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From locality to location and back again: A spatial journey in the study of religion

Abstract

In this article, in the context of a retrospective examination of my own research journey from locality to location and back again, I argue for the importance and value of studying religion in local perspective, and reconceptualize 'locality' from the perspective of a spatial methodology, in recognition of the critiques made of earlier usage and the demands placed on the term in the context of globalization. Using the example of an urban high street, I put a spatially-informed approach to the study of religion in locality to work. I suggest that such an approach counterbalances and challenges the once dominant perspective in Religious Studies that focused on World Religions and saw the places in which they occurred as little more than mere context. A locality-based approach seeks to reconnect religion with other social and cultural fields and to recognise the impact of local particularity on the religious life of an area.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, those of us studying religion in local perspective seemed to be 'running against the grain'. In the study of religion, whether it was the major 'world religions', significant concepts and practices such as discourse and ritual, gender and embodiment, or theoretical debates about secularization, phenomenological essentialism or cognition and religion, there always seemed to be more important issues to research than religion and locality. In geography and sociology too locality, along with community, had moved down the agenda of fashionable subjects. Previous studies were criticised for essentializing and idealizing notions of 'the local' and 'local communities', and for reifying particular bounded, and often mono-cultural and rural places at the expense of open, porous, overlapping and intersected spaces (Massey 1994; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Albrow 1997; Lovell 1998). Global processes of travel, migration, communications and cultural flows not only provided new fields of study but also the critical terms for rethinking notions of scale and social relations. 'Locality' as a concept and arena for academic study was put to the back of the scholarly shelf, rarely deemed interesting or pressing as a subject for critical engagement or research.

In this article, building on earlier work (Knott 1998, 2000a), I will argue for the continued importance and value of studying religion in local perspective, and will reconceptualize 'locality' from the perspective of a spatial methodology (Knott 2005a, 2005b), in recognition of criticisms of earlier usage and demands placed on the concept of the 'local' in the context of globalization. I will undertake these tasks in the context of a retrospective examination of my own research journey, from locality to location and back again.¹

The Community Religions Project and the roots of 'locality' as a conceptual and geographical context for researching religion

At the University of Leeds a research group was established in 1976 by Michael Pye, Ursula King and William Weaver with the purposes of studying religious communities in Leeds and neighbouring cities, and of relating 'such research to associated matters such as community relations, inter-religious understanding, religious education and teaching programmes within the university' (Pye 1976:1).² The Community Religions Project (CRP), as it was called, would host long-term scientific research by staff and students and projects for which external funding would be sought. Between its inception in 1976 and the annual report of 1979 it had initiated fifteen schemes of study, produced thirteen working papers and seven research papers (Toon 1979). These included a collection of primary documents pertaining to religions in the area, a bibliography of religions in West Yorkshire (the county in which Leeds is situated), a photographic study and exhibition (by Nina Kellgren, funded by Kodak), the development of a computer-based literature facility, and ethnographic research on Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in Leeds and Bradford (by doctoral students, David Bowen, Kim Knott, Richard Toon and Stephen Barton).³

In three papers delivered in the first year of its existence, Pye reflected on the aims, benefits and novelty of the CRP, in the first presenting his vision for the project. Stressing the innovation and stimulation of 'studying what is nearby', he noted how instructive it was 'to be confronted with data for the study of religion in their raw state, in a context otherwise familiar to us' (1977a:2). He was struck by this tension, and suggested that 'the very proximity of a phenomenon makes it more difficult to interpret' (2). Speaking in the same year to teachers and careers advisors, he noted

that scholars were inclined 'to study data which exist far away either in space or time', commending that 'one of the ingredients needed by religious studies for its future healthy development is a much stronger relationship to the environment in which it is carried out' (Pye 1977b:2). As he saw it, the benefits included giving students time away from textbooks and a sense of reality through personal observation and experience, the community context which situated academic work in a wider but nonetheless local social arena, interdisciplinarity and the overcoming of 'an undue polarity between theology and religious studies' (1977b:3). In a research paper from that year, on photography in the study of religion, he explored the uses of this medium for research, noting the dissonance between the views of local religious insiders and outsiders in deciding what properly constitutes a subject for photography. He also stressed the importance of 'the physical extension of the data' with regard to expressions and positions in ritual behaviour as well as spatial location (hands, faces, food, objects, space, costume, theatre and ritual were the themes explored in photographs taken by Kellgren and exhibited by the CRP in 1977).

In Pye's observations we see several developments that were to become important later in characterising the study of religion and locality: the difficulties of understanding and analysing that which is proximate and familiar; the novelty and importance of using religious studies skills developed for far-distant contexts on one's own environment; the didactic and social value of such studies; the intriguing possibilities of an interpretive engagement for research purposes between scholarly observers and participants (in Britain we now refer to this as knowledge transfer or exchange); and new research issues – body, space, drama, ritual – opened up by recording and studying events in local places. The significance of the spatial for thinking about context, methodology and theory in this developing branch of religious

studies is considerable – as we see from some of the terms in use above. Studying religion in locality requires scholars to reflect on that which is ‘proximate’, on the transference of skills developed for ‘far-away’ places and religions to those ‘near at hand’, on the engagement of religious ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, in addition to the focus on new arenas such as ‘space’ itself, ‘place’, ‘locality’, ‘body’ and new centres of activity such as those where rituals and performances take place.

Michael Pye left Leeds for Marburg in 1982, and leadership of the CRP passed to Ursula King. It is to her that the project owes its chief material legacy: a new series of research papers and monographs on religious communities in urban settings.⁴ In the 1980s the project was also successful in obtaining several large grants to fund research on the religions of minority groups in Britain, particularly the African Caribbean and South Asian heritage communities.

I took over the direction of the project in 1989 and oversaw a decade marked by initiatives focused on civic engagement, especially the centenary of the city of Leeds in 1994, which was celebrated with a series of public lectures and a book, *Religion in Leeds* (Mason 1994), and a two-year research collaborative project to explore ‘Inter-Religious Social Action’ in the city (Burlet and Reid 1998). During that same decade a novel fieldwork-based course for upper level undergraduates and masters students was developed (Knott 1998, 2000a). ‘The Religious Mapping of Leeds’ examines religions and their interactions with civic, commercial, social, educational and cultural agencies and issues in the city’s diverse districts.⁵ The students work in teams in association with local partners; they undertake fieldwork and select relevant local themes on which to focus; they present their findings in a public lecture at a venue in the neighbourhood. Through their research they form a bridge between the

university and its immediate context, each team contributing to knowledge and understanding about religious diversity in the city and the relationship of institutionalised religion to education, law and order, social provision, economic and cultural development. The 'difference' of Leeds and the character of its various neighbourhoods is a central concern. These are not just any places; they are organic, historically forged, locally particular, but globally interconnected arenas in which religion has a dynamic involvement.

In addition, the CRP has been active in other forms of engaged research, funded by and working with national, regional and local bodies, such as the Government's Home Office, the Yorkshire and Humber Assembly and Leeds Faith Forum, to research issues such as religious literacy, faith-based community cohesion, religious responses to the rehabilitation of ex-offenders, and the feasibility of a regional religious forum. In these projects the focus has been on helping to answer questions about the role of religion in public life in local and regional contexts.

Despite – and perhaps even because of – all this activity, little attention was paid until the late 1990s to theorizing the research of the CRP. In 1998, the first of two papers was published in which questions were raised about the issues and benefits associated with studying religions from a local perspective (Knott 1998), and in the same year a conference was hosted in Leeds to investigate interdisciplinary perspectives on religion and locality and their interrelationship. In both the article and the conference agenda, the key matters for consideration were the mutual impact of localities and the religions situated within them, the meaning of 'locality' and its relevance to the study of religion, the interaction of local and global, and the special

issues arising for both research and teaching from an inductive local perspective for studying religion.⁶

The importance of coherence and conceptual manageability in establishing boundaries around any particular locality for the purpose of its study was stressed: 'Our interest is in the effective locality – the arena in which interactions commonly take place and institutions recognize one another and engage meaningfully.' (Knott 1998:284) In using the term 'locality' we had in mind the condition of that place or environment which was near-at-hand, and its 'local particularity' in terms of physical character and social relations (Jenkins 1999:17), and, in focusing on its coherence and conceptual manageability, we recognised the constructed and operational nature of localities as 'field sites' (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:10). Studying 'religion and locality' meant analysing religion in its local context, in relation to social, economic, political as well as geographical aspects, and investigating the impact of a specific place on religion and of religion on that same place.⁷

The development of a spatial methodology for analysing the location of religion

In turning my attention to writing a book on religion and locality in 2001, and beginning with my own context (the suburb of Roundhay, in Leeds), it soon became clear that I needed tools better tailored to my intended task. My neighbourhood had its fair share of places of worship and these were connected outwards to other organisations and activities through their members and leaders. However, in my view, to focus on such places and connections alone would minimise the location and role of religion. It would not capture the religious behaviour of local residents who worshipped outside the area or those who preferred not to attend places of worship

at all. It would not lead to the discovery of those historical or present traces of religion to be found in ostensibly non-religious sites such as parks, schools, medical centres, shops and restaurants. And it would be unlikely to produce greater knowledge about the relationship of religion and its secular context. Whilst I clearly needed to be able to identify 'religion' in order to locate and distinguish it from non-religion – which I came to refer to as the 'secular' and 'post-secular' (Knott 2005a:59-89) – I did not want to limit my analysis solely to religious places and their networks. In opening up the scope of my research to secular places, the task of location itself became critical: How was religion located in secular places and how was it to be distinguished from its context? How was the nature and act of location as a state and process to be understood?

Answering these questions required me to understand more about 'places' as potential contexts for religion, about 'religion' as the object of study in such places, and about 'location' and what it means for something to be located. The first half of my book, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis*, was the result of this process. In systematizing what I had learnt about 'place', 'location', and 'space' more generally, and then turning this into the tools needed for locating religion in ostensibly secular places, I developed a spatial methodology. Arising from an engagement with the spatial thinking of Lefebvre (1991), Foucault (1986), de Certeau (1984) and Massey (1993a, 1993b), the principal terms of this methodology are the body as the source of space, the dimensions of space, properties of space, aspects of space and dynamics of space (Knott 2005a, 2005b, 2008). On the one hand, these terms constitute a description of 'space' and its characteristics; on the other, they are parts of a systematic analytical process the purpose of which is to provide a deep contextualization of religion within any given place.

This spatial methodology begins with the foundational role of the *body* for our experience and representation of space, in particular with signs of the body inscribed in the object of our investigation, the discourses of the body at work within it, and the way in which bodies are used to maintain and reproduce it.⁸ Following this it requires a consideration of its physical, social and mental *dimensions*. Places (including things or bodies) simultaneously ‘envelop’, to use Lefebvre’s word, these three dimensions or ‘fields’ of space (1991: 11). But they gather together other things as well. They are the sum of their components, relations, interpretations and representations. In fact, this is one of the *properties* of space, its propensity to gather and configure. The next methodological step involves a study of such properties in relation to our chosen place which, in addition to configuration, include its diachronic extensiveness, synchronic interconnections, and power relations. Extension conveys the sense of time flowing through space as well as the way in which places contain within them the traces of earlier times and regimes. But there are also synchronic interconnections with other sites, both those that are similar in kind and those real and imagined co-existing sites to which our place is connected by the movement of people and capital, the flow of communications and ideas. Whether through its historical seams, simultaneous interconnections or the struggles that produce it or take place within it, power inhabits space.

The final stages of a spatial methodology entail a consideration of the dynamism of the object or place, first by means of its spatial *aspects* – the way in which it is practised, represented and lived (Lefebvre 1991: 38-40; Knott 2005a: 35-58) – and, secondly, by means of the processes of production and reproduction that form it and allow it to generate new spaces.

In this approach, 'space' is not seen as the passive container or backdrop in or against which religious activity takes place. It cannot be separated from notions of embodiment and everyday practice, knowledge and discourse, and production and reproduction, and is an engaged and dynamic arena for religion no less than for other aspects of social and cultural life. A methodology for the study of religion based on these spatial elements or terms requires a series of interpretive analyses, thinking first about the location of 'religion' in a given place or object from the perspective of the body, then in relation to its spatial dimensions, and so on.⁹ It has the effect of opening up a place or object of study to in-depth enquiry whilst at the same time taking seriously its outward interconnections, whether diachronic or synchronic.

Before considering how this approach might be applied in revisiting the relationship of religion and locality, I shall return to the issues of definition and usage with which I concluded the last section and explain how my ideas about 'place', 'space' and 'location' evolved in the course of developing this spatial methodology.

In thinking about the location of religion in my own neighbourhood, in particular my street corner, the walk to my local park, and my daughter's school playground, I understood my task to be about 'place' and the emplacement of religion. As Jonathan Z. Smith had made clear in *To Take Place* (1987), 'place' was both noun and verb, as well as being both physical and social. Where and how was religion situated in particular places? What were those places like and how was religion shaped by them? What was the nature of its emplacement? How was it placed vis-à-vis to other social, cultural, economic and political forces, relationships and phenomena? The concept of 'place', however, proved to be problematic in similar

ways to 'locality' and 'community'. Among postmodern geographers its identification with territory, locality and nation, and hence with the fixing of boundaries, was seen as a weakness at a time when global flows and networks and the politics of identity were of more scholarly pertinence and interest (Massey 1994). Phenomenologists of place were criticized for idealizing it and for conceiving of places as bounded and unique. The title of David Harvey's 1993 article, 'From space to place and back again', revealed the spirit of an age which sought to reclaim 'space' from Cartesian abstraction and to leave behind the limitations of 'place'.

It was to the work of Doreen Massey (1993a, 1993b, 1994) that I first turned in order to understand contemporary developments on 'place', 'space' and 'locality'. Like fellow postmodern geographers, she had come to prefer 'space' to 'place' because of its openness, its application in a context of global movements, communications and networks, and its socially progressive potential (compared to the tradition and hierarchies associated with 'place'). Her understanding of space, as socially constituted, as networks of relations at scales from global to local, as space/time, dynamic and full of power, was timely and influential on the development of the spatial methodology I described earlier (Massey 1993a:155-6, in Knott 2005a:20). However, despite her preference for 'space', she did not give up entirely on 'place'. Writing powerfully of one open and dynamic example, London's Kilburn High Road, she stated, 'what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus' (1993b:66). This led me to conclude that places were specific loci in space sharing the very spatial characteristics and dynamics outlined above:

Places [are] parts of dynamic and relational space, and locations [are] situated positions vis-à-vis others. Both place and location are conceived in social, mental and physical terms, and, as concepts, are used to identify hierarchical and political [as well as geographical] positions and stances. (Knott 2005a: 29-30)

As Massey had suggested, places were intersections or meeting places in social space. I did not use 'place' and 'location' as interchangeable nouns, however, restricting the latter to the process of positioning religion and reconnecting it with its context.

Applying a spatial methodology to the study of religion in local perspective

It was my intention in *The Location of Religion* to develop spatial tools to analyse places at a number of scales (body, thing, locality, community, global network). Beginning with the body, the left hand was the first of several case studies (Knott 2005a:133-228). Like a local neighbourhood, the left hand is a small bounded place connected outwards to other proximate and far-away places. It generates representations and perspectives, and has a social and mental as well as physical character. Situated within it are the traces of earlier historical forms and past and present power struggles. Religion no less than other ideological formations may be contained within the social and symbolic space of the hand.¹⁰

If what we mean by place is that nexus in space in which social relations occur, which may be material or metaphorical and which is necessarily interconnected (with other places) and full of power, then – as such a

place – a hand has the potential to contain and express religion (religion being those social relations given meaning by a certain type of ideology, set of traditions, values and ritual practices). (Knott 2005a:134)

A case study of the location of religion within the place of the left hand, I would argue, is no less a study of religion in local perspective than one which takes as its focus a street or neighbourhood.

This study was followed by analyses of the location of religion in places at other scales, notably secular organisations such as a medical centre and school, everyday ritual and urban landscapes (e.g. Knott 2005c, 2007; Knott and Franks 2007). In this final section it is to just such a landscape that I shall turn: the neighbourhood of Chapeltown, Leeds, in particular the main road that runs through it.¹¹ The focus of sustained examination by students and scholars in the Community Religions Project, and of civic, media and wider public representation and reinvention, Chapeltown Road is a thorough-fare renowned for its social diversity, its past association with crime and riots, and its carnival, processions and festivals.

In her example of London's Kilburn High Road, Massey exposed the interconnected nature of one place in space (1993b, 1994). Its multi-ethnic and multicultural nature linked it to other national and global places, and, whilst it could certainly be said to have a character all its own, '[this] is absolutely not a seamless, coherent identity, a single sense of place which everyone shares' (Massey 1993b: 65). This is true of the vicinity of Chapeltown Road too: whilst many of its residents strongly identify with it, a number who pass through associate it only with lawlessness and violence.¹² Some of those who attend its places of worship are local and see them as directly serving

Chapelstown; others drive in from outside the area and identify only with their particular congregation whose members are drawn from the wider region.¹³ Turning now to the spatial terms I discussed earlier, we can see how these might be applied to the case of Chapelstown.

(a) The body as the source and resource for space

In speaking of Chapelstown Road as an 'arterial' road civic leaders and local residents metaphorically represent it as a channel of the city's life-blood, and in many ways this is appropriate as it developed from being a road between places (Leeds and the neighbouring village of Chapel Allerton and places further north) to a migratory route for groups escaping the squalid socio-geographical confines of the inner city: first upwardly-mobile Leeds citizens seeking the clean air of a garden suburb, followed by Eastern European Jews, South Asian Sikhs and Muslims, Central Europeans and African Caribbeans, for many of whom religion was a significant feature of identity. In this sense the road became a flow of migrating bodies, some of whom settled whilst others moved through.

A road and its character are shaped by conceptions of the body in space: its width arises from the size and shape of the vehicles that move along it in both directions, and they too are moulded to suit the bodies that use them. Its buildings take their measure from the human form, with temples and churches no less than others planned and laid out with seated, kneeling and prostrate bodies in mind. The road is a place of work for many, most of whom spend their days in the buildings that line it, whilst others are street workers: cleaners, prostitutes, community police officers, municipal gardeners. For others, young and old, the road is the place where they

hang out, going in and out of cafés, community centres and places of worship, leaning against walls, cruising in cars, criss-crossing the road. Residents and users have lent the road their embodied identities, as is clear from the signs on shops and other public places: Nelson Mandela Centre, Warsaw Stores, Cantor's Fish Bar, Ramgarhia Gurdwara, Black Beauty Wholesale, Medina Food Store, Dutchie Pot (West Indian café), Latvian Welfare Fund, Church of God of Prophecy Precious Ones Nursery, Polish Catholic Centre and Muslim Girls School. Religion is not only present in these organisations but on the bodies and in the identities of residents and visitors: entangled with other aspects of culture and ethnicity, it is represented in dress and other outward symbols, as well as in hearts, minds and behaviour.

In starting with the body as the first term in a spatial analysis of this urban high street, I am suggesting that we begin to see the geographical and social 'context' of religion in a new way. We refocus on locality as embodied, and are reminded that the bodies that form and constitute it are themselves religiously and ethnically marked and self-identified. At the level of the life-blood of the locality religion is present, not *sui generis*, as an essential element, but as an important feature of identity and territorial marking.

(b) The dimensions of space

Chapeltown Road is a physical, mental and social locus. It has been produced, and then periodically redesigned and reproduced, in stone and bricks, tar, metal and plastic. At the same time it is the sum of the people who live on it and move through it, and of those representations of it we read in the press, hear in songs, see in old photographs and construct in our conversations. It has been materially, socially and

discursively reproduced by the various groups who have made it their home. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, Eastern European Jews filled Chapeltown Road and neighbouring streets with their organisations, and then moved north leaving their synagogues and shops to the process of institutional recycling by newer groups of Pakistani Muslims, Sikhs, Vietnamese Buddhists and, more recently, students at the Northern College of Contemporary Dance.

With this second term we turn from the body to focus on the multi-dimensional nature of the street. This enables us to reunite what were previously separate disciplinary gazes (geographical, sociological, discursive and cultural) in realising its physical, social and mental character. Even if we restrict ourselves to a definition of religion based on self-identification, we see that religion inheres in all three dimensions of the street: physically in its religious buildings, socially in its religious organisations, networks and casual exchanges on religious matters, and mentally in its representations as both a multi-religious locality and one associated at different times with particular religious groups such as the Jews and the Sikhs. Although it is important methodologically to differentiate these dimensions in order to do justice to each, we must remember that, as a locality, the road is the sum of all three in tension.

(c) The properties of space: configuration, simultaneity, extension and power

In Massey's terms, Chapeltown Road is a meeting place, not just in the obvious sense of being somewhere where many people gather, but as the locus of a network of global and diasporic interconnections. Its internet café, phone and fax centre is the clearest statement of this. In being home to recent migrants from many parts of

the world it is a hub of international communications, with religious blessings and messages transmitted no less than more mundane social exchanges.

Simultaneously, a local resident may be waiting to collect her children from religious school on Chapeltown Road whilst speaking by mobile phone to a distant family member in Birmingham, Poland or the Punjab.

In addition, the road carries its past within it, most of its earlier traces erased but some still present within the fabric and foundations of buildings, in milestones, graveyards and, not least of all, in the memories of local people, some of which are recorded in oral, visual and local histories and records. Clive Binfield, historian of evangelicalism, writing about the early days of Newton Park Church on Chapeltown Road (Mason 1994), drew his data from church minute books, a young girl's diary and a novel about the area. That building, in its former life as a non-conformist church and its later one as a Sikh gurdwara, was the site of several local religious conflicts, between different groups of Christians, then Sikhs and Hindus, and finally Sikhs from different caste backgrounds. The road has, of course, witnessed other struggles too. The scene of riots in 1981, it has been the site of barricades, burning cars and body armour in clashes between young people and the police, and between rival gangs. Racial and other forms of cultural difference have played a part in such scenes.

As a part of space, like other places Chapeltown Road brings together

...the network of relations at every scale from local to global... [It is] a moment in the intersection of configured social relations... It is not the 'slice through time' which should be the dominant thought but the

simultaneous coexistence of social relations that cannot be conceptualized as other than dynamic. Moreover... by its very nature [it is] full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation. (Massey 1993a: 155-6)

It is a site of configuration, simultaneity, extension and power. As we focus on each of these turn, we witness it as a place where history intersects with contemporary connections and movements. Religious as well as other cultural and political regimes are historically embedded within it as well as evident within its current face. And translocal and global relationships and processes link this road and its people with others elsewhere in Britain, in South Asia, the Caribbean, Africa, continental Europe and North America.

(d) The aspects and dynamism of space

Chapelton Road is a place of routine spatial practices and social interactions – including the comings and goings of religious people in the road's many places of worship. These are rarely the source of in-depth reflection. But the road is also what Lefebvre referred to as a 'conceived space' (1991:38), the on-going work of Leeds City Council, its planners and civil servants, in conjunction with those businesses who seek to make a profit and to do good by investing in the area.¹⁴ At the same time, it is a place transformed each year by the processions that run through it, most notably the West Indian carnival in August which draws crowds from all backgrounds to celebrate the holiday, share Caribbean food, listen to the sound systems and dance along to the rhythms. As such, it is arguably a 'lived space', one in which the dominant order is temporarily overturned by a groundswell of local activity and

collective sentiment (Farrar 2002). It is a vibrant and dynamic road, brought to life by its residents and interconnected to far-away places.

Following Lefebvre's lead, we can see this street as multi-faceted, all at once a place that is unselfconsciously practised, wittingly conceived, ordered and represented, and imaginatively and collectively expressed and 'lived'. These aspects are hard to measure and fully distinguish, and may be a matter of some conjecture and debate. The wearing of religious dress on the street, for example, may be seen as a routine and unremarkable habit, a sign of oppression or an act of defiant self-identity, and may be viewed differently by the insider and outsider, a further illustration of the dynamism of this place.

And back again: the value of a local perspective on religion

My aim has been to show, albeit briefly, how a spatial analysis, through its various dimensions, properties and aspects, can open up a given place as more than a mere context or back drop for the study of religions. But do terms like 'locality', 'place' and 'community' continue to have contemporary methodological relevance for the study of religion in light of the criticisms previously levelled at them? Just like other scholarly concepts, they can be reconceived and revitalised. In his study of the effects of globalization on the London borough of Wandsworth, Martin Albrow notes that people conceive of their locality in very different ways, some seeing it as diasporically interconnected, others as the place where their forebears have lived for several generations, some as an arena for international business, others as a leisure space. Different personal realities can be linked together by their coexistence in such a place but they do not necessarily create a local culture or community

(1997:50). Patterns of social and cultural change do not necessarily require us to give up the concept, but rather to reconsider its meaning and application for current studies of religion in context.

What are the scholarly merits of studying religion in local perspective? An examination of specific places (whether physical, social or discursive) and localised religious groups, places and activities challenges the conception of 'World Religions' as unities focused on discrete, systematic sets of traditions, and normative beliefs and practices. In fact, it is possible that some religious people and organisations forged in particular localities become more interconnected and akin to each other than they are to those at a distance with whom they share a formal religious identity. This is certainly open to testing. What effect does the locality and local religious and other relationships have on the emerging character of religious bodies and the attitudes, practices and values of those who belong to them? Looking through the lens of local particularity invites new questions and makes us see different things to those associated with the generic World Religions perspective.

Studying religion in locality also signals a move away from the modernist regime of collecting, classifying and comparing data towards seeing religion as a plural, dynamic and engaged part of a complex social environment or habitat that is globally interconnected and suffused with power. Re-engaging it with what has traditionally been seen as its 'context' helps us to reconnect 'religion' with those other categories – 'society', 'politics' and 'economics' – from which it has been separated for the purpose of classification and study (Fitzgerald 2007). In focusing intensively on particular bodies, objects, groups or places, we begin to see the difficulty and erroneousness of distinguishing 'religion' from other social fields in order to

investigate it without meaningful reference to its context. Such an act of scholarly reconnection inevitably requires a multidisciplinary and polymethodic process that brings a researcher into engagement with others within and beyond the study of religions who approach the study of that body, object, group or place and what goes on within it from sociological, geographical, cultural, historical, anthropological and economic perspectives using a variety of fieldwork and textual methods.

Such studies of religion in locality necessitate local negotiation and accountability, and are often socially useful studies which can be conducted in partnership with those who live and work in the area and have a stake in it and how it is represented and researched. And, finally, as Michael Pye suggested some thirty years ago, they have pedagogical value in so far as they allow students as well as more experienced researchers to observe and analyse local situations, and to understand more about their own place and its effect on the locality.

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¹ I have borrowed the trope of spatial turn and return in my title from the work of David Harvey. In writing about the conceptual and substantive shift from local to global in postmodern geography, he entitled an article ‘From space to place and back again’ (1993).

² Leeds in the mid 1970s was a major urban centre in the north of England. The majority of its inhabitants were Christians of various denominations, including migrants from Europe and the West Indies (e.g. Irish and Polish Catholics, Greek Orthodox, African-Caribbean Pentecostal). There were also Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus from the Indian sub-continent and East Africa, and a well-established Jewish population.

³ CRP reports, working papers, research papers, and monographs are retained in the Community Religions Project archive at Leeds. The photographic collection and some of the primary documents are held in the West Yorkshire Archive.

⁴ For a list of monographs and research papers, see ‘Institute for Religion and Public Life: The Community Religions Project’, <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/trs/irpl/crp.htm>.

⁵ Religious Mapping reports can be viewed online, at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/trs/irpl/crp.htm> (University of Leeds 2004; Chapeltown 2007).

⁶ Given the centrality of ‘community’ in the CRP, the relationship of community to locality, and the adequacy of the former for critical scholarship on religion were explored in two later articles (Knott 2000a, 2004).

⁷ See also recent work by CRP member, Seán McLoughlin, on ‘multi-locality’ and the writing of British Asian cities, <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/>.

⁸ For a full account of this spatial methodology, its origins in the work of Lefebvre and Foucault, and its stages, see Knott (2005a, 2005b: 156-66).

⁹ I realise that this begs the question of how ‘religion’ is defined for the task in hand, a matter I discuss in Chapter 3 of *The Location of Religion* (Knott 2005a: 59-85).

¹⁰ Like all places, I saw the left hand as both material and metaphorical. References to it spoke at times of real, literal hands, but at other times used the notion of the ‘left hand’ as a symbol or metaphor for something else, often something deviant, alternative or marginal. Embracing both literal and metaphorical bodies and places is part of a spatial approach in which ‘space’ is conceived as multi-dimensional, as physical, social *and* mental.

¹¹ See ‘The Religious Mapping of Chapeltown’ (2007) on <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/trs/irpl/crp.htm> and Knott (2005c:51-6). Chapeltown, in addition to an early reference in Pye (1977a), has been the subject of various CRP monographs and research papers.

¹² From ‘The Religious Mapping of Chapeltown’, 2007.

¹³ In 2001, in Chapeltown, Christians – including older established and new migrants from Europe and the Caribbean as well as British – constituted 55% of the population, with 30% having no religion or not stating one; Muslims numbered 8.6%, Sikhs 4.5%, Jews 1%, with smaller numbers of Hindus, Buddhists and others (religion in Chapel Allerton Ward, April 2001, <http://neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/>).

¹⁴ For a full account of Lefebvre’s spatial triad – perceived, conceived and lived space – and their application to religion, see Knott 2005a:35-58.