ( $r^2 = 0.08$ , beta = 0.23). Detailed examination of the data by further cross-tabulations showed that this somewhat surprising finding may be the result of the over-representation of women (by 9 to 2) among the small group of Baha'í, coupled with high levels of inter-faith activity reported by a relatively small number of female Hindu respondents of professional social class. It would be unsafe to extrapolate from such small numbers to the wider population.

*Discussion*

An overall explanation of these patterns might run as follows. The levels of participation in religious events outside one's own religious community depend on two factors: openness to do so and the actual opportunity to participate, based on invitations to attend. Openness depends on a number of factors, including theological and cultural tradition, but is also related to social class. Professional, highly educated people, who already have a wider variety of cultural experiences than working and non-working class, are likely to be more open. They may also have more leisure time and financial resources which allow participation.

Opportunity also depends on a number of factors. First, there is the balance of numbers between faith communities in a locality. In Newham, there are obviously many more opportunities for inter-faith encounters than, say, in rural Devon. But these opportunities are unevenly distributed even in the inner city. South Asian people—given their concentration in particular neighbourhoods and given their shared language and experience of racism—are probably more

**Table 5.** Responses to items contributing to index 3: openness to inter-faith contact (in % of whole sample)

<i>Do you know people of other faiths? (n = 510)</i>				
Many				36.5
Several				21.4
A few				24.3
Hardly any				3.1
None				14.7
<i>Have you ever talked with such people about your beliefs and customs? (n = 511)</i>				
A lot and in depth				17.2
Several times				18.0
Only occasionally				25.2
Never				39.5
<i>Have you ever attended any inter-faith events? (n = 505)</i>				
Yes				20.0
No				80.0
Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<i>I would like to get to know more people of other faiths. (n = 505)</i>				
11.9	46.1	21.2	17.2	3.6
<i>I would like to join in inter-faith events in my area. (n = 513)</i>				
6.5	37.4	21.9	26.7	7.5

likely to cross, say, the Hindu/Sikh divide in invitations to neighbours than the racial one with local whites. Finally, opportunity for inter-faith encounters other than through family events depends on being actively involved in the life of a faith group. Invitations to most events are mediated by religious organisations and networking contact is largely between religious leaders and key activists. It is therefore not surprising that it is religious activists who participate most often in the organised activities of other faith communities.

#### *Openness to Inter-Faith Contact*

Index 3 (see Table 5) brings together questionnaire items which measure reported existing personal links across faith boundaries with expressions of desire for increased inter-faith contact and activity, measured by two Likert scale attitude statements. It is different in meaning and response pattern from Index 2 which measured reported experience in the context of religious organisations (excluding specific inter-faith events). Nor is it a mere mirror image of Index 4 on theological closure, although the pattern of responses shows certain similarities.

Once again, the reported rates of inter-faith contact are surprisingly high, even for a place like Newham. Nearly 60% of respondents said they knew several or many people of different faiths and 35% had spoken about beliefs and customs at least several times. Only one in five had been to a formal inter-faith activity. It is hard to judge whether this is a low rate reflecting the rarity of such events or a high one resulting from the element of network recruitment in the sample on the part of the Association of Faiths. However, with 58% of respondents wanting to get to know more people of other faiths and 44% wishing to join in

inter-faith events, this suggests a high degree of openness and a substantial market for inter-faith activity.

#### *Factors Influencing Openness to Other Faiths*

A breakdown of the index scores by religious affiliation showed that the Baha'í group are outstandingly open and (rather surprisingly) that the Muslim respondents are more interested in inter-faith activity than any of the Christendom groups. However, this difference is not significant when other factors are controlled in the regression model.

The regression models account for as much as 25% to 33% of the variance in the larger sub-groups highest in the hierarchical analysis. They show that across the whole sample, religiously active people ( $\beta = 0.34$ ), young people ( $\beta = 0.21$ ), professionals ( $\beta = 0.21$ ), and respondents within Christendom ( $\beta = 0.10$ ) are more likely to be open to such contact than others. The pattern is largely replicated within the Christendom sub-sample, for Christians and white Christians. Among Black Christians, only religious activism appears to have any significant effect ( $r^2 = 0.09$ ;  $\beta = 0.32$ ).

For the outside Christendom sub-sample, 15% of the variance is accounted for by a model which also includes religious activism ( $\beta = 0.35$ ) and professional status ( $\beta = 0.17$ ). Sikhs also, perhaps surprisingly, stand out as less open than other faiths ( $\beta = 0.14$ ), although it is hard to see how this can be of any substantive or generalisable importance. Gender ( $\beta = 0.17$ ) also has a significant effect, with women being less open to contact than men, probably in line with the expectations and constraints of their domestic role. In a regression on Muslim respondents, only social class had any significant effect in the expected direction ( $r^2 = 0.09$ ;  $\beta = 0.32$ ).

#### *Discussion*

The overall pattern corresponds quite closely with Index 2 in that both professional people and religiously active people are more likely to have been involved in and to desire further inter-faith encounters. The additional factor for this index is age. Younger people, especially those who have grown up in Newham and have been through local schools in the last 20 years, can hardly have avoided contact with classmates of other faith backgrounds and probably some discussion with them about religion. Religious diversity in the locality is an everyday fact of life. What is more welcome from the point of view of the Association of Faiths is that the majority of respondents see it as a positive feature and want to build more relationships around it.

#### *Theological Closure*

Index 4 based on 5 Likert scale attitude statements provides some measure of what are popularly described as fundamentalist tendencies, that is of the respondents' convictions that only their own belief system is universally valid and uniquely true. The raw answers to the questions involved in the index suggest that such positions are very much in the minority among our respondents. Less than 10% see other faiths in terms of 'enemies' and only a third could

**Table 6.** Responses to attitude statements contributing to index 4: theological closure (in % of whole sample)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<i>I would like to persuade people of other faiths to accept mine. (n = 493)</i>	8.9	22.9	11.4	39.4	17.4
<i>My family wouldn't like it, if I mixed with people of other faiths. (n = 502)</i>	3.2	9.6	11.2	50.0	26.1
<i>Children should be taught only their own religion. (n = 504)</i>	6.5	22.8	10.3	43.8	16.5
<i>I think of other faiths as the enemy of my own religion. (n = 499)</i>	1.8	7.6	10.2	48.2	32.1
<i>I am afraid other people would force their views on me if I met with them, in inter-faith events. (n = 499)</i>	4.0	19.8	16.4	42.9	16.8

be described as using 'evangelical' Christian terminology in their concern to persuade and proselytise others.

*Factors Influencing Theological Closure*

Breakdowns by religious affiliation show some interesting, although not very highly significant, variations with Muslims and Free/Pentecostal group members emerging as the most closed theologically (although with some marked variation within the groups) and Baha'í as the least. Hindus, Roman Catholics, and Church of England respondents scored around the average, with those of no religion being slightly less closed.

The regression analyses were not on the whole very successful in explaining the variance in index scores (less than 10% accounted for in most cases). Professional respondents were generally less closed theologically than non-professionals (beta values mostly around .23). Over the whole sample and in the outside Christendom group, women were significantly more open than men (beta = 0.09 and 0.19 respectively). Religious affiliation was shown to be significant in that both Muslims (beta = - 0.20) and Free/Pentecostal group members (beta = - 0.20) were more likely to be closed. Among Black Christians, this denominational difference (beta = - 0.33) and increasing age (beta = - 0.28) was especially marked in their association with theological closure, accounting together in the model for 16% of the variance.

*Discussion*

What is clear from this analysis is that some 'fundamentalist' theological tendencies do exist in both Christian and Muslim faith communities. Within our sample, they are a minority stream. They are most likely to be found among older Black Christians in the Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions. Grouping mainline Free Churches with Pentecostals, which was necessary to maintain reasonably large group numbers in the analysis, probably obscures some important differences between, say, liberal Methodists and evangelical Baptists and

Table 7. Responses to attitude statements contributing to index 5: syncretism  
(% of responses of whole sample)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<i>I think all religions have a lot in common. (n = 506)</i>	19.2	50.2	14.8	13.6	2.2
<i>All religions are leading to the same goal. (n = 506)</i>	18.0	47.0	16.2	13.2	5.5

Pentecostals. Among Muslims, a substantial number, but by no means an overwhelming majority of male activists and leaders, scored highly in terms of closure. Nonetheless, the media and evangelical Christian stereotype of 'militant' fundamentalist Islam sweeping through East London is not borne out by these survey results. What may be happening locally, according to recent reports in newspapers and TV documentaries, is small-scale, but high-profile radical Islamic activity among students.

### *Syncretism*

The logical obverse of theological closure is the tendency to syncretism; two questions grouped together by the factor analysis into a separate index (Index 5) bear witness to this. A large majority of respondents were in agreement with the ideas that religions have a lot in common (69%) and are leading to the same goal (65%). This is shown in Table 7. The patterns of response on this index, which cannot be documented in detail in this paper, broadly follow those on theological closure.

However, there is a semantic difference between Index 4 which measures emotional certainty about one's own faith and Index 5 which derives from a pair of more objective statements about the competing truth claims of different religions. It is quite possible to recognise, as a number of respondents appear to, that there are common concerns and values which transcend the faiths, while one remains loyal to the particular tenets of one's own and refuses the attempt to synthesise conflicting ideas from outside into one's own creed. Age differences which did not appear on index 4 are notable here, in that younger people across the board are more likely than their elders to accept the two 'syncretistic' statements. They are more likely to have studied comparative religion in RE at school: it is arguable that the liberal humanistic approach in the modern syllabus may have left them with greater tolerance and/or less clarity about doctrinal differences.

### *Social Collaboration Between Faiths*

Index 6 is built from two attitude statements which elicited overwhelming agreement (see Table 8) and it is therefore no surprise that there were few substantive differences between sub-groups in the sample. None of the regression models accounted for as much as 5% of the small variance and it would be hard to draw meaningful conclusions from the findings.

**Table 8.** Responses to items on co-operation between faiths contributing to index 6 (% of whole sample)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<i>Co-operation between faiths would help promote world peace. (n = 506)</i>	37.4	49.6	6.1	5.1	1.8
<i>Different religions should work together to help the needy. (n = 507)</i>	38.5	53.1	4.1	3.7	0.6
<b>Additional Relevant Attitude Statement not included in any Index</b>					
<i>(% of responses of whole sample)</i>					
<i>There are always going to be conflicts between religions. (n = 506)</i>					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	24.1	50.8	13.2	9.1	2.8

Indeed, since all 'right thinking' people are against conflict and in favour of doing good, it would be difficult to disagree with the statements. Collaboration between faiths would be welcomed in principle by all, but probably much harder to arrange in practice, given the cultural and language difficulties, the history of suspicion, and the sheer effort needed for networking and community organising. However, the recent emergence of TELCO, The East London Community Organising group, which has over 30 member organisations able to mobilise politically at least 1500 people from Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh congregations, shows that working together for the common good is by no means impossible.

A more sobering thought, drawn from responses to an item which could not be grouped by the factor analysis into any index, is that around 75% of respondents felt that 'there are always going to be conflicts between religions', a scepticism which may be only realistic in the light of historical experience from the Crusades to Bosnia, from the Reformation to contemporary Ireland, and from the Moghuls to Amritsar in the 1980s and Ayodiya in the 1990s.

### Conclusion: Some Possible Scenarios

The people of Newham live in a community where there is unparalleled religious diversity and a plethora of religious organisations and activities. Racism and culture-linked ethnicity are inextricably intertwined with patterns of religious belonging and believing. A number of alternative scenarios for the future suggest themselves.

#### *Competing Fundamentalisms*

The first is a scenario of competing fundamentalisms, of ethnic/religious conflict à la Bosnia, Beirut or Belfast. Happily, the evidence from our research does not give any convincing support for this scenario. Furthermore, the situation is so new, so diverse and fragmented, so complex and fluid that religious polarisation is unlikely, at least in comparison with simpler boundary definitions, such as black/white or affluent/poor. However, the frequent occurrence of racial harassment and violence (Cooper & Quereshi, 1993; Cohen *et al.*, 1995; NMP, 1991) and

the resurgence of brutal neo-Nazi politics (Husband, 1994; Keith, 1995) in the Dockland communities of East London cannot be ignored; potentially at least, these could be redefined in terms of religious discourse as white 'Christian' Cockneys set themselves against Bangladeshi and Pakistani Muslims. An atmosphere of national and international 'Islamophobia' will not help.

#### *Postmodern Pluralism*

A second scenario is the postmodern pluralist one. Here, one would expect a continuing fragmentation and privatisation of culture, including religion. In such a New Age environment, in the absence of grand narratives, religion, spirituality, and personal values once more become intellectually legitimate concerns or at least consumer choices. Individuals would freely pick and mix spiritualities from different faith traditions, according to what 'works for them', and concentrate on self-fulfilment therapies. There may be some support for this trend in our data in the relatively open and syncretistic views of many young people. But again, it is hardly convincing and countervailing pressures of religiously defined community networks and the political challenge of combating deprivation and injustice in the inner city work against the privatisation of faith.

#### *A Mixed Economy of Urban Religion*

In any case, the notion of pluralism can be constructed and worked out in a number of other ways. The melting pot or blender metaphor describing syncretism and assimilation seems neither likely or desirable. The most realistic, and probably most progressive, model of pluralism in terms of social cohesion and social justice is the persistence of faith communities and their core beliefs and practices, coupled with a public celebration of difference. This indeed is the way faith continues to be handled in religious education, in the celebration of festivals, and in assemblies in most state schools in Newham, under exemptions permitted in the 1988 Education Act which in general demands a religious education that is mainly Christian in emphasis (LBN, 1991). Such an approach is also found in civic religion, where it exists locally, for example, in chaplaincy services in the hospital. The evidence of the survey suggests that this model of pluralism is acceptable to the majority of local people, including those who are religiously well-informed and active.

This third scenario, perhaps the best that can be hoped for as well as the most likely, can be described as the mixed economy of urban religion. A variety of religious forms will continue to co-exist more or less peacefully, and some among them will flourish, while others will decline. Ethnicity will continue to have a strong association with religious affiliation and to a lesser extent with practice and belief, although its influence will not be enough to determine religion for every individual. Some religions will recruit successfully in a more competitive market-place, in some cases by making serious demands on adherents, in others by offering much at little cost. Community support mediated by religion will continue to be important for many people and will offer opportunities for involvement in and service to the wider community, although many individuals will continue to believe 'in something' without belonging. The more aggressive fringes in Islam and Christianity may produce much clamour and



some conflict, but the mainline moderate aspects of faith supporting a quiet decent life will probably be more attractive for the general public of most faith communities. There will be occasional collaboration between faith communities on common agendas, but for the most part, mild goodwill and indifference will be the pattern.

### *Believing and Belonging in East London*

Newham, and perhaps some other multi-cultural inner city areas in Britain, can therefore best be portrayed as a distinct variation on Davie's theme of believing and belonging. Her framework is more plausible than Bruce's paradigm of unremitting secularisation. However, with the exception of the numerically declining community of white nominal Christians, mainly claiming loose affiliation to the 'CofE', the pattern of believing without belonging which is so common in middle England will not be found. For most religious people, 'belonging' will remain or even become more important. 'Believing' may become more problematic for many believers, as the temptation to retreat into the ghettos of orthodox certainty conflicts both with the desire to propagate one's own faith and the daily reality of interaction with decent and even 'spiritual' fellow citizens, neighbours, and friends from other faith communities. Whatever the outcome, Newham will remain a fascinating field for the sociology of religion for decades to come.

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### NOTES

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2. Throughout the paper, Christendom is defined simply as the category of people with a background in a culture which is not obviously dominated by one of the other non-Christian world faiths, and therefore includes people who claim to have no religion as well as—for example—British-born and African-born Christian believers.
3. A fuller account of the technical details of the analysis is available from the author.
4. However familiarity with the discourse of a number of local Roman Catholics suggests that some of them might have difficulty in distinguishing between other Christian denominations and non-Christian faith communities when replying to this set of survey questions, where the term 'faiths other than your own' is used.

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