Editorial

Geography, religion, and emerging paradigms: problematizing the dialogue

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This introduction to the subsequent forum addresses social and cultural geography’s recent engagement with religion and spirituality. While representing a laudable and increasing willingness to approach religion/spirituality through sophisticated concepts and theories, this engagement should include more than just an imposition of the discipline’s emerging paradigms on a new object of study. Geographers need to allow religion to ‘speak back’. The articles in this forum suggest that this speaking back may range from, for example, spirituality/religion’s insistence on its own centrality in social space, to its tendency to complicate categories and experience, to its reminder that it informs the lives and identities of many geographers.

Key words: geography of religion, emerging paradigms, religion, belief, spirituality, self-reflexivity.

Religion as the last terra incognita?

Some forty years ago, in the preface to his pioneering book Geography of Religions, David Sopher complained about the scarcity of writing about religion within the field of geography. He conceived of his book as a first attempt to map ‘a frontier territory with some indications where its boundaries may lie’ (Sopher 1967: vii). While we might still be far from the prominence accorded to religion by the popular press, as James Proctor noted in the introduction to a recent forum (2006: 166), claims about religion’s marginality seem to have been increasingly challenged over the past few years. As a direct consequence of 9/11, or perhaps as part of a new interest within the social sciences in ‘more-than-representational’ aspects of life, such as the spiritual and the numinous (Dewsbury, Harrison, Rose and Wylie 2002; Game 2001; Lorimer 2005; Metcalfe 2001), religion has been revisited in multiple and often very sophisticated ways by an increasing number of...
human geographers who in the past paid little or no attention at all to it. Critical approaches to religion have recently flourished at a variety of scales and contexts, from geopolitics (Agnew 2006; Knippenberg 2006; Ó Tuathail 2000) and the analysis of transnational processes (Olson and Silvey 2006), to the study of the construction of socio-cultural identities through everyday practices (Holloway and Valins 2002), embodiment, affect, and spirituality (Game 2001; Holloway 2003, 2006), historical geographies (Brace, Bailey and Harvey 2006), and geographies of Islam, perhaps one of the largest bodies of scholarship within recent critical geographies of religion (see for example, Dunn 2005; Dwyer 1999; Dwyer, Shah and Sanghera 2008; Falah and Nagel 2005; Hopkins 2006, 2007; Secor 2002, 2005).

At the same time, scholars from other disciplines have increasingly utilized geographical concepts and ideas to talk about religion: from theologians reclaiming the importance of place (Brown 2004; Hamma 1999; Inge 2003; Knott 2005; Sheldrake 2001) and natural landscapes (Lane 1998) in religious traditions, worship, and spirituality in ways that far exceed the concern for sacred space traditionally manifest by geographers of religion, to social scientists and anthropologists interested in the spatially embodied enactment of religious rituals and practices such as pilgrimage (Coleman and Eade 2004; Eade and Garbin 2007; Smith 1987). Just as religion offers geographers a new type of language to explain more-than-rational aspects of life and the world, geography conversely provides scholars of religion with a new vocabulary to map the ineffable. In the words of theologian Balden Lane, geography ‘delights the human psyche because of its localization of truth, its way of helping us grasp the abstract by way of the concrete’ (1998: 128).

Despite recent and past work, however, Sopher’s description of religion as a ‘frontier territory’ waiting to be mapped remains true for many contemporary geographers, as well as for non-geographers approaching the concepts of our discipline. We read the situation, for example, in the anxiety to find new metaphors to define the long-debated encounter between geography and religion. Rather than tracing rigid boundaries, or providing ‘some indications where [these] may lie’ (Sopher 1967: vii), as Sopher and his successors attempted to do (Park 1994; Sopher 1967), contemporary scholars seem rather to challenge them. In a world in which everything and everyone is ‘on the move’ (Sheller and Urry 2006), scholarship orients itself toward different kinds of spatial metaphors and mappings, ones capable of making sense of religion’s disciplinary and ontological fluidities and mobilities (see, for example, Tweed 2006). ‘Frontier territory’ nevertheless remains a useful metaphor in pointing to how geographers who have recently turned to the topic of religion are approaching it. They often envisage religion as a *terra incognita*, a field to ‘colonize’ within our discipline through the imposition of new approaches and theories. In their introduction to *Social & Cultural Geography*’s themed section ‘Religion and Spirituality in Geography’, Julian Holloway and Oliver Valins, for example, note how geographers of religion and spirituality could usefully contribute to newly emerging trends, such as the recent ‘interest in issues of embodiment, performance, and practice’ (2002: 7). Similarly, John Agnew opens his recent editorial introduction to ‘Religion and Geopolitics’ by stating that ‘religion is the emerging political language of the time’ (2006: 183). Or again, recognizing that ‘historical geographers of religion have been slow to apply critical interpretative
methods to existing well-used archival sources’, Catherine Brace, Adrian Bailey, and David Harvey suggest further methodological developments in this direction (2006: 37); and so on. In the light of emerging paradigms, new orientations, and innovative methodological trends, past claims about the (bounded) possibilities offered by geography’s study of religion often no longer prove true. What has been labelled ‘geography’s emotional turn’ (Anderson and Smith 2001; Bondi, Davidson and Smith 2005), for example, opens new venues for our discipline to explore personal religious experience, spirituality, and the transcendent (Game 2001; Hetherington 2003; Metcalfe 2001; Slater 2004).

These encounters between geography’s emerging trends and religion as the last terra incognita (after class, race, gender, sexuality, disability, etc.) are by no means unproblematic, however. They raise a series of questions, especially if we conceive the relationship between geography and religion as (at the least) a complex two-way dialogue rather than a simple one-way colonizing process. Taking the territorial metaphor further, religion, like any terra incognita and indeed like any place, is not a blank surface waiting to be inscribed and shaped by colonizers’ cartographic gazes and narratives. It rather ‘speaks back’ through its own specificities—constraining, redirecting, interacting with, and often problematizing the human geographer’s colonizing narrative. Just as physical encounters with a specific place often disrupt (rather than verify) pre-existing imagined geographies, so too might episodes of geographers ‘seizing’ religion do so. While attempting to encourage and develop the renewed geographical interest in religion and spirituality, this themed issue of Social & Cultural Geography also aims at further problematizing the debate by exploring ways in which religion ‘speaks back’ to geography; ways in which religion blends, for example, categories such as sacred and secular, transcendent and mundane, thus producing new forms of experience, modes of practices and senses of the world. Religion is thus not intended as a new interface that is being interrogated, as the above-mentioned earlier tradition of work on the politics of space dealt with precisely that interface; but the approaches are now taking new and interesting turns.

Religious and spiritual matters, Holloway and Valins observe in their editorial, ‘form an important context through which the majority of the world’s population live their lives, forge a sense (indeed an ethics) of self, and make and perform their different geographies’ (2002: 6). Religion, however, we argue, also problematizes common assumptions and spatialities. It blurs geographical scales and conceptual boundaries: those between the self and the world, life and death, the local and the universal, the private and the public, the introvert and the political, the fixed and the mobile, or, in Kong’s words, between politics and poetics (2001). It blurs disciplinary boundaries too. Subjected to politics and shaping policies, and yet at the same time offering an inner spiritual path to moral self-improvement and salvation, religion is of interest to social scientists and humanists alike. It calls into question distinctions between social actors, subjects, and the humanistic Self. Rather than simply dictating social norms or reinforcing worldly statuses quo, religion often subverts them. While lived and articulated in this world, religion and spirituality are typically not bound to terrestrial life (and thus society); the ultimate goal for many varieties of the faithful is life after death.

Religion poses not only methodological problems, but also ontological ones. It over-turns epistemological beliefs. As Bruno Latour
has shown, where science is ‘uplifting’, ‘sublime’, ‘far-reaching’, religion (at least the Christian Catholicism he describes) can be ‘local’ and ‘contingent’. It is about personal transformation here and now. While science points to invisible worlds through complex concatenations of instruments and models, religion ‘does not even try to reach anything beyond, but to represent the presence of . . . “the Word incarnate”’ (Latour 2005: 35–36). The New Testament itself, with the visual richness of its parables and its detailed topography, seems to appeal more to the heart through the visualization of objects, rather than to the mind through intellectual speculation. Dealing with visible, material things, such as plants, mountains, talents, seeds, and animals, parables reveal the otherwise ungraspable through their appeal to human senses. Similarly, liturgical performance does everything to constantly redirect the attention of the faithful ‘by systematically breaking the will to go away, to ignore, to be indifferent, blasé, bored. Conversely, science has nothing to do with the visible, the direct, the immediate, the tangible, the lived world of common sense, of sturdy “matters of fact”’ (Latour 2005: 36). In other words, religion is not about representation, but (re)presentation. It does not speak of things, but ‘from things’ (2005: 29).

Religion also complicates positionalities. ‘Religious geographers’ face ethical dilemmas when turning into ‘geographers of religion’. The identity of the religious geographer may often be stigmatized or considered taboo in most ‘politically correct’ and yet rigorously secular academic environments (Latour 2005; Markides 2002; Slater 2004; see also Maddrell’s piece in this issue). Religion thus problematizes self-reflexivity. In recent decades geography began incorporating race, gender, sexuality, and other axes of difference because of identity arguments as much as anything else. Geographers holding hitherto marginalized identities insisted that their own categories of experience could no longer be ignored. But religion poses a unique challenge. There is something about the ways in which people adhere to, leave, or proselytize a religion that differs from characteristics of other axes of identity. Religion thus appears to many as something more like political ideology than gender: an identity chosen rather than given (despite scholarship’s serious questioning of that binary). At the same time, more than race, gender, and sexuality, Enlightenment narratives often define religion and belief as the Other to the scholar’s identity. Religion and belief, to some of academia’s residents and gatekeepers, must be not only set aside but also eradicated (Asad 1993). Unsurprisingly, then, only a few geographers have prioritized religion through identity arguments (see Slater 2004, for example); pressure persists against doing so. Thus, ironically, Christianity, traditionally associated with dominant rather than subordinate groups, with the ‘centre’ rather than the ‘periphery’, marks a taboo identity in contemporary academia—indeed a positionality in some ways perhaps even more peripheral than Islam and other religions ethnically associated with groups traditionally marginalized in the West. The conscientious critical geographer may not be able to erase his whiteness and his maleness, among key markers of potentially oppressive tendencies, but he can erase his Christianity.

The papers

This forum emerges from the desire to rethink the relationship between geography and religion as a two-way dialogue rather than a one-way ‘colonizing process’. It thus engages with two sets of questions. First, emerging
scholarly paradigms, which address an increasingly globalized, hybrid, and networked world, produce doubts about the adequacy of traditional approaches to faith and space. How helpful, for instance, is Mircea Eliade's (1959) rigid structural opposition between sacred and profane space? Does it still make sense to think of religion through binary thought? How can concepts of performance, mobility, hybridity, identity, emotion, and spatial power, for example, inform geographical approaches to religion? Second and conversely, what implications might the study of religion have for geography? How can belief and the sacred inform geography through their specificities? How do their peculiar spatialities and dynamics problematize traditional and new approaches within our discipline, the social sciences, and humanities?

We posed these questions to this forum’s contributors. The papers, whose focus ranges from the macro-scale of the nation-state to the micro-scale of the human body, broadly reflect the authors’ specific research interests. At the same time they set up broader agendas towards a two-way, critical dialogue between geography and religion. All of the papers implicitly ask what the discipline of geography offers the study of religion. But they also enquire how the study of religion speaks back to geography. They do so by bringing in concerns from disciplines that have a longer and more systematic tradition of studying religion (for Howe the sociology of religion, for Dewsbury and Cloke theology, for example). But they also attempt to let experiences of religion/belief/doubt/etc. speak for themselves in ways geographers have not been attentive to previously. The papers pursue two main themes: (1) secularity in relation to and the enactment of the sacred; (2) the ineffable, the spiritual, and the numinous in the social sciences, exploring the importance of these characteristics and how we might recognize, witness, or make sense of them. Others have scrutinized the sacred–secular interface before, of course (in geography see, for example, Dunn 2005; Kong 2001; Naylor and Ryan 2002; Valins 2003), but the contributions here move the discussion along in new and important directions. Both individually and as a whole, the papers highlight the value of broadly religious or spiritual forms of experience, practices, and senses of the world. They bring fresh contributions to the study of religion within geography, but they also show in various ways how religion can contribute to geography and probe common scholarly assumptions.

Nicolas Howe’s examination of secular iconoclasm shows that geographic theories of public space that do not factor in religion can only be partial, at best. The assumption of ‘no religion present in ordinary social life’ should not be the default starting point for analysis. Religion and contests over religion are important not only when manifestly visible. The article builds upon contemporary theoretical literature on secularism as well as key legal cases to suggest that the easy dichotomy between ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ is far too simplistic, especially in the religiously plural context of the USA. While certain actors, identifying as both secular and religious, draw sharp distinctions between secularism and religion, the relationship is much more complex, not least because the two categories depend on one another for their existence. Howe identifies three distinct modes of secular iconoclasm in the USA—purification, privatization, and profanation—each with their separate motivations, methods, and objectives. Thus, contrary to commonly held views, secularism’s effect on social space is not necessarily promotion of a ‘naked public
square’. Place and landscape, as used by secularists, both enlarge and diminish the role of religion in American public life. The impulse to replace the idols of religion with the idols of the secular state is only one aspect of secularism’s larger impact on society.

Howe carefully notes how national context affects the relationship between the secular and the sacred. A society such as the USA, where the ideological and legal impulse (if not always the practical effect) is for the secular state and religion to stay out of one another’s way, is very different from a society such as France, where the state tries to co-opt many of the public meanings and strands of identity traditionally provided by religion. The state in Turkey, with origins in French-based secular republican ideology, is one that has profoundly attempted to purge public space of visible markers of religious devotion. Muslim women there face both formal and informal strictures on how and where headscarves can be worn, for instance. While noting that the headscarf is often seen as a sign (of repression, for example; or its absence is seen as a triumph of secular modernity), Banu Gökarıksel analyzes how veiling practices cultivate subjectivity and even the body itself. Her article uses ethnographic research to explore new, fashionable veiling in Istanbul, practices that place the women involved in the crosshairs of sharp debates between secularists and Islamists. Gökarıksel’s work shows how attention to religion extends the literature on performativity; her paper points particularly to the inscription of modesty and piety onto the body. Religious practice in this case subverts and complexifies commonsense sociological assumptions. Subject to both secularism and religiosity, as well as to the city spaces that enforce these, women’s bodies become not simply signs of religion or secularism but also religious or secular spaces themselves. Thus Gökarıksel suggests, in pointing to the dialectical nature of studying religion and producing theory/method within geography, religion is embodied, and bodies are religioned. She thereby reminds us that religion’s role extends far beyond places and spaces officially marked as sacred. Her article provides a useful extension to Howe’s ideas in its implication that variously religioned/secularized bodies are important elements of any landscape. Through both Gökarıksel’s and Howe’s papers, religion thus speaks back to geography by insisting that its presence is more thoroughly pervasive within social space than geographers typically recognize. It often—perhaps necessarily—has a presence even in its apparent absence.

Avril Maddrell pursues themes of landscape and bodies somewhat differently, through themes of ritual and relic. Like Gökarıksel she addresses a topic not traditionally within geographers’ purview. Using the emotional turn within human geography as inspiration, she classifies grief and bereavement as ‘more-than-representational’ practices. Maddrell phenomenologically explores the liminal space between life and death, presence and absence, and the spiritual and the material that the places and relics associated with grief and bereavement rituals call into existence; space that in Massey’s words ‘is always under construction’. In the UK, her specific focus of attention, many of these rituals are not formally associated with ecclesiastical bodies or traditions, and the population is increasingly non-churched. Yet ignoring the practices’ spiritual content would be unwise. While Howe and Gökarıksel problematize the secular–sacred distinction in somewhat different ways from one another, Maddrell adds a third tack: a secular society does not necessarily imply an absence of spiritual meaning. Space, a careful study of grieving tells us, must be
understood for both the tangibility and unsayability it encompasses. Additionally, for Maddrell, belief or spirituality speaks back to geographers through its quiet insistence that it plays a continuing role in their own lives. It has been banished from neither the public square nor the lives of those we study, nor even yet from many of our own lives. Thus she invites geographers to explore their own relationship to spirituality. How does a skeptic adequately explore profoundly powerful and personal experiences, for example—experiences that suggest something more than spaces of materiality and representable meaning? Perhaps equally important, can geographers discuss their own personal experiences of faith or spirituality in the context of scholarship? In other words, does opening geography to studying belief also require institutional accommodation of belief as a legitimate basis of geographers’ identity and positionality?

J. D. Dewsbury and Paul Cloke conclude the forum with a second paper in the (post)phenomenological, non-representational mold, though one much more embedded in debates within continental philosophy. Less directly rooted in the personal experience of doing geography while manifesting belief, their paper is nevertheless equally concerned with the relationship between spirituality and research. Dewsbury and Cloke carefully examine a point toward which many of the other articles hint: spirituality is not incidental to everyday life, but is instead fundamentally constitutive of it. Religion attaches itself to spirituality in a variety of contingent ways. But spirituality itself arises from the moment of reflection upon and recollection of the forgottenness of origin that our existence in the world implies; it is thus indivisibly part of human experience. Centering the concept of spiritual landscapes and using Christian theology as its paradigmatic example of religious thought, the paper follows Kevin Hart in considering three ways of regarding the relationship between religion and phenomenology: religion is not available to phenomenological study, religion can be explored phenomenologically, and religion is already a phenomenology. The difficulty in addressing spirituality, Dewsbury and Cloke then suggest, is the same difficulty inherent in addressing any experiential knowledge. Their paper thus links subtly but productively to, among other ideas within the forum, Howe’s profanistic mode of secular iconoclasm and Gökarıksel’s religiously trained and knowing bodies. Quoting Jeffrey Robbins, Dewsbury and Cloke conclude that in a postmetaphysical age, belief can and should be taken seriously as a constitutive category of life.

As Proctor notes, secularization and sacralization are highly place-dependent; scholarly analysis of these often contradictory trends in contemporary religion must necessarily attend to both empirical and conceptual complexities (2006: 167). Following his lead, the papers push forward various aspects of these problematics through different empirical data, methodologies, and styles. Together, they provocatively proclaim that we are doing more than neglecting important epiphenomena when we fail to account for religion and spirituality; we may also be omitting fundamental features of social space. We hope these papers, both collectively and individually, provide ideas, concepts, and models for geography’s ongoing negotiation of emergent paradigms with the topics of religion, belief, and spirituality.

References


Abstract translations

Géographie, religion et paradigmes émergents: la problématisation du dialogue

Cette introduction au forum subséquent s’adresse à l’engagement récent vis-à-vis de la religion et de la spiritualité de la géographie sociale et culturelle. En représentant une volonté louable et croissante à aborder religion/spiritualité à la lumière de concepts et de théories sophistiqués, cet engagement devrait inclure plus qu’une simple imposition des paradigmes émergents de la discipline sur un nouvel objet d’étude. Les géographes ont besoin d’accorder la parole à la religion. Les articles de ce forum suggèrent que cette intercommunication varie, par exemple, de l’insistance de la spiritualité/religion sur sa propre centralité dans l’espace social, de sa tendance à compliquer les catégories et l’expérience, en passant par sa mémoire du fait qu’il influence les vies et les identités de beaucoup de géographes.

Mots-clefs: géographie de la religion, paradigmes émergents, religion, croyance, spiritualité, autoréflexivité.

Geografía, religio´n, y paradigmas emergentes: problematizando el dialogo

Esta introducción al foro subsiguiente se trata a la participación reciente de geografía social y cultural con religión y espiritualidad. Mientras representando una voluntad incrementada para acercarse a religión/espiritualidad por conceptos y teorías sofisticados, esta participación debe incluir más que las paradigmas emergentes de la disciplina como un nuevo objeto de estudio. Los geógrafos necesitan permitir a la religión ‘responder’. Los artículos de este foro se sugieren que esta forma de responder puede ser, por ejemplo, la insistencia de la espiritualidad/religión de su propio centralidad, o su recuerdo que se informa las vidas y identidades de una multitud de geógrafos.

Palabras claves: geografía de religión, paradigmas emergentes, religión, fe, espiritualidad, la reflexividad propia.

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