Unpacking Growth: The 2012 London Church Census

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The data for Peter Brierley’s paper can be seen at http://www.brierleyconsultancy.com/images/londonchurches.pdf

Walking down the Old Kent Road: New Black Majority Churches in the London Borough of Southwark

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Walk down the Old Kent Road and you will encounter global Christianity. The Old Kent Road is a telling shop window for the recent growth of black majority churches in urban centres, especially in London and particularly in inner city boroughs like Southwark. This paper reports on the findings of a two year research project, entitled Being Built Together, which investigated the demographics and ecclesiology of new black majority churches (nBMCs) in the London Borough of Southwark. The particular focus here is on the growth of nBMCs in the Southwark context and the significance of that growth. Opportunities and challenges arising from nBMC growth, based on pastor and observer testimony, are examined, especially in relation to the pressure on premises and engagement with the planning system. Recommendations are considered for four key parties affected by this growth, namely nBMCs, historic churches, local communities, and local authorities.

The Growth and Transformation of Nonreligion: The Examples of Camden and Islington


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Recent years have seen a rise in churchgoing in central north London, atypical of national trends. One of the more surprising aspects to this picture is that the rise in churchgoing extends to nonreligious populations: recent years have seen the emergence of an ‘atheist church’ – the Sunday Assembly – alongside other forms of nonreligious congregation and culture. Though relatively small in scale,
these movements have had a wide impact, attracting much media attention and rapidly expanding to new sites outside of the city. Their prominence also raises significant questions concerning the relationship between church growth and secularity: traditionally, secularity is the measure of church decline and irreligion is seen as evidence of a religious society rather than a secular one (Bruce 2002); accordingly, a vibrant nonreligious church would be taken as a sign of the vitality of religion in the region. The nonreligious movements described above are not, however, roundly irreligious: they do not reject religions, nor are they hostile to them. Rather, they draw on religious traditions and even collaborate with them (Strhan 2014). Thus, their emergence highlights the uncertain relationship between nonreligion and secularity (Lee forthcoming). The growth and transformation of nonreligion in central north London is therefore a case of significant interest for those interested in religion, nonreligion and secularity more widely. This paper considers how we should make sense of the rise of the nonreligious church as part of the religious landscape in London today.

This paper seeks to locate and understand explaining the rise of nonreligious churches’ in their local context. Organised nonreligion has a particular affinity with central north London – with the bordering boroughs of Camden and Islington and with the western flank of Hackney that borders Islington. Key nonreligious sites, old and new, are found in these boroughs. The central offices of the British Humanist Association, established in 1896 and the Conway Hall Ethical Society which has provided meeting spaces, a library and other resources as a ‘hub for free speech and independent thought’ since 1929. More recently, the area has become home to the original and flagship meeting place of the now international Sunday Assembly and of the School of Life, an organisation set up by the prominent atheist popular philosopher, Alain de Botton. These highly visible examples of nonreligion, clustered in the Bloomsbury area in central London, are echoed in the views of the local, residential populations. The introduction of a ‘religion question’ in the 2001 census revealed that these boroughs were amongst the most nonreligious areas in England and Wales, with both recording numbers of people saying they had no religion well in excess of the national average: in fact, both boroughs were in the ‘top ten’ most nonreligious in the country (Voas and McAndrew, 2012). Both saw further declines in Christian affiliation in the 2011 census, partly explained by increased numbers of those affiliating with the nonreligious category.

My research has used qualitative methods to investigate the everyday, lived experiences of secularity and nonreligious cultures in this region. My interest in Camden and Islington arose as a means to an end in the course of this work: I wanted to find nonreligious people and the connected areas of Camden and Islington was one place that they could be found. I considered the everyday nonreligiosity of my research participants as distinct from the national nonreligious and secularist organisations also headquartered in the area. In this paper, I interrogate this assumption and consider the way in which Camden and Islington display a particular nonreligious culture, one which integrates the activity and outlooks of the organisations found in the area with the concerns and perspectives with a sizable section of its residential population. This nonreligious culture is one, I argue, interwoven with the outlook of a particular urban, liberal intelligentsia. Although the incidence of nonreligiosity is partly determined by socio-economic factors (Voas and McAndrew 2012), this qualitative study shows how socio-economic factors also influence the content and texture of the nonreligious culture that emerges. Thus, nonreligious cultures in Camden and Islington – areas with a high number of professionals and students, and a historical association with the intelligentsia and even to the ‘intellectual aristocracy’ famously described by Annan (a major intellectual also associated with these boroughs) – are confident, intellectual, socially reforming and upper-middle class. This culture is related to but distinctive from the intellectual nonreligious cultures associated with Victorian western Cambridge and contemporary northern Oxford and from the liberal nonreligious cultures associated with Brighton and Norwich.

I argue that the rise of nonreligious churches has therefore to be understood in the local cultural contexts in which they are embedded. The close tie between the ‘godless of Gower Street’ and the ‘laic of (north) London’ also demonstrates that new nonreligious movements are not an ephemeral or fleeting fashion but represent a ‘coming out’ of longer-standing commitments held by a large section of local populations. These nonreligious cultures really do represent their communities – or ‘parishes’
– and draw them together. On the other hand, the nonreligious organizations of this region have an international profile. Through them, London has become a cultural centre for contemporary nonreligion: the British Humanist Association’s ‘atheist bus campaign’ was copied in major cities around the world, and the Sunday Assembly also understands itself and works globally. These global trajectories are cosmopolitan and elite, with these nonreligious cultures particularly popular in places that have a similarly strong liberal intelligentsia. In this way, today’s nonreligious cultures strangely mimic British secularist movements of the Victorian era. The emergence of nonreligious churches therefore call for a critical analysis, sensitive to its potential elitist and neo-colonialist aspects and to the nonreligious ‘voices’ that they might unwittingly exclude.

Research Update: Using Geo-Enriched Twitter Data to Uncover Hidden Church Populations

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This paper will contribute to the growing literature on church growth, by identifying ways to strengthen the church population data used by quantitative studies in the field. The fluid nature of churches in Britain mean that churches frequently form, split, move, close and merge. This makes the monitoring of church population data difficult, particularly so for new churches. This paper will discuss the composition of church population data, by using London as an example. In addition to traditional methods of church identification, studies will be reported which utilise user-generated data from a number of social media platforms, in order to identify whether or not such tools can be used to identify previously undocumented churches.

Mission out of Africa: The Case of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, London 1980 till Present

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The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) epitomises the transnational status of African Pentecostalism across the globe. The proliferation of RCCG parishes in London, Britain is one of several examples of the urbanisation of African Pentecostalism across the globe. My theoretical entry point is to identify internal dynamics of RCCG that precipitated the missionary agenda of the denomination particularly in London situating it within the broader missionary endeavours of the denomination in the West and North America. This paper examines the interface between migration, mission and church growth of the denomination in London. This paper further explores to what degree RCCG has utilised the urban church planting strategy of Paul in its church planting agenda as well as identifying and prescribing solutions to the missionary challenges of the denomination.

‘Patron Saint of Catholics and Hindus: St Antony and Inter-religious Devotion in East London’

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Every Tuesday evening at 8pm throughout the year, a Catholic Church in Forest Gate, East London is
a scene of remarkable religious fervor. Most weeks around two hundred people of diverse ages and ethnicities buy and light hundreds of candles, a knot of people gather around a plaster statue of the Franciscan Antony of Padua (rubbing their hands along the folds of his brown habit) or they place slips of paper in a large wooden box marked ‘petitions’. Meanwhile a number of men and women walk on their knees from the back of the church to the altar, praying with moving lips with a lit candle between their hands, while others embrace and greet each other with kisses as they enter the church. This diverse congregation has come for the ‘Novena of Saint Antony’, but the two hour-long devotion of intercessory prayers, hymns and scripture readings, relic veneration and Eucharistic adoration is unlike many encountered in other Catholic churches – for it brings together people from highly-diverse faith backgrounds, including a substantial number of self-identified (and publically acknowledged) Hindus.

Drawing upon ethnographic research, archival materials surrounding the history of this local pilgrimage shrine and Franciscan missionary work in East London from the nineteenth-century onwards, and a series of targeted oral history interviews and collected petitions, this paper will examine the gendered, performed and embodied dimensions of this multivalent, ‘moving’ and profoundly embodied Catholic devotion. Through concentrating on the shared diasporic identities articulated by Tamil Catholics and Hindus in particular, and the colonial legacies and Christian missionary histories which contextualize this contemporary practice, it provides a case study of an evolving and flexible (local) Catholic ecclesiology. Contemporary migrant religious practice is transforming and enriching this historic extra-liturgical devotional and in this transitory but weekly-repeated ritual encounter, there is an opportunity for communion and practical theological conversation, which far outstrips advances made in formal, Vatican-centred and doctrinally orientated Catholic/Hindu ‘inter-religious dialogue’.