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Religious and Non-Religious Practices and the City

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ABSTRACT:
This article explores the complex intersections of religiosity, power and inequality in an inner-city district of Birmingham, England. This deprived area of mainly Muslim residence has been at the forefront of recent debates about social cohesion and is widely portrayed by disparaging outsiders as fostering 'parallel lives'. Drawing on data from over 100 qualitative interviews with local residents and religious actors, we reveal the manifold, at times contradictory local manifestations of religiosity: as variously reproducing traditional expectations and behaviours *and* contesting prevailing patterns of stratification; as capable of both entrenching social boundaries and of fostering 'convivial', pluralistic co-existence. In wider conceptual terms, we argue for a 'locality approach', which acknowledges the importance of religiosity in the area, without reducing all significant social relationships and interactions to it. In particular, we draw on mediated discourse analysis and argue that its distinction between a 'nexus-' and a 'community of practice' (Scollon 2001) offers much to the sociology of religion in helping to illuminate intra-, inter-, and non-religious discourses and practices, as well as their inter-relationships, unfolding in a locality.

Keywords: Birmingham, deprivation, religiosity, localities, mediated discourse analysis

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In May and June 2012 local and national media ran contrasting religion-related headlines about inner-city areas in east Birmingham. In one instance, the news related to an initiative called 'Faith Watch', in which key religious figures and volunteers — Muslim and Christian — cooperated with the police in grassroots attempts to curb anti-social behaviour in Washwood Heath (BBC News 19/5/2012). This arguably showed local religiosity at its most socially responsible, committed to inter-faith co-operation, as a force of civil society activity in an area suffering multiple deprivation. In the second instance, local headlines told the tragic story of a 21-year-old being assaulted outside a mosque in nearby Small Heath after Friday prayers;

the man subsequently died of the head injuries sustained in this attack (*Birmingham Mail* 6/6/2012). Here, in contrast, a religious space became the setting for urban life at its most violent.

Neither of these incidents can or should be reduced to religion. Yet, a dominant interpretative framework views inner-cities through a religious lens, in which deprivation and conflict are attributed, at least in significant part, to alleged 'parallel lives' and the spectre of assumed religious (i.e. Islamic) radicalism. In this paper, we ask how else one might conceptualize the connections between urban localities, exclusion, religion and social activism. We do so on the basis of our on-going research in Alum Rock, one of the two areas in inner-city Birmingham just mentioned, discussing data that strengthens the case for a paradigmatic shift towards a 'locality approach', which — rather than pre-defining religious groups as *a priori* units of analysis — aims to capture local networks, social relations, and self-understandings, whatever their intra-, inter- or non-religious underpinnings. Following an outline of our theoretical perspective, research location and methods, the questions we address are as follows: Which power relations does a religious discourse or religiously informed action comment and act upon and how? How can the relationship between religion, social practice more generally, and a locality be conceptualized? Our contribution entails the introduction of the notion of a 'nexus of practice' (Scollon 2001a) to the sociology of religion, through which we propose a novel conceptualization of the relationship between religious and non-religious social action and discourse.

Towards a 'locality approach'

Urban sociology of the last two decades has seen steps away from a potentially circular pre-occupation with pre-defined ethnic/ religious 'communities'. Gerd Baumann's (1996) ethnographic extrapolation, in Southall, of uneasily co-existing forms of interaction, which he described as 'dominant' (i.e. culturally reified) and 'demotic' (i.e. fluid, multi-dimensional identities) discourses respectively, marked a milestone. Subsequent work in British contexts showed 'community' to be an unstable construct of a localized imaginary (Farrar 2002) and localities as sites of competition over scarce resources (e.g. Dench et al. 2006). Elsewhere, similar strides towards researching localities in their inter-cultural complexities have been taken. In a Danish context, Tufte and Riis (2001: 332) outlined a distinctly 'multiethnic approach' to the study of a neighbourhood. Relevant American work includes Jennifer Lee's ethnography (2006) of the interactions between African American, Jewish and Korean merchants and Black customers, and across a range of sites the

embodied encounters of 'everyday multiculturalism' have gained growing attention (Wise and Velayutham 2009).

The sociology of religion, meanwhile, arguably continues to be dominated by single-group studies focused on belief, practice and mobilization within particular demographic groups or specific (though sometimes ethnically heterogeneous) religious 'communities'. Such 'community-' or congregationally based work has continued to emerge from the United States (e.g. Green 2003, Harris 1994, Medina 2004, Marti 2005), the United Kingdom (e.g. Khan 2000) and continental Europe (e.g. Yukleyen 2009, Permoser et al. 2010) alike. In contrast, we here take an ethnically and religiously diverse locality as our starting point and examine its multiple, complex intersections of religiosity, power and identity-negotiations, some of them confined within ethnic/ congregational communities and others criss-crossing group boundaries. Such a *locality-focused* approach resembles an emerging strand in the sociology of religion, notably McRoberts' (1999) discussion of ecumenical urban ministries in some of Boston's poorest neighbourhoods or, most significantly, Knott's outline (2009: 154) of a 'spatially informed approach to the study of religion in locality'. It also resonates with Çağlar and Glick Schiller's call (2011: 18) for a 'new approach to … migrant settlement and transnational connections' focused on cities rather than nation-states, ethnic groups or transnational communities. In the yet narrower setting of a deprived inner-city area (also see Wimmer 2004), we aim to capture religious self-understandings, practices and organizations in their local enactments and various contexts. Moreover, we formulate a theoretical position capable of illuminating intra-, inter-, and non-religious practices and discourses. Given 'the state's "interpellation" of selected religions as partners in the delivery of public policies for managing diversity, combating inequality, and promoting social enterprise' (Beckford 2012: 1), ways of further illuminating the interfaces between religious and non-religious forms of discourse and social action are undoubtedly needed.

Religion 'always exists in a social context that shapes and is shaped by religion' (Smith 1996: 7). Thus understood, religion is intrinsically political, either a force of social reproduction or change. This is the first conceptual thread guiding this analysis: drawing on Beckford's seminal distinction (1983), we reveal forms of religious power 'that control' and 'contest' respectively. Our second theoretical driver, invoked to conceptualize the relationship between religious and non-religious social action, is the notion of a local 'nexus of practice' (Scollon 2001a), itself part of an approach to studying social practice known as mediated discourse analysis (MDA). Mediated discourse analysis shares with the better known critical discourse analysis

(CDA) an interest in the social conditions and consequences of written and spoken language (e.g. Weiss and Wodak 2003), but 'reformulates the object of study from a [singular] focus on discourses … to a [wider] focus on [all] social actions through which social actors produce the … habitus of their daily lives which is the ground in which society is … reproduced' (Scollon 2001b: 140). MDA thus retains interest in language but 'figur[es]' discourse in wider social practices that (re)produce 'social groups, histories and identities' (2001a, 1; 4). Existing MDA-inspired work takes ethnomethodological (Scollon 1999: 151) or developmental psychological (e.g. Scollon 2001a; Wohlwend 2009) directions or focuses on the bodily micro-practices of the everyday (e.g. Scollon 2003), Ron Scollon also prefigures the possibility of a more explicit orientation towards wider social structures (2001a: 164; 170). In what follows, we argue that Scollon's distinction between a 'nexus' and a 'community of practice' offers a novel way of illuminating the relationship and differences between non-religious (or inter-/ 'supra-religious'-) and intra-religious practices in an urban locality. A 'nexus of practice' is 'a network of linked practices' that are 'unbounded' and 'unfinalizable' and intersect in particular spaces or 'sites of engagement' (Scollon 2001a: 147; 5; 3-4). A 'community of practice', conversely, is discursively reified and thereby given boundaries of membership and exclusion. It is on the level of a reified community of practice that we encounter religion as drawing and maintaining group boundaries, whilst — within a broader local nexus of practice — it intersects with other forms of social practice in a myriad of ways. Inter-faith work, neighbourhood associations, encounters and relationships in the spheres of business, work, education and quotidian interaction are examples of local intersections of religious and non-religious practices. This distinction between a nexus and a community of practice thus offers a conceptualization of the relationship between a locality, comprising multiple sites of engagement, and a particular religious grouping within it.

The manifold local manifestations of religiosity in Alum Rock, where we have been conducting research for the past six years, can be a basis for buttressing patriarchal familial relations, for interpreting or opposing signs of social change, or for critiquing Western foreign policy; but they can also provide a motivation for charitable action overseas and a base from which to engage with other faiths locally. Analysis of the politics of religious discourse and practice involves specifying the axes of inequality religiosity acts upon and how: i.e. as a hegemonic force of social reproduction or as a contesting force offering critique. It also requires an understanding of how religious identity discourses and practices relate to a wider local realm of social relations and interactions. Before turning to these issues, empirical and methodological contextualization are needed.

Researching Alum Rock

Alum Rock, east of Birmingham's city centre and part of the Washwood Heath ward, is comprised of a South Asian majority (mainly of Pakistani and Bengali descent), a minority of longstanding English, Irish and Afro-Caribbean residents, more recently arrived Somali refugees and eastern European migrants. In religious terms, in the 2001 census 62% of Washwood Heath residents self-defined as Muslim and 24% as Christian. Employing ethnic categories, a 2009 ward profile defined 64,9% as Asian or British Asian (i.e. 56,24% Pakistani, 5,03% Bangladeshi, 1,7% Indian, 2,04% Other Asian), 26,8% as White, 4,9% as Black/ Black British, 2,4% as Mixed, and 0,9% as Chinese or belonging to 'other ethnic groups'. Alum Rock ranks amongst the most deprived parts of the UK, with average life expectancy seven years below that in affluent suburbs nearby (Birmingham Public Health Network 2005), and half the local population estimated to be living in breadline poverty (Dorling et al. 2007: 50). More widely, Washwood Heath households have the lowest income in all of Birmingham, 94% of the ward's population live within the 5% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country (ECOTEC 2010: 52); in June 2012 job seekers allowance claimants in Washwood Heath constituted 11.4% of the working age population, three times the national average (Office for National Statistics 2012).

The area has been constructed by parts of the media as an alleged 'no-go-area' for non-Muslims, as fostering 'parallel lives' (Nazir 2008; Harrison 2008; Liddle 2008). Partly fuelled by terror-related arrests in the area in 2007, the fact that Alum Rock was a priority neighbourhood for funding through the UK government's Preventing Violent Extremism initiative (Safer Birmingham Partnership 2009) reflects the locality's negative 'reputational geography' (Parker and Karner 2010) that exacerbates its deprivations. Religious institutions — Christian churches of various denominations and growing numbers of primarily Sunni mosques and madrasas — are key-nodes in the social life and civil society activities of the area.

Methodologically, as Ron Scollon emphasizes (2001a: 157-158), a 'critical study of discourse and social practice' must be 'inherently ethnographic' and 'fundamentally discursive-historical or longitudinal so that the [diachronic] workings of practice … can be made visible'. Extending our previous research (Karner and Parker 2008, 2011; Parker and Karner 2010, 2011), we therefore here draw on some 100 extended semi-structured interviews conducted in Alum Rock between 2006 and 2012 with local residents and entrepreneurs of different ethnic/ religious backgrounds, whose homes, businesses or places of worship are (or previously have been) near the main commercial artery, the Alum Rock Road. Our interviewees have

also included two local councillors, activists and religious spokespeople (from different strands of Islam and Christian denominations). Focusing on local biographies and the quotidian, our interviews centre on people's experiences of the area, their responses to media representations of the locality, the significance of religious/ ethnic boundaries and their everyday negotiation , interviewees' thoughts on local politics and feelings, hopes and visions for the area. Other methods of data collection have included ethnographic immersion in local organizations (e.g. an inter-faith network, a neighbourhood association, a local football team), and social historical research focused on cultural representations that have emerged from the locality since the period of initial South Asian settlement in, the area in the 1950s and 1960s (Parker and Karner 2011).

A dominant, though not uncontested, narrative emerging from our data unfolds around partly contradictory key-themes: memories of a successful multicultural past, since superseded by inter-ethnic conflicts but also taken-for-granted pluralistic co-existence; political disillusionment alongside civil society activity; concerns about the locality's infrastructural deprivation, drugs, unemployment, educational under-achievement and host of local initiatives to combat manifestations of deprivation. From amidst such multi-faceted depictions of life, hardship and activism in Alum Rock, the local manifestations of religiosity emerge time and again. These include religious discourse variously operating as a social practice to consolidate identities, make sense of experiences, or inform civic action. Yet, whilst Alum Rock cannot be understood without engaging with the local role of religious faith, practices and institutions, it cannot be reduced to religion either — as outsiders alleging Islamically underpinned 'parallel lives' tend to do. We thus turn to questions about the local politics of religion and its relationship to the non-religious.

'Controlling' and 'contesting' in the context of multiple inequalities
Alum Rock is partly defined by the effects of inequalities of power, wealth and status, with which religious beliefs, practices and solidarities intersect in complex ways. Many of Alum Rock's residents can be structurally classified as working class. The population census of 2001 estimated 72% of the local electoral district population to fall into the skilled working class, unskilled working class and those on near subsistence incomes (Office for National Statistics 2005). That said, our data reveal clear distinctions of status within this socio-economic designation: intra-class distinctions are shaped by localities, with Alum Rock the focus of a racialized

geography where local residents relate how the absence of white people signals its relative decline to residents in other parts of the city[1]:

[W]e get the mick taken out of us … we are run-down. I work at [a large factory] and when you mention Alum Rock … they just laugh at your face. ('Mohsin')

Notwithstanding their co-existence with feelings of local pride and attachment, such relative area-evaluations and rankings can be internalized by some among the locally resident or otherwise present. This was illustrated by a young man of Bangladeshi descent who had grown up in Alum Rock and continued to live there through his upward mobility. Having found employment with a firm in Birmingham's city centre, he recalled being offered a lift home by his manager and trying to avoid a sense of embarrassment when being dropped off in 'his' stigmatized part of the city. Similarly, a health-care professional recalled that 'those are some of the things I say to people in my own community ... you shouldn't leave [the area] until you are civilized. If you don't clean up [Alum Rock] … you should not be allowed to move out of [the area].' ('Ali')

Local, working class identities 'intersect' (Brah 1996) with ethnic and religious divisions and at least occasional antagonisms. This has been captured by accounts of Islamophobia participants have experienced in places of work, schools, other parts of the city, or a local amateur football league which a team of Muslim players from Alum Rock felt obliged to leave due to their experiences of racism. Intra-class and inter-ethnic antagonisms also emerged from a discussion with a group of white, working class men who showed strong resentment towards South Asians, more recently arrived migrants, and the political establishment they felt had disenfranchised them:

It's like a time bomb really, with all the coloured people [sic] and everything … But how can you air your views…like if I was to say what I'm saying now, I could be done for racism? ('James')

In the context of multiple deprivations and the experience of such antagonisms and exclusions, what local roles can religion play? James Beckford's discussion (1983) of forms of religious power, particularly his distinction between 'power that controls' and 'power that contests', provides analytical purchase here. As shown by our data, religion acts both as a *power that seeks to control* and a *power that contests* with regard to the hierarchies of status, influence and privilege that structure Alum Rock internally. This manifests, for example, in relation to rules of endogamy, inter-

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[1] Research participants are given pseudonyms.

generational dynamics or clan politics, with which religious beliefs and solidarities intersect.

The first of these intersections reflects a hegemonic dimension to religious practices as aiming to reproduce, communal boundaries. Rules of religious endogamy are crucial here, but — as the following account by a British-born Muslim of Pakistani descent illustrates — individuals negotiate, and at times contest, such *powers that seek to control* in the context of their biographical circumstances:

> I had a love marriage, my wife comes from a Hindu background, so that was … a struggle … my parents didn't accept it, hers didn't accept it … but [when] … my father suffered a brain haemorrhage, my wife looked after him. Then my mother had a brain haemorrhage and my wife did all the caring for her for two and a half years. ('Mohsin')

The unorthodoxy of an exogamous marriage breaking with established 'structures of action' (Karner 2007), contravening family expectations and incurring negative sanctions, here emerges as a counter-hegemonic action. Put differently, adherence to — or contravention of — norms of religious endogamy variously helps reproduce or disrupt some of the configurations of power shaping local lives.

In addition to the above-mentioned interplay of class and 'race', the intersections of the social 'axes' (Brah 1996) of gender and religion are thus also significant in the biographies of many of our interviewees. Religiously underpinned systems of patriarchy emerged in various degrees of forcefulness from the accounts of several residents, both male and female. Inflected with 'cultural family paradigms' (Fazil et al. 2004: 395) these constrained expectations of young women in particular and provide a form of what Beckford terms 'power that controls' or, more accurately, power that seeks to control. A female interviewee reported having been kept away from secondary school and confined to home between the age of eleven and sixteen during the 1980s. As another Muslim woman reflected, 'the Pakistani girls, were dropping off like flies. Girls were taken out of school ... I was the only one who stayed there until I was 16.' ('Faria') One young woman living in Alum Rock recently posted a heartfelt summary of her experiences on Twitter: "Being a Pakistani Muslim Girl from Alum Rock, Birmingham is harder than Maths" (twitter.com/fuzzdammit, April 23 2012).

Alongside, there are manifestations of another religious power Beckford describes as 'power which contests' (1983: 23). Importantly, as in the growing local prominence of Islamic revivalism reported by some participants (see below), religious practices can simultaneously seek to control and contest. Reflecting an engagement with different axes of power, Islamist discourses thus seek to reproduce long-

established structures of patriarchy *and* to transform or subvert institutional manifestations of secularism.

'Power that contests' appears, for instance, in criticisms of British and American foreign policy and in some staggering conspiracy theories, concerning 9/11, articulated — with disconcerting anti-Semitic undertones — by two participants that can only be read as symptoms of perceived disenfranchisement by, the political establishment:

> [T]he person [who] owned the World Trade Centre, he was heavily in debt, that was a demolition job … How could all those people have [a] day off? All the Jewish people, all off sick on the day? … And look at the number of the date, 911, emergency dial, all this is set up. If you look at a twenty dollar bill, they've shown it on YouTube, if you fold it up in a particular way, it's like two towers burning … I reckon it's freemasons at the bottom of it. ('Ashfaq' and 'Hamid')

This intertwining of American, Masonic and Jewish conspiracies demonstrates how alongside the intersections of systems of inequality and the power struggles associated with them, our data also reveal processes of discursive 'hierarchizing', which utilize 'grammars of identity' (Baumann and Gingrich 2004) that construct in- and out-groups in relations of superiority/ inferiority to one another. We return to this theme in our later discussion of 'communities of practice'.

Another dimension to the intersection of religion with intra-group power pertains to inter-generational issues and manifests in religion, or rather a perceived lack of religiosity among young people involved with drugs, being used as a framework for interpreting local problems:

> They're not practicing Muslims … a lot of our people are British really, they are just a bunch of British Asians …You wouldn't be on these drugs, if you were a Muslim. ('Zabaz')

Such statements condense an ambivalence surrounding some manifestations of religious power: as simultaneously seeking to control behaviour through definitions of the 'proper' or 'traditional' *and* as premised on a counter-hegemonic self-understanding that opposes a status-quo perceived to lack religious grounding. Social criticism is thereby articulated through an equation of religion with propriety and, conversely, of present, secular circumstances with moral decline.

Amongst the socially most engaged understandings of religion we have encountered is the close association of religiosity, inequality and social change articulated by a Methodist minister:

> [W]e have a thing called a Prayer of Gathering where one of our children reads a prayer, and we will thank God for people regardless of their age ... gender ...

> ethnicity and ... sexuality. And that's been really interesting ... how comfortable people are in affirming different ethnicities, but not affirming different sexualities ... [W]e have gay people worship in our congregation now, who bring something very distinctive ... I've learnt … that to be Black and gay is really hard work…and leads to people living very difficult lives far too much of the time.

The critical potential of religiosity described here thus emerges from a religious space and practice in which several 'axes of difference' intersect — sexuality, ethnicity, gender, age and class.

The local 'nexus of practice'

Having discussed religiosity as part and parcel of power that controls and contests respectively, how can the reduction of inner-city areas like Alum Rock to religious identities, networks and assumed 'parallel lives' be avoided? To illuminate local social action in its manifold manifestations, including the religions, the inter-religious and the non-religious, we here utilise Scollon's (2001a: 147; 5) conceptualization of a 'nexus or practice' defined as a 'network' of 'linked', 'unbounded' and 'unfinalizable' social practices. Alum Rock, as any locality, provides a nexus of practice, comprising a wide range of interconnected social actions that are structurally embedded and consequential: emerging out of social contexts, they either reproduce or challenge existing configurations of power (as in the examples above). Of course, not all social practice in Alum Rock is discernibly religious in motivation and orientation. As a nexus of practice, Alum Rock includes countless 'sites of engagement' — social spaces where social action occurs: from homes to schools and businesses, from the main road in the area to neighbourhood associations, from pubs to churches, mosques and youth clubs. Simultaneously, Alum Rock also constitutes a node or site of engagement within a larger, transnational nexus of practice, within which networks extend from inner-city Birmingham to South Asia, Ireland, the Caribbean, East Africa, Eastern Europe, and — via the flow of commodities sold on the Alum Rock Road — textile suppliers in the Far East.

Alongside locally salient discourses of religious particularism and the above-mentioned hierarchies of otherness and exclusion (see below), religion in Alum Rock can act as a 'bridging' (Putnam 2000) mechanism. As discussed elsewhere (Karner and Parker 2008; 2011), some civil society organizations most committed to addressing social exclusion and to building what have come to be referred as 'cohesive communities' (Husband and Alam 2011) have more or less explicit religious underpinnings, yet do much to bridge ethno-religious divides and to tackle

issues that adversely affect all residents regardless of their backgrounds. In some cases what may appear as an inwardly oriented ethnic association turns out to work across social divides and religious boundaries. The locally based Bangladeshi Welfare Association, for example, offers advice and support regarding a range of issues from welfare benefits to immigration matters for 'anybody who walks through [our] doors', being committed to 'look[ing] after the whole area' ('Shaqib', local advice worker). Similarly, a project-coordinator for Right Start Foundation, an organization working to educate young people about drugs, summarized the potential for partly religiously underpinned, inclusive social work:

> [D]rugs [are] a universal problem … [that] doesn't differentiate between colour, gender, race and faith … I'm a Muslim, a lot of workers are Muslim, but the organization itself is not an Islamic organization … Whether you're a Muslim or not … [the] message is that you contribute to the society you live in … [A]s ethnic minorities … Muslim or not, we want to show … that we are here to help, and that we are part of [this] society.

Within the local nexus, religious practice often cannot be neatly disentangled from, but intersects with, social action with other ideological/ motivational underpinnings. For instance, opposition to 'Project Champion', a planned camera surveillance system targeted at the main roads into and out of the area, was not led by religious organizations but allied to the secular vocabulary of civil rights violations (http://spyonbirmingham.blogspot.com). All secular or inter-religions 'sites of engagement' aside, there is considerable local evidence of religious networks and initiatives working towards community cohesion (e.g. Cantle 2008) by tackling social inequality and establishing meaningful inter-ethnic relationships. A local minister thus outlined how the shared expression of faith from distinct religious perspectives could be mutually enriching:

> [T]he church can be … transformed through its engagement with God who always reveals himself in the life of the other … [M]y ministry is hugely enhanced by the witness of my Muslim friends who do reveal to me what God is like, who do call me to a life of prayer, who do call me to faithfulness to scripture. They call me to be more of a Christian, they don't call me to be less of a Christian.

As relevant here is data revealing what Paul Gilroy (2004) terms 'conviviality', a form of everyday pluralism, a taken-for-granted way of living with difference but without fear of it, of embracing 'otherness' and crossing boundaries with ease. This emerged from a long-established Sikh shop-owner's account of his Muslim friends and the largely harmonious inter-religious encounters he had had in the area ('Jag').

Conviviality also defined the reflections by a local sales assistant of working class, Irish Catholic background:

> We have Somalians … Muslims … Blacks … [and] whites round here … You'll see three races [sic] walking along … because they've been brought up and they're at school together, which is the best way. ('Andrew').

Similarly convivial inter-ethnic and inter-religious relationships emerged from an account by a local tailor of Pakistani descent who described his customers as including 'quite a few people from the English community, quite a few from [the] Afro-Caribbean [community] and I'm very close to some of them. A lot of them … are just like my own family.' ('Shahid') Similarly relevant here is an emerging activist inter-faith forum, in which a Methodist minister takes a leading role, whose reflections and motivations reflect conviviality in the area:

> Friendships began to form across … differences. When a Christian minister felt under attack from Radical Islam it was his Islamic friends who opposed extremism, when a Muslim girl sought freedom from cultural constraints it was the Christian who offered … a listening ear … [I]llegal immigrants, isolated women … disenfranchised young people were just a few illustrations of the need for a radically new approach to our being one community … For the people of Saltley Methodist Church there has been a clear recognition that this may mean … learning to share their most treasured space, for many Muslims it has meant engaging with Christians not in the hope that they might become Muslim but that … both might learn. (Saltley Methodist Church 2011: 3)

Such examples illustrate that much local everyday social practice crosses ethnic and religious boundaries. What is more, some such practices may be religiously motivated, yet they are in part outwardly directed, engaging positively with people who may be discursively constructed as 'the other' but are — on the level of significant everyday social action — co-members of a partly shared life-world.

Alongside, however, our data also reveal relatively common perceptions that the local nexus of practice has undergone transformations over recent decades. Numerous participants have articulated a narrative of decline from a short-lived peak of multicultural harmony, nostalgically pitting a period of successful pluralism in the 1970s/ 80s against allegedly more recent tendencies towards ethnic isolationism and the local dominance of the Pakistani community. For example, an interviewee of Gujarati descent, from a family of Shia twice-migrants, contrasted the circumstances surrounding his family's buying a local shop from its previous Jewish owners in the 1970s to the present:

> When we first took over the Goldbergs told us where they were buying from,
> and … I don't think that kind of business would happen now because of the
> religious state of life. But they were 100% Jewish and we were 100% Muslim.
> The two could gel together … because there were no barriers put up.
> Everybody was open-minded … especially Mrs Goldberg, for years … she
> used to come round and it was as if we were her children ('Zaman', local
> business owner)

Rather than pitting two successive eras against one another, the following account by
the earlier-quoted Methodist minister reports two competing kinds of identification
and socio-religious practice:

> [A] group of Islamic extremists would set up a stall in front of church on a
> Saturday and be … very vocal in their views … [W]hat's really exciting about
> it is that the local Muslim community has taken it on, and they've stood with
> us in solidarity and addressed the issue from within the Muslim community
> … Local imams came to visit the stalls and made it very clear to the people
> that not only was what they were teaching non-Islamic but it wasn't welcome
> in this community.

This illustrates two contrasting forms of local interaction and self-understanding: a
clash between rigid, religious identity politics and close inter-religious relations.
Whilst the latter testify to the workings of a nexus of practice that transcends
ethno-religious boundaries, the former corroborate the simultaneous existence of
a more narrowly defined realm of social action with exclusive criteria of
membership. It is to this dimension of local life that we turn next.

'Communities of practice'

Ron Scollon differentiates a nexus of practice, which is outwardly open and in a
continual process of change, from a 'community of practice'. The latter is an
'objectified', discursively reified version or part of a nexus of practice:

> [C]ommunities of practice … become constructed … as objectivized structures
> [that] are said to have structure, rules and procedures. They are no longer
> organized around practice so much as around definitions, boundaries,
> membership, inclusion and exclusion. (Scollon 2001a: 170)

Communities of practice draw and maintain boundaries, defining certain practices as
markers of in-group membership. Put differently, communities of practice are
constituted by practices, ideas and networks that are seen as manifestations of the
assumed 'thick relations' of, for example, a shared ethnicity or religion.

Such 'communities of practice' also manifest in what Michael Keith (2008) has termed 'the global-local'. Transnational links and connections, particularly to and from South Asia, but also the Middle East, Eastern Europe, East Africa and elsewhere are a defining feature of Alum Rock. Moreover, religion plays a key-role in these interfaces and interactions of the locality with the global.

A considerable amount of social practice in Alum Rock reproduces transnational social relationships. Localities clearly matter, but for people inhabiting more than one node in a transnational 'social field' (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004), two or more localities are interconnected through bonds of kinship, remittances, the flow of commodities, ideas and memories (see Bönisch-Brednich and Trundle 2010):

> [W]e live parallel lives … it's a bit like Britain [had] colonies where you've got Australia and New Zealand and some people from here migrate to there, and they've got kith and kin … and links to the UK. Ours is the same but in reverse. We come from Kashmir but live in Britain and we've got kith and kin in Kashmir. ('Umar')

The transnational, often distinctly religious 'ways of belonging' (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; also see Levitt 2004) prominent in Alum Rock manifest in the growth of mosques and madrasas of various regional origins and devotional leanings, including Deobandi and Barelwi. In addition successful residents of Alum Rock invest in property, religious institutions and philanthropic ventures in South Asia. One prominent owner of a local textiles company established a welfare trust in the Khuiratta region of Kashmir which has invested in developing health care, infrastructure and education (see www.azizwelfaretrust.org). Ties of solidarity also manifested in people travelling from Birmingham to Pakistan to support the aid efforts following a devastating earthquake in 2005, and the weekly local collections for Islamic Relief and Islamic Help.

Amongst the most noticeable forms of transnational 'ways of belonging' encountered in Alum Rock are those not informed by ethnic ties but singularly underpinned by religious solidarities. Widespread criticisms of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are informed by a close identification with the global Islamic *umma*, as are local calls for solidarity with the people of Gaza. The latter surfaced in a graffiti mural, subsequently removed by the local council, and in the following account:

> Gaza is a big issue … there is nowhere else in the world which is like living in a big prison … for something you have never committed … You see your own parents dying, your brothers, sisters and own family members dying. ('Ashfaq')

Returning to the theme of perceived social change and religious responses to it, the following account is noteworthy, as it emphasizes a historical dimension in reporting

an alleged hardening of religious boundaries over recent decades. In light of an emerging religious radicalism since the 1980s, this female South Asian participant felt compelled to move out of the area:

> In the 90s … there [were] imams knocking on the door asking for charity for mosques … instead of just being called British Pakistani, I was a British Muslim … Organizations like Hizb-ut-Tahrir, so you've got jihadists … preachers and … intellectual Islamists … through my days of domestic violence, I started to research …especially on the status of women and Islam … [Y]ou had the Saudi money and the Saudi imams coming in … then you had Islamia Jamaat, Tablighi Jamaat … it was their ideology which was slowly being planted … [W]hat kept me out of it was the Islam my mother taught me. Whereas my dad [was] pulled into it. ('Sameena')

Conceptually, there is another dimension to the nexus-community distinction that is relevant here. Scollon detects a link between MDA and Bourdieu's (1977: 72-79, *original italics*) notion of the *habitus* — the 'structuring structures', dispositions, categories, 'schemes of thought', perception and action that enable the '*intentionless invention* of regulated improvisation'. Whist Bourdieu has been criticized for overemphasizing the socially reproductive tendencies of the habitus (Adams 2006), this is not the inevitable consequence of his theorizing: he also introduces the idea that the 'universe of the undiscussed', or commonsensical *doxa*, is transformed into a realm of discourse and competing 'opinions' and politics as a result of social crises (Bourdieu 1977: 168-169). Similarly, there are recurring hints in Scollon's work (2001a: 7, 9, 167-168) that practice has the inherent potential to transform social relations and that accounting for social change is a key challenge for MDA.

Crisis and social change are defining features of places like Alum Rock. Residents' *habitus* or *doxa* is, seen from a Bourdieu-ian perspective, chronically subject to transformation into a realm of self-reflection, debate and contestation:

> The Muslim community has got to seriously take stock … what they are supposed to be doing, because one thing I find with great sadness is that the Muslim community is forgetting … that there are certain obligations wherever in the world ... a Muslim community or a Muslim person is. ('Majid')

In the resulting 'universe of argument' religion plays a key part. In some instances, a 'return' to a religiously defined 'community of practice' becomes the advocated responses to experiences and perceptions of crises. One example of this, and simultaneously of the religious potential for contestation surfaces in relation to the phenomenon of *biradari* (Ballard 1994; Ahmad and Evergeti 2010, 1707), a politics of clan and extended kin imported from South Asia and widely reported to still shape

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voting patterns and paternalistic ties in Alum Rock and other diasporic localities. However, the next generation is becoming outspoken in its criticisms of what is seen as an unhelpful cultural anachronism:

> The nature of the community we're living in is changing … Asian communities [are] hierarchical … in that we're supposed to … listen to our elders … But that model is breaking down, people are more saying that the people who get elected should be competent. ('Umar')

Such change is, according to another interviewee ('Naz'), partly a symptom of a religious re-awakening and concomitant challenge against established structures. Religious practice is thus defined as posing a challenge against a cultural order understood to be deeply entrenched but in need of reform, thereby providing another example of religious power seeking 'to contest'. A similar juxtaposition of 'religion' to 'culture' (also see Raj 2000), equated with righteousness and long-established but erroneous patterns of behaviour respectively, defines the following account:

> [T]here's a lot of things happening that bear no resemblance … whatsoever to the teachings of Islam. Most of these people claim to be Muslims, but the tragedy is … that just by saying that 'I'm a Muslim' and going to the mosque, doesn't make anybody a better Muslim. ('Majid')

The same interviewee drew a distinction between textual fidelity as the wellspring of religious virtue and actual lived practices falling short of these ideals:

> [W]hat I'm talking about is the teaching of the Quran, that's very important … the teaching of the Quran is one thing, but the present Muslims living in today's Alum Rock … that is another thing.

Alongside, as 'predicted' by the notion of a community of practice, perceived crises can harden ethno-religious boundaries, leading some to overlook or deny more widely shared experiences of hardship and the inter- or non-religious connections and practices that also define the local nexus of practice. The following account is a case in point:

> [N]ow on the Alum Rock Road, you get beggars that are obviously not beggars, who've probably got better benefits than some of the [local] residents … The beggars are mostly from Eastern Europe ... they pretend to be Muslim … [T]hey're Christians, but … because it's a predominantly Muslim area they go begging … saying, 'Brother, I'm a poor Muslim' … they've got babies … a Muslim wouldn't do that. ('Ahmad' and 'Umar')

Herein we encounter ethno-religious stereotypes and their underlying 'positive self- and negative other-presentation' (Wodak 2007: 662). Such rhetorical- and sense-making patterns help (re)produce essentialized religious identities and entrench local

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divisions between sections of the now established Pakistani population and recently arrived Eastern European migrants**.**

Concluding remarks

Localities like Alum Rock call for a discussion able to give religion its due significance without reducing all social practice and relationships to it. This echoes Kim Knott's (2009: 159) call for 'studying religion in locality', for 'reconnecting' religion with '"society", "politics" and "economics"'; 'looking through the lens of local particularity', Knott summarizes, 'makes us see different things to those associated with the generic World Religions perspective'. This resonates with a wider turn to the local, currently evident both in some sociology of religion (e.g. Pogorelc 2011) and in wider, trans-disciplinary terms (e.g. Quillian 2012).

Our locality-based research suggests that totalizing typologies of religions as oriented towards the status quo, resistance, revolution or counter-revolution respectively (Lincoln quoted in Billings and Scott 1994: 184) are of limited use in illuminating the context-bound, multiple, and potentially contradictory ideological motivations and effects of particular religious practices. In Alum Rock such malleability and ambivalence manifest in the close proximity of inter-religious conflicts and conviviality, in the co-existence of racism and inter-ethnic alliances, and in the persistence of long-established structures that religion variously legitimates *or* contests. Moreover, analysis of the multiple intersections of religion and place requires a transnational lens.

Understanding of these complexities benefits from conceptual tools and distinctions provided by mediated discourse analysis. Their application in a discussion of local religiosity offers a fine-grained analysis of the multi-dimensional and multi-directional politics of religious practice. The latter work on several axes of power and inequality in ideologically heterogeneous ways — as mechanisms of social reproduction, political critique or attempted transformation. Religious identity discourses, organizations, and other religiously framed and sanctioned behaviour comment and act on numerous social relationships and institutional structures: from patriarchal family structures to transnational ties; from inter-generational tensions to inter-religious dynamics; from local mechanisms of decision-making to interpretations of global politics. Moreover, some religious practice reflects local conviviality and inter-communal bridges.

Religiosity, in its many and often contradictory effects, is indeed crucial to the (daily) workings of Alum Rock. At the same time, the locality cannot be reduced to religious identities and practices, contrary to what disparaging external observers

would have us believe. The MDA-derived notion of a nexus of practice provides a nuanced perspective in illuminating the multiple intra-, inter-, and non-religious practices unfolding in places like Alum Rock. As such, this theoretical re-orientation can contribute to the analysis of deprived, multicultural inner-cities and the forces and flows that shape them.

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