

Discourses on Religious Diversity

Explorations in an Urban Ecology

- **Martin D. Stringer, University of Birmingham, UK**

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A brief review by Greg Smith...

This is a short but insightful book drawing on a career of engagement with communities and faith in the inner city. Martin Stringer's career began as a community worker in Manchester and has now spent many years as an academic in Birmingham, where he supervised a number of research projects and postgraduate students working on religious topics. As a leading well respected scholar he knows the field and the literature in great depth, and across a number of disciplines, but has kept his feet on, and his ear close enough to the ground to bring a valuable contribution that should be appreciated by academics and practitioners alike.

The book has emerged as a compilation of papers given at various conferences, and although this clearly shows, the text has been well edited so that it is not particularly jerky, (and indeed there is no reference to such chicken even in narratives centred on the Lozells Road). The urban landscape is well sketched and easily recognized if, like me, you have lived most of your life in similar urban communities, and have visited Birmingham on numerous occasions. I am less sure how a reader who had spent their lives in suburban Surrey or rural Cumbria and had never explored an inner city would make of it, though of course it is less likely they would want to open the book.

Chapter 1 sets the context in the disciplines of sociology and urban and community studies and chapter 2 looks at the methodology of discourse studies which guides Stringer's approach. The next two chapters are focused on religion in two contrasting neighbourhoods Highgate and Handsworth. This is followed by two chapters describing and reflecting on public processions and celebrations of diversity, the second of which takes the author to London for the Chinese New Year. The final chapters reflect on the social significance of religion as part of urban memory, and on the policy related issues of managing religious diversity and the conflicts that can arise over differing discourses, representations, mechanisms of "othering" and exclusion, space and territory.

My own research and writing on these themes would bring me into sympathy with the book at a number of points. Recognizing that in metropolitan cities we enter into a realm of super-diversity and hybridity where a top down macro view of simple satellite geography and of reified monolithic and unchanging cultures and religions is a point that seems self evident. Religious super-diversity is tolerated, even celebrated in such settings though Stringer suggests this is largely because the majority of folk are indifferent to it, or at least don't notice the differences in belief and practice that are so significant to the believer, and the theologically educated. However, current discussion on the teaching of core British values, and the spectre of "Trojan horse" plots in Birmingham schools makes it clear that powerful discourse makers do not see the world the way some of us

take for granted. Values, and divergent readings of faith traditions are contested and remain politically significant.

I agree about the importance of locality in shaping the dynamics of community and faith relationships; even in a globalised world Highgate and Handsworth have their own inter ethnic and religious cityscapes and ethos. People speak differently about social reality both in those places, and about them, though in both places there are myriad voices, varying by age, gender, ethnicity, religious practice and much else besides. There would be a very different picture in Newham, Bradford or (especially) Burnley. In many northern towns there is not yet super-diversity but polarized and segregated territories, where “the other” is clearly and visibly as well as linguistically marked. A key issue which arises and is pointed out in the book is that for the most part religion (in terms of belief and practice) is secondary to ethnicity and race as a boundary marker between communities, and becomes further nuanced by distinctions such as gender, generation and social class.

The chapter taking to the streets in my view is particularly interesting and valuable. Together with buildings and artifacts, and some of the “signs” and signs in the city these are the most overt public manifestations of urban religion and local “community” that are accessible for study. In Newham in the 1990s the borough council invented a new autumn festival of lights, lantern parades and fireworks that seemed to combine Guy Fawkes, Diwali and Eid celebrations. But this too was in a decade where, Christians had their March for Jesus, Shia Muslims had Ashura processions, and the Africabana carnival brought steel bands and samba to the streets of Forest Gate. In Preston Guild in 2012 there were similar processions [which I talked about in the Socrel conference in 2013](#) I think Martin Stringer is correct in suggesting that such events are probably more significant in the public profiling and understanding of religion and culture than the acts of prayer, worship, study of and interpretation of scriptures or the verbal recitation of creeds. Which makes it somewhat of a pity that both the book and this review are limited to the medium of text. To appreciate such “signs” in the city and open conversations about them we really need a multimedia presentation, with photos, music, film and a walk through the neighbourhoods in question.

So if I have a frustration with this book is that it is limited in perspective because of the way it concentrates on discourse, even though I am convinced about the power of discourse to shape our worldview. His research method which seems to rely heavily on “eavesdropping” of casual conversations, and notes of his own interactions in the street seems a little thin at times, and maybe would be stronger if there was a more detailed account of who was saying which things. I’m sure Martin Stringer as a social anthropologist recognizes this and has looked at the visual and material, and has had students who have done more sociological work with qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews, providing thick descriptions of aspects of urban religion, and that he has also done the macro level analysis of census and survey data. It’s just that I’m eager for more, rather than less, and look forward to reading more studies about such research in Birmingham and the debates on social science and policy that they will generate.