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# Religious Identities, Social Networks and the Power of Information: Fieldwork Issues in Mapping Religious Diversity in London

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## Abstract

The work of Manuel Castells is perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of contemporary urban society covering urban geography, urban social movements, the power of identity, the rise of the network society and the significance of information technologies at a global level. Other sociologists such as Robertson and Beyer have developed theories of globalization and globalization with particular reference to religion, while scholars in the disciplines of anthropology and cultural studies have provided useful models for understanding ethnicities and identities. Finally theorists of social capital such as Coleman, Putnam or Bourdieu have produced influential ways of looking at social cohesion and local social networks.

This paper will enter into dialogue with each of these major themes in a reflective account of fieldwork practice and findings in the East London Atlas of Faiths project co-ordinated by the author in the late 1990s. Religious organizations and individuals are seen as engaging with the three types of collective identity described by Castells, legitimizing, resistance and project. However, it is with resistance, albeit so implicit that it is better termed support and survival identity, that the majority of religious organizations working with ethnic minorities in East London are concerned. In a globalizing, rapidly changing setting, described by Castells as a 'space of flows' resistance is shown by lack of trust of all things official, thus making information gathering particularly difficult. The reflexive analysis of the situation linked with the faith-based transformative 'project identities' that they have espoused raises difficult political and ethical questions for researchers themselves.

## Introduction

This paper has its origins in some practical research carried out in the context of community development and inter-faith relations. The East London *Atlas of Faiths* project aimed to produce and regularly revise directories of all the religious organizations in three boroughs, Newham (Aston CIU, 1999), Hackney, and Tower Hamlets (CANDL, 1997, 1999). It was funded by two voluntary agencies and resonated with developing UK government policy to extend the participation of 'faith communities' in civic life, in planning for urban regeneration and in public service delivery. The policy issues have been discussed in publications by myself and others (Home Office, 1999; Smith, 2001, 2002a, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Farnell, *et al.*, 2003; Finneron and Dinham, 2002; Taylor, 2000; Sweeney, *et al.*, 2001; Furbey and Macey, 2005). Since the events in New York in September 2001, disturbances in towns in the North of England in summer 2001, the invasion and occupation of Iraq and recent terrorism in London, the policy relevance of such work has if anything increased.

The pioneering research in East London has since 1992 produced four editions of the directory for Newham, and at least two for each of the other boroughs (Smith, 1996). It has now been replicated with more official support in other parts of the UK. For example in a wider and more recent survey of some 665 congregations and faith-based groups in 20 inner London boroughs (GLE/LCG, 2002), 665 organizations claimed nearly 70,000 users for their community activities, and the involvement of over 8000 volunteers. Similar work in the North West of England (NWDA, 2003) has surveyed the contribution of over 3000 religious organizations in the region. Some of the methodological issues in collecting and handling information for directory/database research are discussed in Smith and Soteri-Procter, 2004. The experience discussed there matches that of Martikainen (2002) whose report on similar work in Turku, Finland is one of the few other published discussions about such fieldwork. However, the purpose of this paper is more theoretical. It gives an opportunity to reflect on fieldwork and findings in the light of theories of globalization, ethnicities and identities, the information society, social capital and non-positivist epistemologies. Inevitably this is theoretical reflection after the event rather than a deductive process beginning with theory before designing research. However, in the real world theory and fieldwork rarely follow a simple linear progress but mutually influence each other in an iterative dialogue. The discussion therefore oscillates between the fieldwork issues and discussion of findings, in a pattern which is less complex than our actual experience. It is structured around five major themes found in contemporary social theory, all of which resonate closely with the concerns of Castells, namely: the power of identity and religion; globalization, world faiths and transnational communities; urban transformations, social movements and the role of

religious organizations; social capital and the network society; and finally surveillance and the information society.

## **The power of identity and religion**

One major theme of urban sociologist Manuel Castells, filling a volume of his recent trilogy on the information age, is 'the Power of Identity' (1997). As globalization proceeds 'the space of flows' supersedes space conceived as place, resulting for Castells in the upsurging power of local cultures and identities, which offer resistance to global capitalism. Politics based on social class and struggles of labour within nation states, which characterized much of the twentieth century have been displaced by the politics of identity where nationality, ethnicity, gender and sexuality are more important for self definition and collective action. Among the variables which help to forge identity movements, Castells highlights religion, and in the early part of his book considers both Islamic and North American Christian fundamentalist groups. In the second edition in 2004 additional space is devoted to an analysis of the Al Qaeda network.

Castells approach to identities is fundamentally about collective mobilization and the role of institutions rather than about individual psychology. He sees them as 'norms structured by the institutions and organisations of society' and argues that they 'become identities only when and if social actors internalise them and construct their meaning around this internalisation' (Castells, 1996: 7). He goes on to define three contrasting models of identities which are found in the contemporary world (Castells, 1997):

*Legitimising identity* [is] introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalise their domination *vis à vis* social actors...

*Resistance identity* [is] generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institution of society... *Project identity* [is] when social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural material are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure (Castells, 1997: 8; emphasis original).

Castell's assumption that identity as local resistance is essentially in conflict with globalization has been challenged by Tomlinson (2003) who argues that globalization actually proliferates identities, as migrant groups and transnational communities are confronted with new challenges to identity formation and maintenance. This is most obvious in the deprived areas of metropolitan cities, where migrants and refugees bring with them their cultures, foods, languages and not least their

religions, which encounter and interact with established indigenous groups and with each other. Much of the early analysis of migration and settlement in Britain and Europe has been carried out in terms of economics, race, postcolonialism, ethnicity and culture and has adopted a discourse based on the notion of 'between two cultures' (i.e., the host and the immigrant). Since this sociological tradition tends to assume secularization as a given, until recently, religion has rarely featured in studies of ethnicity in the UK, despite the fact that the formation of communities and institutions has taken place around religion for many decades. An early exception is Rex and Moore's (1967) study of Sparkbrook, while more recent studies in other countries are easier to find, for example in Australia (Bourma, 1996) and in the USA (Eck, 2001). The emergence of interest in the implication of religious identities for public policy in Britain owes much to the work of Tariq Modood and his colleagues with the PSI fourth survey of ethnic minorities (Modood, *et al.*, 1997) and a more recent volume on multicultural politics (Modood, 2005).

A developing interest in issues of religious identity in multicultural areas is found in the discipline of religious studies, for example the work of Kim Knott and colleagues in the Community Religions Project at Leeds (Knott, 1984, 1992a, 1992b; Knott and Khoker, 1993; Lewis, 1996). In the sociology of religion a rather broader focus is evident in Coleman and Collins (2004), a recent collection based on papers from a conference of the BSA sociology of religion group. Much theoretical reflection draws not so much on Castells, as on ideas, research and literature about the construction and negotiation of ethnicities and identities that has emerged within cultural studies and social anthropology, and on theories of social categorization advanced in social psychology by Tajfel (1982). In the context of religion these theories together with the tradition of ethnic boundary processes first suggested in anthropology by Barth (1969) have been well used and adapted, for example by Jacobsen (1998) in her study of Muslim young people in East London and by Nesbitt (1991) in her work with Hindu/Sikh children in Coventry. The major significance of this is to avoid reifying or essentializing any ethnic, cultural or religious group as fixed or primordial, but rather to examine social processes through which, in particular contexts, subjects assign themselves, and/or others ascribe them, to particular collectivities. A consequence of this is to reject any simplistic 'world religions' approach which suggests that because someone 'belongs' to Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism or Christianity, she or he will believe, practice or interact with others in a prescribed manner. By avoiding essentialism such an approach leaves room for human agency in social life, and for the social construction of 'imagined communities'.

## **Identity and categorization**

Religious and other forms of social identity were a central issue for our project at a number of levels. The *Atlas of Faith* project implicitly follows Castells' institutional approach rather than a psychological or cultural one by taking the local religious organization as the unit of analysis. We assume that because each institution has a life of its own, that any person who takes part in its activities, and in particular the representative who responds to the survey, has made a significant investment in a particular religious identity. However, in reflecting theoretically on the process and findings of the project the valuable insights of the alternative models need to be recognized.

Assigning groups to simple categories was essential for sorting the database and ordering the directory, but inevitably relied on researchers' judgments. For purposes of analysis these were categorized using conventional 'world religions' and denominational labels, although we need to note that not every respondent would choose to describe themselves in these terms (see Table 1, below).

The questionnaire allowed each group to define itself in terms of its name, the faith tradition it came from, and the denomination, movement or group (if any) with which it identified. Every organization was sent a draft copy of its own entry and invitation to confirm or amend before going to print. A few Christian groups were uneasy about particular denominational labels, and some had a narrow interpretation of the term 'Christian' which made them wary about appearing in a directory alongside groups which they regarded as anti-Christian. Other groups with roots in India did not fit easily, or were unhappy to be described, into the category of Hindu. Followers of Sai Baba offered the term 'Omniversal' and the Ravidasis who are devotees of a Punjabi guru, operate on the fuzzy boundary of Sikh and Hindu communities. Although none of the Hindus or Sikhs we contacted spoke in any depth about caste, we became aware that several mandirs, gurudwaras and movements drew on particular sections of the Indian heritage community. Among Muslims a small number of groups described themselves additionally in terms of a specific movement within Islam such as Sunni, or Barelwi.

Table 1. *Religious Categories Used in the Database*

<b>Faith Tradition</b>	
Bahai	
Buddhist	
Christian	Christian Congregation
	African
	Baptist
	CofE
	Ecumenical
	Independent. Evangelical
	Methodist
	Moravian
	Non-denominational.
	Orthodox
	Pentecostal
	Roman Catholic
	Salvation Army
	SD Adventist
United Reformed	
Unknown	
Non Trinitarian Religious Movements with roots in Christendom	Christadelphians
	Iglesio Ni Christo
	Jehovah's witnesses
	Unification Church
	Latter Day Saints
	Spiritualist
Unitarian	
Hindu	
Inter-faith	
Jewish	
Muslim	
Pagan	
Sikh	

Type of Organization
Congregation or Place of Worship
Hostel
Chaplaincy
Community Centre
Welfare Agency
Denominational HQ
Network or Umbrella Group
Religious Order
Shop

From this discussion it is possible to see how religious group identity is a complex process of social categorization and boundary setting and maintenance. It is evident that for the leaders that boundaries defining inclusion or exclusion from the faith community, though in some cases fuzzy or fudges, are defined in religious, theological or traditional communal terms. Doctrine, ritual form or transgression of

moral standards may be seen as placing others outside the true faith or beyond salvation. There is little direct evidence here of particular religious identities being utilized explicitly in contradistinction to the 'evil world order' of global capitalism as Castells' framework might predict. Rather at first glance they would appear to be legitimizing identities, not so much on behalf of the state or the global economic order, but in terms of particular religious worldviews and their associated social structures and institutions.

### **Presentation of identities by fieldworkers**

The project was initiated by a group of white male 'professional' Christians with a long-term shared involvement in local community work, among whom the author was best placed to co-ordinate the research. Several volunteers and students acted as interviewers, by phone and in personal visits, including a group of white Christian students from Alabama and a Muslim student from a local university. Since he was of Pakistani heritage, a committed Muslim, habitually dressing in a traditional Islamic style, male and bearded, and had grown up in a neighbouring borough, it was assumed he would be ideally matched to the task of gathering information from mosques, Islamic organizations and other South Asian groups. On the whole the matching of interviewer to respondent had some positive effects.

...one of the American students [had stated] that she felt people at one of the Hindu temples did not want to talk to her because of her American accent. I obtained an interview, over the phone, the first time around... Because I spoke to these organisations with a degree of confidence and knowledge of their names, I think it helped me in obtaining the data.

However it soon becomes evident that an 'Asian' field-worker faced both similar and different issues to the Americans.

I have noticed that when I gave my name, a Muslim name, to some of the Catholic and Pentecostal groups, it produces an adverse affect on the telephone conversation.

Yet even when working among Muslims, 'matching' the interviewer does not turn out to be the 'magic bullet' as has often been supposed. Language skills (the interviewer's dominant language is English) and generational status (aged 22) were different from most mosque leaders. The result was a complex negotiation of identities described below by the interviewer:

My culture (secondary culture as a Pakistani which does not conflict with my primary culture, Islam) was something which did seem to bring a positive light to this data collection. I found that the fact that I was of Asian appearance, seemed to, in some cases, lessen tensions which may have arisen when a complete stranger

walks into a setting other than of his own... Many times I also conversed with them in the Urdu language, despite some of them primarily speaking Bengali or Gujerati. This was a very reassuring process for myself and I am sure for them. I also found that despite the different languages and nationalities of some of these organisations, there was no hatred towards me from those who were not Pakistani. I have seen intra-Muslim hatred/racism (towards each other) brewing up in other parts of London... Rather, it appears (from the way I was talked to by Bengalis and Gujeratis) as if the Muslims in this borough do appear—even on a limited scale—to practise the famous brotherhood of all which is preached by Islam.

But he also commented

[It was] not at all straightforward... I have encountered a lot of mistrust and suspicion from the Muslim communities...

From these reported interactions between fieldworkers and research subjects it is obvious that a range of identity negotiations were taking place. Although Castells does recognize that there may be a plurality of identities for individuals, it is hard to see how his macro level analysis could cope with situations as complex as this. Micro ethnographic accounts of such interactions are far more revealing.

### **Globalization, world faiths and transnational communities**

Castells (1996) has contributed useful insights around global flows of people, capital, goods and information, and other scholars such as Robertson (1992) have shaped the field of globalization studies. The study of globalization and religion rests largely on the contribution of Peter Beyer (1994). Beyer (1998a, 1998b) has developed Robertson's (1995) theme of 'glocalization' in describing the effects of an interaction of global and local factors on religious life. Beyer's (1998b) article is particularly significant in its discussion of the processes of religious identity and institution formation in contemporary contexts where global communication channels ensure that migrant communities can remain in touch with religious, cultural and political developments 'back home'. Localized inputs and impacts of globalization processes have also been taken up in a case study by Lyon (1998) of the Toronto Blessing movement, and Freston (1998) on Pentecostalism. The findings from the *Atlas of Faith* project suggest that Castells' global generalizations about globalization require a more nuanced gloss.

The international economic pull of London has for centuries attracted migrants and settlers who have been willing to move in order to sell their labour or their wares. However it was with the end of Empire in the 1950s and 60s that large numbers of Commonwealth immigrants came to Britain and settled in deprived urban areas, struggling against poverty and discrimination in the housing and labour markets (Rex and Moore, 1967) Successive waves from the Caribbean, India and



Pakistan, East Africa (Asians), Bangladesh, Vietnam, and most of the countries of Black Africa have found their way to Newham. Among the most recent groups are Somalis, Ivoireans, Kurds, Russians and Colombians. The borough of Newham now has a majority of minorities, with only 38% white British in the 2001 Census.

An important result of global migration and local settlement in recent decades has been the formation of new religious institutions. Of the 171 religious groups in Newham, for which we have information, 94 have been founded since 1971. The proportions are particularly high for Pentecostal, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh groups. Mobility is the keynote; few such congregations own their own buildings; halls are rented from mainline churches or community centres and schools, the church minibus and increasingly the mobile phone are characteristics of this mode of religious being. Many inner city religious groups operate in a volatile organizational setting with rapidly changing memberships, leaderships, affiliations, changes of name, logo or public presentations of their identity. Among Pentecostals in Newham in 1998 for example, our estimate is that nearly 20% of the groups have moved on or closed since the previous edition of the directory four years earlier. Local ethnographic knowledge made us aware that mergers and rebrandings of churches sometimes obscured the continuity of personnel involved.

The theoretical issues around globalization and transnational communities led us to ask about international relationships within churches, denominations or movements, and flows of human and financial resources (which we hypothesized were as likely to come from the developing world to Britain as in the opposite traditional direction for mission and aid). Some of these questions proved to be sensitive and it is likely that a lot of potentially interesting information was not disclosed. Nonetheless, there was plenty to suggest the continuing and probably increasing importance of global links involving people living and worshipping in London, with Africa, Asia, the Americas and Continental Europe. We discovered largely Caribbean Pentecostal churches ultimately ruled by (white) overseers in Tennessee, Pentecostal pastors who regularly travelled to branches of their denomination in Lagos, Oslo and Brussels, and Hindu groups who depended for teaching and ritual services on swamis making annual visits from their base in India. Among Muslims, on top of the consciousness of participation in the global ummah, we discovered a number of organizations which were affiliated to movements founded in Pakistan but which had branches across the world (more about this is documented in Smith, 2000).

In East London ethnicity is a key factor for an analysis of religion. Indeed, the large majority of Christians, as well as Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs come from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. Religious institutions have often emerged, and continue to function as, support systems and centres of solidarity for people from

particular national, regional or cultural backgrounds. As a result churches, temples, gurudwaras and mosques sometimes replicate the linguistic, social and cultural forms of the homeland and become closed communities, or at least recognized central points for the gathering of particular ethnic groups within a wider faith community. Our questionnaire asked in both a tick box, and a more open-ended way about the ethnic make up of the worshipping community in each congregation. Results revealed a substantial number of groups that catered specifically for a single ethno-linguistic group such as a Tamil Christian church, a Polish Catholic parish and a Spanish-speaking congregation of Colombian refugees, while others catered for substantial numbers of one ethnic group such as the Acholi people from Uganda within an Anglican parish. Hindu temples also tended to specially cater for people with separate regional and linguistic backgrounds, such as Tamils, Gujeratis or Punjabis. Prejudices and conflicts from the country of origin can be transferred from one continent to another, for example one vicar spoke of the difficulty of reconciling two groups of people in his parish from an African country where they had belonged to two tribes who were on opposing sides in the recent civil war. Such issues may even impact on fieldwork. Our Muslim interviewer reported at least one difficult encounter in a gurudwara where a discussion of the history of conflict between Sikhs and Muslims in South Asia developed into an altercation in which he felt unable to continue to operate in a 'neutral' researcher role.

The findings of the project suggest, despite a superficial common experience of living amidst ethno-religious diversity and having some transnational connections, a high degree of particularity. Each religious organization, as a result of specific historical and geographical circumstances, has a unique pattern of relationships with one or more ethno-religious groups represented in London and in other, particular, places across the world. It would appear therefore that a model which includes multiple patterns of glocalization offers richer insights than one based on a single overarching notion of globalization. The evidence is more consistent with, in Freston's (1998) terms, a diversity of 'globalisations from below' using a wide range of ethno-religious identities.

### **Urban transformations, social movements and the role of religious organizations**

Castells, particularly in his early work (Castells and Sheridan, 1977), studied urban society through a political lens, looking at conflicts over issues such as land use and employment rights, and the role of social movements in articulating claims for social justice. Housing action groups, environmentalism, feminism and mobilized ethnic identity are key examples of such social movements. where 'the personal is also political'. However, it is still unusual to find studies of religion as the basis of

social action. Both secular media and sociologists (including Castells), perhaps as a result of the global profile of American Christian fundamentalism, seem to find it hard to find evidence of religion playing anything other than a conservative role in politics. However, over the last couple of decades alternative trajectories may also be seen, for example, in the growing significance of Islam in politics (as shown, for example, in the high vote for the anti-war RESPECT party in Muslim areas in the 2005 UK General Election), and in Christian activism through theologies of liberation in Latin America, South Africa and in the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. In the context of globalization of London, in the middle of urban and industrial transformation such as the regeneration of Docklands, it becomes particularly important to track the roles of religion in social action.

In the local context we were particularly aware that religious groups would encounter deprivation, discrimination and rapid social change and might be involved in programmes to alleviate poverty and suffering, to empower local people through community development or be involved in partnership with other organizations, including the state, to further urban regeneration or deliver welfare services. In addition there might be organized activity or political lobbying on issues of perceived social injustice or moral concern, for example on Third World Development, domestic debt or poverty, local planning and housing issues, racial injustice, abortion. The obvious implication for our research was that we needed to include questions that capture evidence of this range of activity in sufficient detail for analysis.

Rather less obviously it meant that we also needed to identify and approach many social welfare groups and community action organizations which were religious in origin or ethos but were not in themselves worshipping congregations. Even after definitional difficulties were resolved, we concluded that by taking organizations as the unit of analysis, the contribution of people of faith to the welfare of the local community would be underrepresented. For example, we knew from local knowledge and another more ethnographic study (Smith, 2002a) the substantial role of individual Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in local politics, within the local secular voluntary sector or in their professional lives as teachers, health workers, local government officials, police or probation officers or as business leaders.

The directory lists in total 620 activities and groups additional to public worship provided by the groups in Newham's religious sector. Over two thirds of these (437) were defined as religious activities and less than a third (183) as secular groups open to the wider community. Over 80% of activities offered are associated with Christian congregations though non-response from other faiths may distort the true picture. It is worth noting the denominations and faith communities which appear to provide more non-religious than religious activities. These are Buddhists (2/0), CoFE (101/77),

Ecumenical (19/7), Methodist (25/16), Salvation Army (3/2), United Reformed Church (13/7), Sree Narayana (4/3) and Sikh (7/4). For Pentecostals on the other hand the ratio is 12/95 and for Independent Evangelicals 13/48. This indicates which groups are more outward looking in terms of community service rather than focused on the spiritual needs of their own faith community. The majority of social activities were low-key social support, or leisure and welfare activities, often targeted at children and young people, the homeless and vulnerable and the elderly. Radical, empowering, community development and politically controversial forms of community campaigning are relatively rare.

In terms of Castells' tripartite typology of identity movements it would appear that most of the worshipping groups in our directory best fit the 'resistance' category. They represent identities and networks of comfort, support and survival in the face of an oppressive world, a functional role perhaps as an 'opium for the people'. 'Project' identities are harder to find among the congregations, although there are numerous faith-based organizations and projects, as well as faith-motivated individuals working in broader social movements and local politics, who see their mission as transformative. The examples which approached Castells' category of 'project identities' were by and large located not in the newer, more sectarian, ethnic-minority faith communities (who tended to be clearly focused on the spiritual and religious) but led by white clergy of the mainline Christian denominations. However, as noted earlier, religious groups in East London also exhibit some characteristics of legitimizing identities. The conclusion must be that Castells' categories are not very well defined or useful as a typology of religious organizations.

### **Social capital and the network society**

The first volume in Castells' (1996: 3) recent trilogy covers the rise of the network society, concentrating on recent global transformations in economics and information whereby 'our societies are increasingly structured around the bipolar opposition of the Net and the Self'. Castells is mainly concerned with the role of information technology in networking, though he does discuss the fact that the notion of society as network is universal, predating the new technologies. He recognizes associated transformations of social life and the trend for significant personal relationships to extend beyond localized *gemeinschaft* patterns of community to more geographically dispersed *gesellschaft* associational networks. There is a bridge here to theories of social capital advanced by two social theorists Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1990). While the former locates social capital in the context of several different types of capital (economic, human, cultural, etc.), which are distributed unequally between individuals, classes and groups in society and which tend to be used in competition

and conflict, Coleman sees social capital in a more functionalist perspective as the networks which form the bedrock of social cohesion.

The popularization of such ideas and policy implementations owe much to the work of Putnam (1993) whose studies of civil society in Italy, and of social trends in the USA (Putnam, 1995, 2000) follow Coleman's approach. For Putnam and his numerous followers the key task is an empirical one of devising and applying measuring instruments which will allow reliable macro-level comparisons between societies and over time. Putnam's definition of social capital scarcely helps in the task of measurement as it contains a mixed basket of concepts, namely networks, norms and trust. The recent division of social capital into bonding, bridging (horizontally across equal status groups) and linking (vertically between groups with differential status and power) is a helpful analytic development although it hardly simplifies the measurement problem. Our perspective in this paper is that precise measurement of social capital is an impossible and fruitless task but that the analysis of social networks and social processes that lead to bonding, bridging and linking is viable and throws useful light on issues of social cohesion and conflict (Smith, 1998).

Tracing, documenting and securing a response from all the religious groups in the study area was the most challenging part of the whole enterprise and success depended on the research group's networking skills and accumulated social capital. Long-term local involvement as participant observers and ethnographers in the community and church, enabled us to draw on a wealth of relevant knowledge, and gain access to new sources of information, such as leaflets, noticeboards and gossip, while often a phone call to a particular person within the researcher's own social network of colleagues and friends was the quickest way of verifying or clarifying information about new religious groups. Social Capital beyond the research team is also relevant since 'snowballing' was part of the sampling procedure whereby we sought to ask every group about the existence of other agencies in their field or patch, particularly where there are newly emergent groups.

Our analysis of response rates shows clearly that we found higher levels of response from the groups and individuals that our organizations and staff already knew, above all from those in the mainstream Christian denominations. Interviewers commented '*If they knew (the principal researcher) it was usually OK*'. With marginalized groups, who were distant from our networks, interviewers became frustrated by the difficulty of making contact, and the time spent out on the streets, in cold, wet, dark, winter conditions, in the hope of being able to talk to someone at the mosque or church. It is social capital, especially of the linking variety that puts mainstream Christian groups in touch with official power structures (including the researchers, who could more easily track them down, remind and persuade them to

return the forms). All of the Methodist and URC churches and as many as 95% of Anglican parishes responded, as did around three quarters of Roman Catholic, Baptist and Independent evangelicals. 63% of Christian para-church agencies also completed the questionnaire. On the other hand, only 40% of Pentecostals responded fully. Muslim and Hindu groups had similar low response rates, despite the intensive personal contacting that was undertaken..

What is significant here in terms of networking and social capital is that information gathering depended so much on interpersonal social capital, while disembodied, place irrelevant forms of information gathering mediated by electronic communication technologies had limited success. To be fair to Castells (1996), in his discussion of the networks engendered by new technologies he notes that particular urban regions retain a pivotal role as a centres of critical mass, and cradles of information for the new industries of cyberspace and suggests that some of the benefits of this derive from the location of numerous highly-skilled persons in small areas where they can personally interact. Yet the very difficulty of collecting solid and stable information amidst the increasing diversity of ethnic groups, denominations, church plants, networks and rapid pace of change, suggests East London is recognizable as being a space of flows. Indeed, one Christian minister who had worked in the area for 40 years remarked on the '*shift from Institutional to "Flow" spirituality*'.

Finally, the research design and structural network analysis applied to the data was shaped by a theoretical interest in the bonding, bridging and linking within and between religious organizations and communities, and a practical concern with improving communication and collaboration within the sector. Questions about the numbers and types of people involved in meeting together for prayer, worship, learning or associated social activities were relevant for evaluating the level of (bonding) social capital found in the religious sector. However, we were also interested to find out which organizations were in touch with which others, or clustered together through shared membership of particular umbrella organizations, and especially where such relationships crossed the familiar boundaries of creed and denomination.

The organizations in the directory listed affiliations to over 75 different second tier bodies. The mainline Christian churches reported a more developed structure of umbrella bodies than the Pentecostal or minority faith groups, (among whom only Muslims reported any umbrella organizations). 205 groups reported just under 200 significant *one to one* relationships with other local religious groups within their own faith community. Here again it was Christians, especially the mainline churches, who were well networked within and across denominations. Altogether the groups responding to our survey mentioned 142 *international* links, and there was some evidence to suggest that it was the newer, ethno-religious minority groups that had more and stronger global networks.

In contrast local links across the boundaries of other faith communities were extremely rare in the data. None were reported by any Muslim or Sikh groups. One Bahai group and one Hindu-origin group reported some non-specific interfaith relationships. One interfaith organization listed relationships with all the major world faith traditions. Seven mainline Christian organizations reported significant direct links with non-Christian faith organizations but even these only offered specific names of two mosques and the one Hindu group mentioned above. Even if we add the dozen or so groups who claimed affiliation to the UK Inter-Faith Network or borough's Association of Faiths it seems there is little evidence that religious organizations in the borough are interested in developing interfaith relationships, activities or dialogue. Many, in fact, would be hostile to the very idea on the basis of their own exclusive theological understandings.

This evidence once again underlines the advantageous position of mainstream Christian groups in what may be the crucial area for linking social capital. For it is through mobilization through umbrella bodies, and the weak ties (Granovetter, 1973), of occasional partnership activities, that group leaders get to know the 'movers and shakers' in a community, exchange valuable information, build coalitions and acquire a measure of political influence. In contrast, the newest faith communities appear to be more fragmented and less well connected in the locality, therefore at a disadvantage in terms of mobilizing power and resources, at least through conventional political structures.

### **Surveillance and the information society**

Castells clearly recognizes that the control of information brings power which can be used in situations of competition and conflict. Changing modes of information exchange such as the internet offer new possibilities for economic, social and political organization. His case study of Mexico's Zapatistas (Castells, 1997: part 2) provide an interesting example of how a resistance movement can itself make use of the technologies of globalization to further its cause. How far have such innovations impacted on the religious life of East London? Even though the survey was carried out as long ago as 1998, 41 religious groups in Newham gave email addresses and 15 had their own web site, with some of the African Pentecostal groups being among the early users of these new technologies.

However, in contrast, several comments from the interviewers reveal some discontents and resistance to the intrusive and time-consuming techniques of the information society. It is possible that information overload and what one interviewer described as 'form fatigue' when confronted with our lengthy questionnaire, may call into question the whole enterprise of research, or at least indicate that

survey research may now be so commonplace that we have reached the point of diminishing returns. Yet beyond sheer busyness we detected more than a little outright suspicion.

We have argued already that there is little evidence of an articulated politics of resistance through religion. However, there is an implicit rejection by marginalized ethno-religious groups, of the hegemony of the state and of secular western culture. It is to be found in lack of trust of the authorities and avoidance of contact and questioning, which impacted on our data gathering. It is reasonable to link these experiences with the concerns of the social capital theorists around the issue of trust (Putnam, 1993; Fukuyama, 1995). It also suggests there are some important political and ethical concerns for this type of information gathering and social sorting around with the question of surveillance in an information rich society (Lyon, 2002). We should not be surprised to encounter resistance to what is perceived as state surveillance on the part of minority groups who are often subject to extra attention from the authorities who see them as potential illegal migrants, criminals or even terrorists.

Anecdotes from the interviewers are indicative. A pair of American students visited the worship activities of a Hindu religious group and interviewed the leader, recording the conversation on tape with his permission. However, they were surprised that 'bouncers' or bodyguards were stationed at the door of the building, and later the religious leader phoned them to demand the return of the tape. Our Muslim student interviewer reflected on his experiences as in the following extract:

The appearance of a stranger to the prayer congregation who 'looks the part' has undoubtedly caused a few murmurs of 'spy', 'agent' etc. Whilst I would deny any ulterior motive for my presence in the Mosques...I can to some extent understand the fears of the Muslim community. Years of colonisation by Western European nations with policies such as divide and rule, as well as current day tragedies such as Bosnia and Kosovo, have undoubtedly preoccupied the minds of Muslim communities. Thus, any aspect of Western academia/research is seen as a hypocritical show of the hand of friendship after so much oppression and injustice by other Western institutions.

Lack of trust sometimes combined with misunderstanding of the origin and purpose of the research:

A number of the organisations actually believed that I was something to do with the council or social services or some other local government body despite the fact I told them who I was and where I was coming from. This belief in my 'government' (!) status coupled [perhaps] with the failure to obtain planning permission for the Mosque, may have led to some organisations not wanting to be included in the directory.

(Some Muslims at first) seemed to believe that I was actually working for a Muslim cause...collecting information for the Muslim directory (a nationwide



directory). It is only when I explained that I wasn't, that some of the mistrust set in with some of the people.

### **Wider ethical and epistemological issues**

Our experience raises the issue of the ethics and values behind the project as a whole, many of which only emerged as a result of the fieldwork. These go beyond familiar questions about data confidentiality, and usual general issues about reliability, validity, quality and scientific integrity, and epistemology which arise when working from a committed viewpoint which has rejected the supposed 'objectivity' of the positivist view of social science.

The Christian senior researcher and Muslim research assistant both tried to develop a reflexive understanding of their role and their own religious identities. But it also became evident that asking someone to do research in 'one's own' faith community in the context of resistance identities may lead to vulnerability and personal cost. For example our Muslim interviewer pondered the legitimacy of a Muslim taking part in

monitoring the state of the Muslims by a Christian-run organisation...I do not consider, that I as a Muslim, have broken any cardinal rule of the faith I belong to. I also do not subscribe to conspiracy theories...

However he went on:

All of this mistrust in the end, I feel, has not really done much for my own credit rating amongst the Muslims in Newham, and thus I consider this to be a major disadvantage of research; that it can alienate oneself from a people or community whom one considers being a part of.

A difficult issue arises when a researcher, (Christian or Muslim) holds a personal conviction of the truth of their own faith, and a firm belief that this truth is not merely a personal preference but universal, and should be placed on offer in the public realm. For the sake of good outcomes in research and community work such commitments may need to remain hidden when dealing with members of 'other' faith communities. At other times they can offer privileged access to the life of one's own faith community. However, the very act of research in a multi-faith context can be interpreted by 'fundamentalist' fellow believers as soft-peddalling compromise. Like my Muslim colleague in this work I, as a Christian, have sometimes been criticized and recognized the pain of alienation from my own faith community.

How far can the whole research enterprise be justified in terms of the assumption that religious groups can be persuaded to become partners in policies that contribute to the 'common good', when many of them as people from materially deprived, socially excluded, ethno-religious minority groups, emerging from a

history of colonialism have a right to be more sceptical about and resistant to our intentions? Both Christians and Muslims working in this field are likely to be concerned for social justice and what liberation theologians call 'the preferential option for the poor'. By associating with such 'project identities' they may wish to find ways of maximizing the benefit of the enterprise to the marginalized and socially excluded members of the community. Research from this perspective is more than collecting neutral information and undertaking social sorting, it is about giving people a 'voice'. The implication of this is that the researcher needs to be extremely cautious in any definitional statements and interpretations that are made, and ideally to check out the formulations with the respondents so that as far as possible they remain subjects (rather than objects) of the research. The findings also need to be available in ways that make them accessible and useful to members of the different faith communities for purposes and priorities that are theirs to decide. The real difficulties of putting these ideals into practice should not be underestimated and much work remains to be done. This stance, however, conflicts with that of Castells who has little time for such concerns and is reluctant to attempt an answer to the question 'what then is to be done?', ending his trilogy thus:

Each time an intellectual has tried to answer this question, and seriously implement the answer, catastrophe was ensured... In the twentieth century, philosophers have been trying to change the world. In the twenty-first century, it is time to interpret it differently (Castells, 1998: 358-59).

While most of us can recognize the deep flaws in millenarian utopias as a genre, it seems more than a little ironic that a scholar, whose own work not only highlights the significance of project identities in the contemporary world, but whose critical analysis bears some of the hallmarks of Old Testament prophecy, should deny that option to others.

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