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Sacred communities: contestations and connections

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Abstract

The paper discusses a project whose purpose was to jointly review existing qualitative and quantitative data from two separate studies to provide new insights about everyday religion and belonging. Researchers engaged in knowledge exchange and dialogue with new and former research participants, other researchers involved in similar research and wider academic networks beyond the core disciplines represented here, principally anthropology and geography.

Key concluding themes related to the ambivalent nature of 'faith'; connections over place and time and the contested nature of community. Implicit in terms like faith, community and life course are larger interwoven narratives of space, time, place, corporeality and emotion. The authors found that understanding how places, communities and faiths differ and intersect requires an understanding of social relatedness and boundaries.

Key words: Faith, religion, belief, community, voluntary, class.

Introduction

In this paper we aim to contribute to academic understandings of the embodied, performed and relational beliefs and practices that inform faith and community, and the ways in which these are influenced by, and connected across, different geographic locations and time periods. The study is grounded in empirical case studies in three different counties of England. We focus on four key ideas: how 'faith community' is variously seen as both a cohesive and fragmentary tool; the symbolic and multiple

ideas of community; how invoking the idea of ‘community’ can obscure deeper structural issues; and how such terms as community, faith, belief and religion are unstable yet sometimes synonymous with everyday social relations that connect people and places over time. We reflect on contestations over community, faith, religion and belief and how those contestations are resolved through social connections across space and time. We conclude that we often found a common ground amongst our informants, despite differences in age, gender, and religiosity: the importance of social relationships and identities as a main motivator for joining and sustaining voluntary networks.

Method

This paper is the result of an experimental interdisciplinary collaboration between Abby Day, an anthropologist, and Ben Rogaly, a geographer, instigated by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-led consortium on Connected Communities. Substantively we set out to compare our original studies based on a total of 143 interviews in the mid-2000s with children, teenagers, and adult men and women in two separate projects in two English counties - North Yorkshire and in East Anglia. Rogaly’s work in Norwich, East Anglia was already a collaborative interdisciplinary study with historian Becky Taylor. Day’s work continued through an ESRC grant allowing her to revisit participants first studied between 2002 and 2005. While Day’s work made central issues of belief and belonging and the relation between them, and thus provides deep insights into faith and religion (see, for example, Day 2011), these were only accidental bi-products of Rogaly and Taylor’s work, the central concern of which was a critical analysis of the construction of the study’s location as a ‘deprived white community’ (Rogaly and Taylor, 2011).

As part of our joint study, we reviewed our separate projects and contrasted their findings on the themes of community and faith. We then tested our emerging findings amongst former and new research participants through informal interviews and group discussions in our 'home' county of East Sussex. Restrictions of time and funding allowed only a small number of new interviews and we therefore sought a range of gender, religiosity, and age: one middle age female rabbi known for her community engagements, one middle age Muslim male medical doctor actively engaged in environmental activism and a spiritual community; one elderly retired policeman nominally attached to a Christian church; one young agnostic female university student and one young atheist male student, both involved in academic and voluntary work concerning international development. Following the interviews, we discussed and reflected on our impressions.

Contesting Community

Understandings of 'community' have changed over time in the academic disciplines of, for example, geography, anthropology and sociology to reflect moves from place-bound studies of social relationships to considerations of symbolic and multiple identities. We draw selectively below on some of the literature we found most salient, before moving to our new empirical evidence about how some people view 'community'.

Hillery identified 94 different definitions of community, most suggesting 'it consists of persons in social interaction within a geographic area and having one or more additional common ties'. What Bell and Newby (19) described as the 'minimum'

definition of a community study ‘the study of the interrelationships of social institutions in a locality’ may have reflected conceptions of community in the UK and the US in the 20th century. Work in both the US and UK typically focused on a place, mapping and explaining the social relationships therein.

Traditional community studies were soundly criticised in the UK by, for example, Stacey who condemned ‘the myth of community studies’. Neither culture nor community are holistic, bounded entities, but better understood as processes or movements. We have moved from Middletown to Anytown, or from place to space, importantly informed not so much by how people physically move through places but how they imagine (Anderson) and symbolise (Cohen) what is important to them, what may lend substance and meaning to their lives (Geertz) and how identities and structures intersect as ‘cross-cutting cleavages’ (Baumann). This latter trend in sociology and anthropology focused attention on processes of identity formation and expressions arising from difference, sometimes described as ethnicity or transnational influences.

The state too, working at various levels has, as Rose argued, deployed the idea of community as part of a governmental strategy. Such discourses have been connected, particularly in relation to working-class places, with ideals of personal responsibility and are connected to a behavioural analysis of material inequality – people are poor through their own fault because they do not do enough to come together as a ‘community’ (Rogaly and Taylor, 2011).

Baumann’s study of Southall, a town on the western edge of London, helped move the discussion forward by engaging in a process epitomised by the book’s title –

‘Contesting Culture’. He analysed how ethnic categories become reified as communities become defined by an apparently stable ‘ethnic’ culture. This circular discourse, he points out, can reduce all other social complexities and cross-cutting cleavages. So, for example, he points out that the Muslim ‘community’ is presented as an ethnic community in a way that Jehovah’s witnesses are not. He argues that social cleavages cut across each other in any plural society but that the dominant discourse ascribes community to whichever cleavage is deemed most important in a particular context. This may reflect a dominant discourse that cultures are, as Gilroy described it, ‘supposedly sealed from one another by ethnic lines’ (55).

It also raises a question: what are the multiple identities being discussed and who decides? Is pluralism a mix of what some call ethnic identity, itself a contested term, or religious identities, or gender, class, sexual orientation, national, or other identities? The foregrounding of any one identity is a discursive, perhaps political act. Mitchell discussed how people have consciously employed the discourse of community as a strategic device to bring their concerns onto the national agenda (1998; Rogaly and Taylor, 2011).

In the UK religion, or to use the dominant discourse, ‘faith community’, is sometimes variously seen as a cohesive or fragmentary tool, depending on who is defining it and for what purpose (Dinham). The deployment of ‘community’ to both cohere and divide represents one of the problems that anthropologists and others have identified as problematic in earlier studies; like religion, or faith, ‘community’ often serves as a term that masks conflict and diversity. The discourse of faith community can therefore be used to further the interests of people for religious and non-religious purposes.

Sometimes, ‘community’ can work to obscure structural inequalities. For example, Smith analysed how the then New Labour government created the Inner Cities Religious Council partly as a response to unrest in some of Britain’s cities – an unrest that was probably erroneously interpreted as religious, or ethnic or ‘racial’ instead of structural and economic. While Smith suggests that very little academic research is published on the levels of involvement by faith, there is a gap between official and religious discourses and agendas about community. A simplistic official reading that reifies ‘the (faith) community’ as homogeneous and supportive may miss many internal divisions such as gender, age group, caste, ethnicity, and religious belief.

It may be that diversity is its strength: in Smith’s study in East London in 2001, he identified nearly 300 religious organizations from all the major world religions, with responsibility between them for some 620 activities and groups, in addition to public worship. He also noted that most of the activity was in the white majority mainstream churches, with Anglicans in particular playing a leading role, and concluded that, due to continuing rates of decline in those churches, the future of such voluntary activities was uncertain.

We now turn below to how our review of our data in our original studies helped illuminate these themes and how they were further tested through new interviews and discussions.

Emic contestations of community

We found on-the-ground emic evidence of the academic contestations noted above, drawn from our original studies and the six interviews and group discussions in our joint study.

We first note the way that faith community can be both a cohesive and fragmentary tool. For example, Jane, a woman in her early 60s featuring in Day's Yorkshire study, used the term 'community' to both include and exclude. Presenting community as a cohesive concept, Jane said that she could not imagine a better 'community' to belong to than her church. She said she believed that the church was the source of moral teaching. Jane then deployed 'community' to divide and fragment, adding that people who did not attend church had 'no sense of community for a start'. She was not only certain that people like her gained a sense of community from belonging to a church, but she was equally certain, although she did not explain how, that people who did not belong to a church would not have such a sense.

The church's role in both cohering and fragmenting was described by a seemingly unreligious man interviewed in our joint study. Roger, a retired detective now in his late 80s, whom Rogaly interviewed at the Anglican church Roger attends in Hove, was critical of standard institutionalized narratives of Christian religious faith. For Roger, nevertheless, church attendance provided a key source of 'community' and support. He described vividly how he did not actually believe in a God and took the opinion that 'all the people [in this church] have had snow fallen on their head.

They've got white hair... They're frightened of dying.' In spite of his stated views on religious belief Roger's overall position is ambivalent rather than atheist. He is moved to tears by hymns such as 'Guide Me O Thy Great Redeemer' and at the same time is disdainful about religious rites. Roger's views have shifted over time as his own life has involved moves from Burnley, where he was brought up by a strict, but ultimately in his view hypocritical, Salvation Army father, through to Burma and India during the Second World War, where he witnessed intense human violence and suffering. All

these experiences have provided him with a nuanced and complex perspective on faith. Yet in terms of Anglican churches, he had a strong sense of belonging. He concluded that “it is like Woolworths” – you go into one anywhere and you get a sense of home.

While the connection between church and community was emphasised by the informants above, the idea, expressed by Jane, that church was essential to community did not feature in the lives of non-church attenders in our joint study. Jack and Mel were two young, unreligious people who had a strong sense of community. Both were university students involved in a national charity that promoted social enterprise both locally and internationally. They each became involved because they were invited by a friend to come to a meeting. While they explained in their interviews that the work they do with young people in Brighton, Mexico and Malawi produced good results and matched their beliefs in human flourishing and human rights, it was the social experience of carrying out that work with their friends that kept them involved.

When Day asked if there was a ‘faith’ element to what he did, Jack said, “No, I don’t believe so”. His own faith perspectives were experimental forays into religion a few years earlier and now largely abandoned, he explained. Jack related a recent discussion in the Student Development Society about the role of Faith Based-Organisations (FBOs) in development and said they had agreed they had faith in development as an industry, and that it was doing a lot of good. When Day asked him to reflect on why he did so much voluntary activity, he concluded: “I think community is at the heart of it”. That sense of community, he said, was not so much about international development, or the student society, or the local projects they

organise, but the feeling of belonging to a wider community of people who believe, and feel, the same things.

The symbolic and multiple natures of faith and community were referred to by regular church-goers from Rogaly and Taylor's Norwich study. One of their middle-class participants, Frances Bailey, had moved to Norwich with her partner, who took up a job as a GP in the estates. She became a very active volunteer there and observed residents' practices at close quarters. She likened the doctors' waiting room to a church:

One of the things that struck me was that people [in surgery waiting rooms] were there because there was nowhere else to go... they were feeling ill or depressed whatever but I think for some people it was almost maybe the role the church might have had in a way . . .

A local priest, a woman, made a similar point regarding the pub across the road from the church:

there are many more parallels than you might think between pubs and churches... And it's my job, as it is his, to make it a welcome and open place for anybody to come, so there aren't any barriers.

Such connections between church work and embodied practices of community were strongly alluded to by Carol White:

I'm a spiritual person and coming to terms with [sighs] accepting the church... I

won't leave the church cos... I still see that as being part of my place in this community.

It was the embodied practice of the former priest that had played an important role in getting Carol to stay and which also led her to see the connection between church and community. The priest would get down to floor level for his story-telling using the technique known as 'godly play':

I was just totally entranced by this 'cos this was community building in church. It wasn't 'I'm the priest and I talk at you, you sit there absorb the sermon and then we sing a few hymns and go home.'

We now turn to our third theme, of how invocations of 'community' failed in practice to support structural, material needs. From the Norwich study Rogaly described how research participant Tom Crowther's earliest memories were of growing up in deep poverty in the 1930s. As a child he had been part of a Church of England congregation and his aunt had said she would pay for him to join the choir at Norwich Cathedral.

Struggling to bring up young children on very little money, Tom said he had received no help with childcare either from his own parents or his far off in-laws. Tom eventually moved back to Ireland staying there for over a year. Even in comparison to his own experiences, Tom emphasized what he saw as extreme deprivation:

This is a god-forgotten country... the village was still on oil... there was no

telephone or anything like that...

Tom was also moved by what he saw as the plight of Catholics in Northern Ireland. He said he had been recruited into the police and he had left because he objected to what he saw as double standards:

If it was a Protestant you turned your back; if it was a Catholic you done [them] for everything except for murder... that was what got me... I do like to be impartial. I treat everybody alike. I don't like to segregate people.

Tom had become a Roman Catholic after the birth of one of his sons (before he went to Ireland), and remained one for fifteen years. His reasons for leaving the church were informed by values of the kind expressed in this last quote and by the deep wounds, including physical wounds from a devastating accident at work, which related to his class position. Tom had become closely involved with the local Catholic church in Norwich, but later, when he became sick and could not work, he asked the Canon of the church, whom he had got to know, to come round and advise him, and was so shocked when the man did not contact him that he decided to give up religion altogether:

I thought 'bloody hell, if that's religion', . . . And I've been an atheist ever since... If there's a god well he must be bloody redundant.

The above emic examples support the wider inter-disciplinary evidence that 'community' is a contested term that can both cohere and divide, providing symbolic,

multiple meanings and masking structural inequalities. We now turn to other contestations that work, particularly in combination with ‘community’, to further complicate understandings of community, faith and cognate concepts such as religion and belief. What we found were not contradictions but rather different ways of expressing sometimes complex connections over time.

Contestations of faith, religion, and belief

In the same way that we found that ‘community’ had multiple meanings on the ground, so did other terms and concepts such as faith, religion, and belief embedded in social identities that ranged from clear-cut to more ambivalent. An example of the clear-cut approach from Rogaly and Taylor’s study was Frank Levett, an energetic priest in the Norwich estates, who had moved there within the preceding few years from his home country of South Africa and presented himself as an unquestioning believer in Christian evangelism. He described how he felt when he first saw the building in Norwich that would become his church

The first thing, being a pioneer, the first thing I thought was, gee, I can expand this building.

Other, unreligious, people from our studies presented equally cut-and-dry self-identifications. Terry, one of Day’s Yorkshire participants, was clear and unambiguous. He said in his interview that he did not believe in God, yet identified himself as Christian on the 2001 census. To him, to be British meant being Church of England:

That’s the British way, isn’t it? If people are not religious, they’re C of E.

Church of England. Weddings, funerals and christenings.

Another Yorkshire participant, Gary, emphasized how ascribed religion, rather than everyday practices and beliefs, defined him as Christian:

I've been baptized and confirmed as a Christian so in effect I was - I am - a Christian, but I'm not a practising Christian believer

While this reflected an unambiguous idea that being baptised as Christian conferred life-long Christian status, it suggests a more complex idea of 'belief'. Naomi, the female rabbi we interviewed, was outspoken in rejecting 'belief' as a useful term. For her, the point of her religion was action, not 'belief'. Her and Gary's responses conform with observations about how the term 'belief' may signify something different in different religious and unreligious contexts, revealing its unstable nature and inadequacy as a cross-cultural comparative tool (see Needham; Ruel; and Asad for classic formulations of the 'belief' problem in anthropology and Day (2010 and 2011) for a synthesis of anthropological and sociological interpretations of belief). Kadushin showed how research on religion often tests respondents 'beliefs' without qualifying what the term may mean for a specific religious tradition. In the case of Judaism, he argued, the sense of experiencing God was more important than believing in God. Returning to the examples above, both Gary and Naomi, while different by gender, occupation and religiosity, shared the same sense of the difference between belief and practice and wanted to emphasise that distinction.

Another research participant also expressed sensing a difference between what some

people might describe as religion and how she wanted to practice it. For Norwich resident Sheila Spencer, becoming what she referred to as a ‘born again Christian’ eventually led to her being ordained. Later, she left the institutionalized religion of the church and many of its practices, but not her religious beliefs. She criticized the church for its hierarchical practices and its separateness from everyday life, describing one priest who lived ‘in this huge great house somewhere else’. For her, this was an issue of both class and religion. Yet, continuing to act on her beliefs in helping others, she did not dismiss her former role as an active participant in people’s lives, but carried that out through volunteering. Although she had removed herself from a visible and recognised ‘faith community’ she continued to perform her faith in the community.

Contestations over institutionalised religions were also in evidence when Rogaly interviewed Muhammed, a medical doctor, whose understanding of his own Islamic religious faith led him to set up an organisation campaigning for more environmentally and socially sustainable lifestyles. His work, like the young volunteers Jack and Mel cited above, was stretched between places rather than being tied to a geographical community. He lived in Brighton and the organisation was most active in London. The work also stretched across space in connection to his US-based Sufi teacher as well as on-going transnational connections to the Indian subcontinent. Muhammed’s faith leads him to be a friendly critic of institutionalized manifestations of Islamic religious faith. At the heart of Muhammed’s embodied practice is a critique of contemporary capitalist society and a vision for social change. Those practices arise not from propositional expressions of belief nor from institutionalized religion,

but rather from his collective experiences and the unarticulated insights emerging from regular practice of Sufi meditation.

Thus far, we have been citing examples of people's degrees of ambivalence towards religion, the multiple ways they present unstable concepts such as faith and belief, and the way they embody their faith practices both in and outside institutionalized religion. We will turn now to explore how these are connected across space and time, with the connections and changes being best explained through the lens of relationality.

Connections across space and time

As community is often better understood as a network of social relations than solely a physical place so, we found, were faith and belief. In Day's study, she found that when people talked about important places, they interwove senses of belonging or alienation. An attachment to place was, on closer examination, a sense of connection to the people within those places. Her research participants' explanations of their beliefs were often rooted in a non-religious discourse of family, friends, and places. 'Place', for many of her participants, was sometimes referred to as an area of habitation, or what people describe as their 'communities', being, typically, perceived safe places segregated from 'others' and where they felt they belonged.

Places were always relational and embodied. Significant relational places for her young research participants were their bedrooms where they sometimes prayed but more often communicated with their deceased loved ones. For example, Vickie, 14, continued her relationship with her deceased uncle. Although she attends church, she

described how she does not pray to God or Jesus, but when she is alone in her bedroom at night she discusses personal problems and worries with her deceased uncle, who offers advice and solace. In a similar way, one of Vickie's classmates, Charlotte, 14, said that it was in the privacy of her bedroom she had transcendent conversations with her deceased grandfather. She felt he was listening to her as she told him her deepest problems, particularly about the people who were bullying her at school.

That particular experience of 'place' represents a relocation of the common theological representation shared by many religious faiths that transcendence is supra-human and located in a place within another, non-human, realm populated by deities. For many people transcendence is a place located in their most intimate and everyday social spaces. It also calls attention to the under-researched area of emotion in the faith lives of young people (but for an excellent example involving primary school students, see Hemming).

Returning to our earlier discussion of Jack and Mel, it is interesting to also note the importance of social relations in their descriptions of why they belonged to their charity and their feeling of belonging to a wider 'community' of like-minded people. This reflects a sense of stretched community, and multiple sources of influence and identity – a point made recently by Hopkins, Olson, Pain and Vincett in their study of young Scottish people. They found that place-based practices drew on many complex sources, from parents, to peers, to politics.

We did not find that these multiple, less institutionally religious forms of identity were a source of concern for those involved as they were for several leading theorists

of the sociology of religion. That young people account for the source and maintenance of beliefs in their social relationships complicates some of Smith and Denton's conclusions that describe youth being (143) "nearly without exception profoundly individualistic, instinctively presuming autonomous, individual self-direction to be a universal human norm and life goal". Those authors further suggest (156-158) that teenagers today live in a "morally insignificant universe". Day departed then, and now, from their conclusions, however, in finding no reason to delegitimise young people's moral beliefs as insignificant simply because they are firmly grounded in the social and the emotional and not in a grander narrative.

Place was often conceived both relationally and spatially by older informants in terms of what they felt attached to and threatened by. Day (2013) recently completed a longitudinal restudy amongst her former research participants. She found that the presence of 'others', variously portrayed as Asians or Muslims, and the mosques where they worshipped, created anxiety in some of her white informants about cultural identity and beliefs. Barbara, for example, had described in interviews five years earlier that she used to be a cook in a pub in nearby Bradford, a town once the centre of the textile industry and a place to which many people emigrated from Pakistan during the economic boom of the 1950s. She had also discussed, in that earlier interview, how she liked living in the village they had now moved to and seemed proud of her neat, pretty home and idyllic rural setting. When interviewed more recently, after a gap of five years, Barbara was vociferous about her years in Bradford.

It's a dump. It's, it was a beautiful city. It really was a lovely city, and there was a lot of civic pride there, and with the invasion of the Asians... it has changed beyond all recognition.

At that point in the interview, Day pointed out that the demographic changes in Bradford began in the 1950s, not recently. Barbara shrugged that off. What she mostly wanted to talk about was her new life with her partner, their new friends in the village and their new acquaintances made on the several cruises they have been taking over the previous five years. It was evident that her social relationships had changed a good deal between interviews. This was most apparent when Day was confirming what she had understood from the previous interview: that Barbara had worked in the family pub business as a cook.

Day: Because you, didn't you used to own a pub, work in a pub in Bradford somewhere, years ago?

Barbara: No, my parents had pubs.

Suddenly, Barbara had disassociated herself from her family's business, her former working life, and from much of Bradford where she had lived for 60 years. What had changed was neither the pub nor the presence of 'Asians', but her social relationships. It appears to be those relationships that have helped her harden certain boundaries about her biography. Although she had repeatedly said in interviews during both phases of Day's research that she did not believe in God or attend church, she also said she would identify as a Christian because she had been baptised as a child. This

may be a form of what Day has described as ‘ethnic’ and ‘natal’ Christian nominal belief and adherence (2011): a sense of belonging to a certain group of people may be enhanced by related forms of identification with a religion, a place or a ‘community’ as discussed above.

A sense of belonging may change over time and place as people physically move or change the ways they imagine themselves in relation to specific places, but, Day concluded, these changes are always relative to the social relationships that were important to research participants within a web of inter-locking discourses. Day’s initial findings revealed the stability of belief over time, despite changing cultural and life cycle contexts. Indeed, many people seemed to deny strongly that much change had occurred in their beliefs or their lives. Relating these narratives to her work on performativity she has argued that in interviews many people were performing narratives of stability to interpret changes they experienced over the life course and as they changed their places of residence. Any changes in belief seemed mainly to be provoked by changes in relationships rather than where a person lived or which point they had reached in their life course.

The examples above from Day’s study emphasise the relationality between the actual and imagined time of the arrival of people with Muslim south Asian heritage into Bradford, their embodied practices, and some of her participants’ shifting notions of faith and community. Although there was much less immigration from the Indian subcontinent into Norwich and Norfolk post-war than into North Yorkshire, the presence and intentions of Muslims in the UK and the way some of Rogaly and

Taylor's participants felt about this in relation to the nation as a whole (sometimes expressed as England rather than Britain) made such immigration an important aspect of faith and community in the Norwich estates too. However, in life narratives, this was often expressed through stories of older participants' own sojourns abroad, for example in the colonial armed forces, and their travels to visit loved ones elsewhere in the UK. These stories in turn led Rogaly and Taylor to explore the spatio-temporalities of white British emigration more generally in the study (see Rogaly and Taylor, 2010).

We have already heard from Frank Levett, the evangelical Christian priest, who moved from South Africa to work in a church on the edge of the estates. Frank's practices of faith and community were clearly informed by his on-going connections to his former life as a white South African. He brusquely dismissed the idea promoted by many in Norwich that these estates were dangerous – his life geography meant he saw them through the eyes of people who continued to visit him from South Africa:

When our friends come from South Africa, I take them on a drive through here. And I say to them, this is one of the six most poorest areas you'll ever find in England, and they can't believe it. Their jaws hit the ground...

Structural inequalities were playing out in both contexts, but differently.

These spatiotemporal connections (no doubt in combination with Frank's commanding physical presence and personality) meant that he was relaxed and open in relation to white teenagers who came into the multi-ethnic church and occasionally engaged in pranks.

There is a major literature on Irish migrants to England, including how they are viewed and view others – part of this historical narrative concerns how the Irish in England came to be seen as white (see Walter; Hickman). Several participants in the Norwich study had lived parts of their lives in Ireland, and together they revealed some of the on-going complexity of transnational connections across the islands.

One of these was Carol White, whom we have encountered earlier in the paper. Carol grew up in Suffolk and, unusually for a resident of the Norwich estates, is a graduate – in her case of Newcastle University. She moved to Donegal in Ireland when her daughters were about to go to secondary school in Suffolk: She said the school they were in the catchment area for was

awful... they would have had to go on the bus and people were kind of like coming off the bus with stab wounds and all sorts ooh...

Here we see a change – she had moved to Ireland to get away from the danger she perceived her daughters would face at a secondary school in Suffolk, but now, having experienced Belfast during the latter part of the conflict (as well as Donegal) she saw living in England as relatively safe. Her explanation to Taylor about why she came back to live on the estates, where she had lived for a spell earlier in her life, was expressed directly in terms of community and religious faith:

There's a lot of people in this area that know me, know my face and just say, 'how's Carol doing'? Yeah that was part of the reason I wanted to come back

here. The other reason was the church. I wanted to get involved with the church here.

As with Day's participants, both Carol's and Tom's moves were strongly connected to their social relations and in particular relations with certain family members (albeit those relations in Tom's case were often extremely fraught). They were also shaped by economic factors, either a lack of, or moving towards, work and the income that came with it. Stretched out over time and over space, yet not marked as migrants or immigrants, their practices of faith and community showed elements of both change and continuity.

Our observations here of local, translocal, and transnational geographies of people who may or may not see themselves, or be seen as, migrants extends recent work on religion and transnationalism (see, for example, Kong; Sheringham). The literature Sheringham surveyed deals in the main with transnational minorities, for whom expressions of faith form part of a connection to a home, a transplanted familiarity, and thus, in the cases quoted, a source of strength. Our emphasis, in contrast, is on what both marked and unmarked populations' experienced as connections across space and time brought to their embodied practices of belief, faith, and community.

Connections across time and space are sometimes reinforced by their breaking.

Several of Day's participants talked about their lives improving by breaking relationships with former homes and people who lived there. In so doing, they often brought religion into the story. In answer to her first question, 'what do you believe

in?’ Chris, a 42-year-old production manager, answered that he was a “total atheist” and had no beliefs. He spoke angrily about his impoverished childhood in Ireland where, he said, the local priest would regularly appear at his home, demanding money, and where convents were run by people he described as cruel and hypocritical nuns. There is nothing, he said, more “illegal” than the Catholic Church.

The above examples highlight the complexity attached to movements over time and place and, we propose, help displace homogenous, imagined models of neat passages, ‘local’ identities intact, as people move back and forth between former and new places. In their overview of a journal special issue exploring transnational geographies, Olson and Silvey (807) emphasise the need to consider ‘transnational flows altering social boundaries around ‘communities’ while simultaneously reinforcing existing hierarchies and disparities’. From Massey, we understand places as ‘open, porous and the products of other places’ (154). Working out how places differ requires an understanding of social ‘relatedness’, including the social boundaries through which relationships are formed, experienced, mediated and transmitted.

Like Sheringham, Kong, in her review of the changing geographies of religion, similarly notes how geographers, while continuing to research official sites of religious practice, have, like other social scientists, ‘recognize[d] religion as neither spatially nor temporally confined to “reservations”, practised only in officially assigned spaces at allocated times’ (757). Like Kong, we believe attention to embodied practices can reveal that there is no simple process of secularization but the intertwining of the sacred and the profane in people’s lives.

Conclusion

Communities are brought into being by people who imagine and create them, who believe in them, who feel they belong to them (and that others may or may not do so). The collaboration on which this paper is based also developed important insights about religion, place, space, and faith. We have illustrated how, implicit in terms like faith, community and life course are larger interwoven narratives of space, time, place, corporeality and emotion.

We further explored how 'faith community' is variously seen as both a cohesive and a fragmentary tool, reflecting symbolic and multiple ideas of community and sometimes obscuring deeper structural issues. It will be particularly important for policy makers to recognise such nuance in the terms community, faith, belief, and religion. While unstable, they are often synonymous with everyday social relations that connect people and places over time. Our research suggests that what makes these 'faith community' actors valuable to public policy are the realities of everyday lived experience. Faith communities 'are real, situated and contingent, located in spaces as well as relational across them' (Dinham, 14).

At stake here is much that is contested, in particular how we, and the participants in our research projects, have employed different meanings of the word 'community'. Moreover, our study confirms the dynamic nature of that term, how it changes over time and as people move between places. Community is often an act; like beliefs, communities do not arise pre-formed. They did not exist, in some pure form, intact, before societies became pluralistic, culturally and religiously diverse, globally mobile,

and multi-layered. They do not sit alongside diversity or plurality, in competition with it. Indeed pluralism and diversity are not threats or challenges to community if we conceive community as being formed, performed, by the actors in pluralistic, diverse fields.

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