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### **Shaping religious community in East London**

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## **Shaping religious community in East London**

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### **Abstract**

Our aim in this paper is to explore how religious communities form and stabilise attachments to their worshippers in the context of the significant demographic, economic and social flux that Bauman (2000) calls liquid modernity. The last decade has seen renewed interest in the shaping of religious community and questions of religious identification and belonging, particularly in the United States (Edwards, 2008; Emerson and Smith, 2000; Emerson and Woo, 2006; Madsen, 2009; Marti, 2005; Orsi, 2005). Much of this work addresses questions of identity, race and diversity, but there are also significant studies of the way these elements intersect with the material and spatial dimensions of urban life (Eade and Garbin, 2006, 2007; Kershen, 2005; Naylor and Ryan, 2002; Watson, 2009).

## **Shaping religious community in East London**

It is the relationship between the city and religious attachment that is the subject of a recent collection of essays *When God Comes to Town* (Pinxten and Diktomis, 2009). The guiding assumption of this book is that the patterns of association and attachment that held together the communities of worshippers in what they call the ‘traditional’ religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism – must have been radically destabilised by the unprecedented growth and diversity of the modern giant city. They argue that these religions developed followers because they offered an explanation of the meaning of life and social organisation to their groups of believers and that they were able to do so effectively because they did so in a social context that was small, such as tribes or clans, and predominantly rural (Pinxten and Diktomis, 2009: ix-x).<sup>i</sup> Based on this they assume that these monotheistic religions must undoubtedly be experiencing significant transformation under what they call the modern urban predicament. They ask whether they still offer convincing accounts of the meaning of life or cultural practice; how do they survive the encounter with radical religious diversity, or the disintegration of the relationship between church and state? (Pinxten and Diktomis, 2009: x).

*When God Comes to Town* is based on the experience of the modern, rapidly expanding cities of the new world. In our research we turn these questions around and ask them of the old world rather than the new: how have the significant demographic, economic and cultural transformation occasioned by immigration and de-industrialisation since the Second World War affected religious communities in London? Were the experience of these communities the same or quite distinct, in a context where two of these monotheistic religions, Christianity and Judaism, were already well established, but Islam was itself arrived as part of the process of transformation? As Ann Kershen (2005) has shown, for centuries religion has provided a focus for immigrant communities in East London, acting as the conduit for the welfare and support so necessary for recent, often impoverished immigrants arriving in an alien context. We wanted to know if this remained the case, and if so, how does it work in the modern city?

In order to assess the relationship between recent urban transformation in London and the three major monotheistic religions, we chose to focus on the East End and the eastern part of the City, essentially the E1 and EC1 postcode areas, which have been particularly affected by economic and demographic change. It is not that these areas face challenges or opportunities which are unique to them, but here the recent transformation of London is cast in its most stark and obvious form, marked most obviously by the de-population of large parts of central London, and the transformation of the East End under the impact of significant immigration, particularly from Bangladesh.

For anyone familiar with the recent history of London, it is immediately obvious that the ‘challenge’ faced by each of the so-called ‘traditional’ religions in East London is quite different. Christianity and Judaism were well established in East London long before the Second World War, and thus the challenges they faced were to respond to the social transformation of the area, faced with the departure of large parts of the population from which they drew their congregations. Islam, on the other hand, only began to emerge as a presence in the East End in the 1940s and 1950s and did not really become prominent in public debate until the 1970s. As such the challenge for Islamic communities was in building from scratch and gaining the acceptance of an often sceptical wider public.

More generally, however, our research suggests that in many ways the challenge faced by all these communities was fundamentally the same: to build a religious community, or at least minister to the public, in a context where religious attendance and affiliation was in no way

determined, and could not be taken for granted. We certainly discovered some definite barriers to the maintenance of religious communities: for example, in the Jewish context it is forbidden to travel on the Sabbath and the congregation therefore walks to the synagogue, which means that the movement of the Jewish population away from the East End makes it a practical impossibility for them to attend the old synagogues in that area. However, the same barriers do not exist for Christian denominations and we found several instances of people travelling long distances to attend particular churches, even where the population from which they traditionally drew their worshippers has long since moved elsewhere. Further, even in areas which appeared to have a ready-made demographic to draw on, there was no guarantee that those people would either continue or begin to attend any kind of religious service, nor was the particular location or kind of service they attended straightforwardly determined by geography, class or ethnicity. Simply because the inhabitants of Bethnal Green are predominantly of Bangladeshi origin, and might even self-identify as Muslim, does not mean they will necessarily attend a mosque on a regular basis, and even if they do, it does not determine which mosque they actually go to. This observation is particularly important in the context of contemporary policy, which often treats 'communities' as given, stable entities possessing attributes which are simply 'there'. Our work on religious communities emphasised to us the extent to which taking 'communities' and their affiliations for granted is a mistake. In the modern, globalised, multicultural city there is simply too much diverse, easily accessible religion available for any religious group to take their worshippers for granted, or for there to be a straightforward map between location, identity and religious expression.

This is not to say that we see these different religious communities engaged in some kind of market-like competition for worshippers, or as necessarily engaged in a process analogous to marketing themselves, it is simply to acknowledge that if these communities are to fulfil what they regard as their religious mission they need to make an effort to construct an environment in which not only are the articles of the faith they practice appropriately enacted, but which also ensures that they are able to maintain and spread this faith to others and to provide for the spiritual needs of their worshippers. This generally involves generating a sense of attachment between individuals and the communities of which they are intended to form and feel a part. Accordingly, given that we see the construction of religious communities as an essentially active and ongoing process of work, we turn our attention to the sets of practices employed by the principal actors in these communities to create and maintain attachment amongst their worshippers in the face of the transformations they perceived going on around them.

In order to assess the nature of the changes taking place, and the response of religious groups to them, we interviewed approximately 25 people representing the Christian, Islamic and Jewish traditions. Within these broad categories, we interviewed people from a variety of different confessions, including, for example, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists and Baptists from the Christian tradition. We asked them about the communities they ministered to, what they sought to do in their ministry, what they saw as their mission, and how they felt their worshippers formed attachments to their communities.<sup>ii</sup>

This working paper presents a sample of material from this survey, focusing on a limited number of sites for initial analysis. From our interviews, from attendance at the various sites, and from collecting printed material relating to them, we identified three particular forms of practice used by these groups to establish a stable community. As will be evident, there is considerable overlap between these, and we divide them only for the purpose of analysis. The first, and most obvious, is what we might term the liturgical dimension: the precise nature and ethos of the religious service being enacted in the site in question. This fundamentally religious question is obviously of the utmost importance, and yet below the level of the broadest religious distinctions between faiths, at the level of the denomination it does not seem to have been universally determining in terms of the rationale for membership of a particular community. The second set of practices we identified were basic material and

organisational practices: the nature of the buildings themselves, timings of the services, accessibility, and so on. Third, was the social dimension: communal meals, accommodation, home visits, social activities, outreach and community interaction. Different churches approached these elements in different, more or less distinctive ways.

Ultimately, we found that the mechanisms devised to practice faith, spread the word and form attachment between worshippers and their community, extended far beyond matters of identity or even religious belief: those religious groups that were able to assemble durable communities did so by forming an assemblage that was at once liturgical, material, organisational and social. It is evident from the homology between the different practices for building communities and generating attachment to them across the different denominations and faiths, that although there are considerable contextual differences, all three major religions deploy similar practices of community shaping.

### **Liturgical Practices**

The most obvious place to begin is with the element that most religious people would probably identify as the most fundamental: the liturgical dimension of worship. Clearly people attend the religious site of their faith- be it churches, mosques or synagogues, and these most fundamental patterns of attachment are rarely transgressed, except in the notable instance of deliberate inter-faith interaction. It is equally unsurprising that there are frequently strong mappings between particular ethnic or national groups and certain religious affiliations or modes of liturgical practice. For example, at both the Ishatul Mosque and the East London Mosque, the congregation were identified as largely Bangladeshi (interview at Ishatul Mosque, 15 December 2009 and at East London Mosque, 2 December 2009). However, both mosques noted that they also drew in people from other backgrounds. For example, our respondent at the East London Mosque noted that they drew in people from India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Somalia (interview at East London Mosque, 2 December 2009).

This is an equally prominent feature in churches, which, because they use a variety of national languages, often not only give their services a national flavour, but frequently carry them out in the native language of that community as a way of catering for them directly. For example, at St Anne's (Underwood Road) a Portuguese and Brazilian community has taken over a church vacated by the Irish community which had largely left the area, catering for both local Portuguese residents and the Portuguese community across London (interview at St Anne's, 10 December 2009). Likewise, St Peter's Italian Church in Clerkenwell was built to cater for the needs of poor immigrants, and it is argued that 'the popular identity of St Peter's still strikes those who take part in any of its religious services', part of an attempt to retain or reconstitute the feel of life in Italian villages decades ago (Stanca, 2001: 69). There was initially some dispute about whether the church should cater for the Italian community alone, or for all Catholics in the area. The plan had originally been to open the church to all nationalities, however the first parish priest was determined that sermons should only be delivered in Italian. However, within a few years the church had broadened its remit to include confessions in English, Spanish, French and German, and the Polish community used the crypt as a chapel (Stanca, 2001: 85). Nonetheless, to this day the church delivers all but one of its masses in Italian (Stanca, 2001:89). There are also Vietnamese, German, Nigerian and Maltese churches in the area.

Beyond the ethnic dimension, several churches have developed a particularly distinctive approach to the liturgy. St Andrew's Anglican Church in Holborn is strongly Anglo-Catholic in orientation, something which is likely to attract and repel equal numbers of the Anglican community, but which might be expected to attract a loyal following amongst Anglicans of that particular persuasion. However, although one might expect this to be of fundamental

import to worshippers, they seem on occasion to be more pragmatic about their affiliation or attendance. For example, the Church of Our Most Holy Redeemer in Exmouth Market, Clerkenwell, also represents a highly distinctive version of Anglo-Catholicism, which might be expected to deter many local people and attract those particularly attuned to Anglo-Catholicism from across London. At Holy Redeemer, mass, as it is called, is drawn from the Roman Missal and their liturgy was described by the parish priest as being 'entirely Roman Catholic' (interview at Holy Redeemer, 28 July 2010). The church offers a low mass on weekdays and high mass on Sunday, during which mass is said facing east. There is lay assistance with deacons, altar servers carrying a thurible and crucifer, and morning and evening offices are read from the Roman Breviary (<http://www.rainbowinformation.com/hr/worship.html> accessed 16 March 2011). However, despite this very strong visual and liturgical orientation, the parish priest, Father Paul, believes that the vast majority of the congregation, which numbers between 70 and 100 on a Sunday, is drawn from the local area and very few people travel significant distances to the church (interview at Holy Redeemer, 28 July 2010). This might be explained by the fact that Anglo-Catholicism is an historic feature of the church, rather than a recent addition, so is unlikely to be off-putting to anyone who has lived in the area for any length of time.

Equally, there is no reason to assume that a distinctive approach to the liturgy necessarily leads to a large congregation, although it may lead to a loyal one. City Temple in Holborn describes itself as 'a church for the 21st century with its roots in the historic church revolution of the 1500s' with what it calls 'a multicultural international congregation gathering people from all over London', drawing in worshippers from six continents ([www.city-temple.com/](http://www.city-temple.com/) 16 March 2011). Their ambitious and distinctive idea, according to the current pastor Rod Woods, is to blend the historic reform tradition with the renewal movements of the 1980s and 1990s, which emphasised the importance of a living encounter with God, transforming the character to a form closer to that of Christ (interview at City Temple, 2009).

In general, the pattern of worship we observed at City Temple is close to that of charismatic Christianity, with the singing of hymns being facilitated by the projection of the words on a large screen above the congregation, and an emotive evangelical sermon. In general the Sunday congregation numbered about 50 people, with slightly more present during the week. The congregation included individuals, couples and families and people of heterogeneous ethnic backgrounds. Although it was by no means the smallest congregation we encountered, there was some disjunction between the relatively small number of people and the vast building housing them, and some concern was expressed about the lack of numbers, with this being attributed to the lack of a resident population. The same might be said of nearby St Andrew's Holborn, which despite its Anglo-Catholic stance attracts about 30-40 people to its main Wednesday evening service, and about 20 people on Tuesday and Thursday lunchtimes, numbers which stand in marked contrast to their very popular Friday Forum, which is not a service, but a lecture and discussion which attracts between 60 and 200 people (interview at St Andrew, Holborn, 19 July 2010). The relative success of churches whose liturgy caters for ethnically or nationally homogeneous as opposed to churches whose liturgy does not have such a focus, is perhaps best illustrated by the enormous success of the guest congregation which uses City Temple, the House of the Rock, a South African (largely Afrikaaner) charismatic church which attracts 300 people and which has a database of 5000 members in London (interview at City Temple, 2009).

Where churches have seen a dramatic decline another strategy to create a community is to entirely reconstruct the existing theological rationale. Thus, at St Paul's Shadwell Anglican church, in 2002 the decision was made by the Bishop of London and the Bishop of Stepney to adopt the controversial practice of church planting (Murray, 2001) and to bring a congregation from the Holy Trinity Brompton in West London to St Pauls, a practice seen by many as an extreme version of evangelical Christianity. Such objection to an imposed set of new practices and an imported congregation expressed by many locally, did not however

deter the plant from Holy Trinity Brompton to St Pauls where the congregation grew from single figures to over 100 virtually overnight. Rather than reattaching a local community to the church, instead, the majority are white middle class young professionals from Bethnal Green and Hackney. One local vicar expressed his ambivalence thus: 'they sometimes behave as if no one has ever done these sorts of things before- they said 'they are bringing light to the dark places of the East End' that put people's backs up. I have very mixed feelings about them. How much it could be called a local church is a moot point'.

## **Material and Organisational Practices**

Liturgical, national and ethnic components were by no means the only element that our informants understood to provide attachment to the religious community. Just as important, sometimes far more so, were more practical and material elements, like the nature of the building in which the services were held, or the times of the services themselves.

There is nothing novel about an attempt to engineer a sense of attachment through architecture, a strategy particularly evident in the six Hawksmoor churches built between 1714 and 1729. St George in the East offers one illustration, hit by a bomb during the Blitz which destroyed the original interior, melting the bells and burning the galleries, it was rebuilt in 1964 in the form of a modern church interior constructed inside the existing walls. As the current vicar explained: 'We haven't changed building since the 60s - it's very much protected and seen as part of its time. Some people think it is a scandal the interior was never recreated - but it was gloomy dark wood' (interview at St George, 2010). The local congregation interviewed expressed considerable pride in their building, while the church has a highly informative and extensive website, where the materiality of the church is central to its promotion and frequent references are made to the unique design of this, and the other Hawksmoor churches.

This strategy was by no means confined to renowned architectural sites. As might be expected from its Italian heritage, the Roman Catholic church of St Peter's, was constructed principally for the Italian settlers based in Clerkenwell. The basilica style church was built in 1863 by the Irish architect John Miller-Bryson, based on a reworking of the Basilica of San Crisogono by Francesco Gualandi (Bertoncini, 2007: inside cover). From the 1880s the church appears to have been the origin for the Procession of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which it is claimed was the first public manifestation of the Catholic faith since the Reformation (Bertoncini, 2007: 22).

Likewise the Anglo-Catholic Holy Redeemer on Exmouth Market very squarely locates itself in the Anglo-Catholic tradition in its material form and trappings, something evident not only in the robes of the parish priest, who wears Anglo-Catholic vestments and a *beretta*, but in the overall appearance of the church, designed in the Italianate style by John Dando Sedding according to the ideals of the Anglo-Catholic Oxford Movement, in marked contrast to the prevailing gothic tradition. The church was designed to stand as a beacon in the local community, drawing attention upwards from the poverty of the area below (interview at Holy Redeemer, 28 July 2010; <http://www.rainbowinformation.com/hr/history.html> accessed 16 March 2011). On entry the church could easily be mistaken for a Roman Catholic church, given the nature of its statues, decoration and the presence of confessionals, as well as the advertising for rosary prayers. This point was put to the parish priest, who laughed and responded 'Well, I would regard us as Catholic' (interview at Holy Redeemer, 28 July 2010).

Another Roman Catholic church, the Guardian Angels on Mile End Road, links its distinctive liturgical orientation directly to its built form. The church itself was opened in 1903 on the site of a previous Catholic church built for the large local Irish community. The current congregation includes not only Irish and English worshippers, but West Indians, Vietnamese,

Poles and a wide variety of other people who have settled in the local area. What is most distinctive about the church, however, is its following of the Neocatechumenate path, following the stages of the Catechumenate step by step over a number of years. This began in 1975 and they now have five 'communities', distinct bodies of around 40 worshippers exploring the meaning of their faith together, the longest lasting of these having been running more than 25 years. The parish priest attributes the success of this church, in comparison to several others in the area, to the unique experience this pathway offers (interview at Guardian Angels, 2 December 2009).

This following of the Neocatechumenate has had a direct impact on the structure of the church itself, which was remodelled in 1988 according to the plans of a Roman architect who established the principle upon which the church was designed, intending to manifest the ideas of the Second Vatican Council. The church is essentially organised in the round, with the idea that the community is not an audience facing the priest but that together they are gathering around the Table of the Eucharist. A central part of this gathering, particularly at Easter, the focal point of the church year, is baptism, and therefore the centrepiece of the church is a large walk-in baptismal font. The font is octagonal, signifying the seven days and the eighth eternal day, decorated with, amongst other things, the symbols of the four Evangelists surrounding the throne of God, a black stone at the base signifying Christ, and seven steps to the bottom marking the seven deadly sins on the way down and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit on the way back up (interview at Guardian Angels, 2 December 2009).

In contrast, genuinely historic churches, that is those that pre-date self-conscious nineteenth-century historicism, were not necessarily constructed with quite the same aim of signifying a particular confession or liturgical orientation through their structure, but they also generate attachments through their appearance, and can signify their orientation through their interior decoration. St Andrew, Holborn retains some medieval elements in the tower, but is essentially a Wren church, remodelled after bomb damage in the Second World War. The church has many significant associations, including the notorious high church preacher Henry Sacheverell, rector from 1713-24; Thomas Coram, founder of the Foundling Hospital, who is buried in the church; William Hazlitt, who was married there and Benjamin Disraeli who was received into the church there; William Marsden was inspired to set up the Royal Free hospital after an encounter with a destitute woman on the steps of the church. The church was almost destroyed by bombing in 1941 and it did not reopen until 1961, at which time it was designated as a guild church for the local working population, rather than a parish church, given the almost complete absence of any residential population in the area. The City Temple, close by, was similarly affected by the bombing, which destroyed an iconic huge altar, previously represented in many texts and photographs and core to its identity, which was rebuilt with funds raised by supporters in the US.

Like Holy Redeemer, St Andrew's is strongly Anglo-Catholic in orientation, with the striking presence of a statue of the Virgin with votive candles, three icons and a new, motorised suspended crucifix icon at the front of the church. These icons are produced in the Monastero di Vallechiara near Rome, with which the church maintains a connection. In addition to the high church decoration, the church is organised so as to promote a feeling of participation: although the pews are mobile, at the time of visiting they were set up in a broadly semi-circular fashion around the altar, producing an effect something like a church in the round.

Given that the church is directed towards serving the needs of the working population, it is perhaps not so surprising, albeit unusual, that the church is not open at weekends at all; rather, it opens Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, to fit in with the working day, with an additional service at 7pm on Wednesday, which forms the main service of the week; there are also services on Tuesday and Thursday lunchtimes (interview at St Andrews, 19 July 2010). Similar practices are undertaken at Holy Redeemer, where masses are held at times to make them accessible to people in all walks of life, particularly at lunch times and for people on the



way home from work (interview at Holy Redeemer, 28 July 2010). City Temple also holds lunchtime prayer fellowships on Mondays and services on Thursdays, alongside the weekend services, as well as dinner followed by worship on Thursday evenings from 18:45 ([www.city-temple.com/ThisWeek.asp](http://www.city-temple.com/ThisWeek.asp) and [www.city-temple.com/Church.asp](http://www.city-temple.com/Church.asp); accessed 16 March 2011).

In addition to the standard services, St Andrew's also runs something called the 'Friday Forum', which is essentially a lecture series addressed to the local business community. This takes place from 13:10-13:35 and includes lunch, a lecture and debate on a wide range of social and ethical questions. Less frequently there are also fortnightly bible study meetings and pilgrimages to places as diverse as Ely and Rome (interview at St Andrew's, 19 July 2010). The congregation itself is mixed, with some regular members, some who attend only for a brief period (often in relation to mobile work patterns) and some visitors; like most of the churches we attended, there were several people who travelled some distance to be there for the Wednesday service. In addition to their own congregation, the church is also host to a Russian Orthodox congregation that is currently without other premises.

Near to St Andrews stands a second historic church, St Etheldreda. This church is located just off Holborn Circus in Ely Place. Originally the chapel to the palace of the Bishop of Ely, St Etheldreda's is unique not only because it is the only part of the palace complex to survive, but because it is the only complete building in London dating from the reign of Edward I. Of course, the reformation brought an end to the church's links with Rome, however in the nineteenth century the Rosminians (otherwise known as the Institute of Charity or the Fathers of Charity), who were active from nearby St Mary Moorfields, managed to purchase the church back and restored it to the Roman faith, making it the first Roman Catholic church in England to operate from its original historic premises (Cunningham, 1992/2003: no pagination).

Given the almost complete absence of any resident population in the immediate vicinity, the church draws its congregation either from those people who work in the many offices around, or who come from other parts of London specially to attend the church itself, as was also the case at the Sandy Row synagogue. Masses are held on Sunday at nine and eleven (in Latin) and on weekdays at 1pm, catering for office workers. The historic building is the unique point of attraction for many. In her introduction to the church's guidebook, Mary Kenny recalls that they travelled from nearby Bloomsbury to attend the church because it was 'ancient, holy, and full of charm' (Cunningham, 1992/2003: foreword). For Kenny it was the intimacy of the building that particularly marked it out from other churches, with a sense of 'tradition and continuity' reinforced by the use of Latin for the main Sunday mass (Cunningham, 1992/2003: foreword). Likewise, our informant at the church stressed that many of those who came to London specially to attend the church, and particularly to get married or have their children christened there, did so because of their attachment to the building itself. Many of them met when colleagues in the area, but returned to the church for special occasions because of the associations it held for them (interview at St Etheldreda, 18 November 2009).

This attention to buildings and religious artefacts is by no means confined to churches. The remaining synagogues in the East End similarly emphasise the importance of keeping material traces of a religion which was highly visible and vibrant in the locality throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and whose traces have been progressively obliterated as the population dwindled with outmigration to the suburbs and synagogues close or are sold into the private sector or reconstructed as mosques. Attempts to reattach the small local Jewish population, or Jewish populations from further afield, to the synagogues through valorising architectural and material elements of the site have met with resistance or financial constraints. Most significant is Sandys Row Synagogue, which is the oldest Ashkenazi synagogue in London, built in 1867 on the site of a French chapel and the last remaining synagogue in Spitalfields, has been vigorously pursuing funds to refurbish its Grade II listed building. As a result, in the last decade there has been a resurgence of interest in the site as new and old members alike

have chosen it to host their family celebrations, and a heritage centre dedicated to the Jewish East End and the Huguenot experience has been established (interview at Sandys Row, 11 December 2009). The same interest can be found in the smaller and less architecturally significant synagogues that are struggling to maintain their congregations. At Nelson Street founded in 1923, the caretaker's objective is to obtain funding to preserve and exhibit as heritage the objects in the synagogue that are of significance, yet he has encountered a negative response from the Federation of Synagogues who are unwilling to fund repairs, apparently with a view to selling the building in order to build a new synagogue in an area with a larger Jewish population (interview at Nelson Street, 2010).

However, it is not only historic buildings that are of visual or architectural significance, something recognised in recent work on the visibility of Islam in the Western city (Hill, 2011). At the East London Mosque work is currently underway on a large community centre. This is in a striking contemporary style, and the architect who designed it, who also did the original mosque, stated to our interviewee that he would no longer build the mosque in the same style if he could start again, but would build something like the new community centre that fitted more into the general pattern of London's contemporary buildings. Our interviewee concurred that it was 'very South Asian looking', but he also recognised the significant impact of the mosque on the East London skyline and felt that it had added a different flavour to the area, something he noted was also marked in the Museum of Docklands exhibition. Our interviewee was also under the (incorrect) impression that the mosque was also the only one in the UK that has the call to prayer, adding a different dimension to its presence (interview at East London Mosque, 2 December 2009).

Finally, the materiality of several of the sites revealed local contestation of various kinds. According to Father Osvaldo the windows of St Anne had protective fences as the local Bangladeshi community repeatedly threw stones to break the glass (interview at St Anne's, 10 December 2009). Other religious sites concealed their religious activities from public view, making no attempt to change the look of the building from its previous use, such as the community centre at Stepney Settlement, or the old warehouse appearance of Ishaatul Mosque.

## **Social Practices**

Although they might be considered peripheral in religious terms, almost all the religious communities visited were involved in a variety of social practices which clearly had considerable importance for them and for their worshippers. At St Peter's Clerkenwell the church community itself recognises the profound changes it has undergone in recent years, with the changing nature of the London Italian community and its move away from the local area (Stanca, 2001: 89). Accordingly 'the Church finds itself having to work with a more dispersed community, scattered across a wide area, and in effect the conventional fabric of a parish around the church simply does not exist' (Stanca, 2001: 89). The solution to this is that the church 'sponsors a number of activities that make it not just the traditional point of reference for the wider Italian presence in the UK but also, and more importantly, the heart of a living and continually evolving local community' (Stanca, 2001: 89). These activities are defined as baptisms, weddings, first communion and confirmation, a pilgrimage and a service to remember the Italian war dead (Stanca, 2001: 89). However, these are activities common to almost any parish church and it is unclear what marks these out as different. Of more interest perhaps is the set of community activities undertaken by the church, such as its role as a drop in centre, hosting narcotics anonymous, St Peter's Project (a charity for drug addicts, now housed at Kings Cross) or the clubs they run for different age groups. These include clubs targeted at older people who migrated to Britain from Italy many years ago, as well as two youth clubs, a toddlers group, knitting clubs, prayer clubs, choirs, and a guitar club. Some of these attract over 100 members. They also host a mini-Olympics every two years, hiring a stadium in north London for three days of events attended by 1000 people with 800

participants (interview with Father Carmelo, St Peter's, 10 December 2009). There are also events run in concert with the Italian Embassy and various Italian clubs and associations (Stanca, 2001: 89). The church also became famous for its musical recitals, and was involved in caring for members of the Italian community who found themselves in hospital or in prison, and was also involved in running an Italian school (Stanca, 2001: 86-8).

Whatever the novelty of these sets of practices, they certainly seem to act to maintain a vibrant religious community. Masses currently attract around 1000 people (the church has capacity for 900 seated, 1500 standing), with many more for baptisms and weddings (interview with Father Pedro, St Peter's, 10 December 2009). The congregation remains principally Italian, but also draws in people from Asia, Somalia, South America and Sri Lanka, with confirmation classes and marriage courses opening the church up to new members. Almost none of the congregation lives in the local area, they come from all over London, with some travelling an hour to participate (interview with Father Carmelo, St Peter's, 10 December 2009).

Nearby Holy Redeemer is also involved in an array of community work. This operates at a low level, such as keeping the church open so that twenty or thirty people a day can come in just to use the church as a place for quiet reflection or to talk. In addition mass is taken elsewhere, once a week in local schools and once a week in the Peel Centre, which caters for both youths and the elderly (interview at Holy Redeemer, 28 July 2010). But the church also has strong links with the local community. The church itself commissioned a report by two academics (Thake and Murdoch, 1997), which sought to investigate the nature and transformation of the local community. According to the parish priest, when local people read the report and found it tallied closely with their own impressions of the area, this led to increasing acceptance of the role of the church and the priest was subsequently invited to sit on local forums, community projects and social action groups. This has given the church a profile and sense of impact in the local community which is not only tied to the annual procession through the streets on feast days and celebrations, for which some local restaurants provide food (interview at Holy Redeemer, 28 July 2010).

In addition to the school, the church also employs a youth worker two days a week and administers the Exmouth Market Centre, based in the parish hall. This 'community and art space' operates a twice weekly lunch club, an early years project of music and play, various dance classes, drama groups, a chamber orchestra, activity and keep fit groups, residents associations, charities use the premises for meetings and so on (interview at Holy Redeemer, 28 July 2010 and <http://www.rainbowinformation.com/hr/exmouthcenter.html> 16 March 2011). The church is heavily involved in the centre, particularly through their administrator Janette, who deals both with day to day issues in the parish and manages the centre itself.

St Andrews Holborn also offers a variety of outreach services. The most obvious is the listening service, offered Monday to Thursday, 11:00-15:00. This is not a counselling, nor do they aim to offer religious direction, rather they just ensure that there is someone in the church whenever possible to listen to peoples' problems and, if necessary, to act as a referral service to other more specialised organisations, including Analytica Consultants who operate from the church (interview at St Andrew's, 19 July 2010; *St Andrew's Holborn Listening Service* leaflet). Analytica operate both traditional psychotherapy and what they call a 'Psychological Wellbeing Assessment Service'. By 2009 negotiations were underway with MIND for the provision of CBT-informed therapy and Body/Drama Therapy (St Andrew Holborn Transformation Project Newsletter, Autumn 2009). This all forms part of their larger Transformation Project which involves landscaping the gardens around the church (which area actually run by the corporation of London), as well as the introduction of new icons into the church, to provide an air of peace and calm, and the letting out of church space to a locally based legal company that runs relaxation classes for its employees. Indeed, the church offers a variety of rooms to let as conference facilities.

Charitable work has long been a central part of the activity of St Andrew's. The church directly administers three distinct charities for the poor of the parish area: the St Andrew Holborn Charity, the Bromfield Educational Foundation and the Alexander Stafford Charity, which can give grants to either individuals or organisations for either the relief of need, or education. In addition the church acts as a co-ordinator for charitable work, offering an annual event at which all the charities they support come together and network, swapping experience, knowledge and contacts (interview at St Andrew's Holborn, 19 July 2010). The church also operates Thavie, a service which enables charities to buy in differing degrees of administrative assistance they cannot provide for themselves (see [www.standrewholborn.org.uk](http://www.standrewholborn.org.uk)). Their charitable connections also bind the church into the local community in other ways: the vicars and priests of the nearby churches of St Alban's, St George the Martyr and St Etheldreda's are all trustees of their charities, as is the Master of Charterhouse. Another link to the local community is provided by Christ's Hospital School, who use the church for their annual service (interview at St Andrew's, 19 July 2010).

Given that the aim of the Rosminians is to carry out charitable work, it is no surprise that missionary work is central to St Etheldreda's. At the time of the initial research (November 2009), the parish newsletter records an appeal for the Association for the Propagation of the Faith, the Catholic missionary society (St Etheldreda's Parish Newsletter, 2009). At the time of writing (March 2011), the church is engaged in collecting funds for a new clinic in Kwalukonge in Tanzania, raising funds through an organ recital.<sup>iii</sup> The church is noted for its music and as well as organ recitals the church claims one of the very few professional Roman Catholic choirs in the country, and it employs both an organist and a director of music; the church's music is available both on CD and on the website.

Other churches have adopted different strategies. At City Temple one of the central aims of the church is 'Building Christian community' and one of the chief devices the church uses to attempt to achieve this is what it calls its Citadel Residential Community. These are people from a variety of backgrounds, not only those who work at the church, but, it is claimed, students and employees, all of whom live at City Temple itself, and in various ways 'commit themselves to building a dynamic Christian community in the heart of London'. This is an exacting task, as every member of the residential community 'covenants to live a Christian lifestyle, participate faithfully in the ministry of City Temple, and give a specified amount of practical and ministry service at City Temple each week' ([www.city-temple.com/Community.asp](http://www.city-temple.com/Community.asp); accessed 16 March 2011). In order to build this community the Temple offers an intern programme designed to enable young people from across the globe to come to London, committing 70 hours per week to service of the Temple, experiencing a variety of ways of ministering. This includes ministering to the homeless, with provision of shelter, washing facilities and clothing for 30-50 homeless people between January and March (interview at City Temple, 2009), but also less expected practices, like extending religion into the workplace, through placements in schools, businesses, government and so on, targeted at 'the transformation of our communities, cities and the world' ([www.city-temple.com/Volunteers.asp](http://www.city-temple.com/Volunteers.asp) accessed 16 March 2011). All this is part of what the church calls its Citadel Vision, the aim of which is to 'develop an urban international Christian fellowship' centred around prayer, community, worship, outreach and training ([www.city-temple.com/Vision.asp](http://www.city-temple.com/Vision.asp) ; accessed 16 March 2011).

The church also runs courses training people to learn ministry, and 'to equip people for effective living and ministry in the workplace and the world' ([www.city-temple.com/CTInstitute.asp](http://www.city-temple.com/CTInstitute.asp) and [www.city-temple.com/SpecialEvents.asp](http://www.city-temple.com/SpecialEvents.asp) ; accessed 16 March 2011). However, how current these activities are is uncertain, because at the time of writing the former was advertising that there were no courses in 2008 and they would recommence in 2009. The current status of City Temple is perhaps best illustrated by its website, which advertises itself as 'City Temple, Church and Conference Centre' ([www.city-temple.com/](http://www.city-temple.com/) ; accessed 16 March 2011). The conference centre, with facilities for up to 900

and a dedicated catering staff, clearly provides significant income for the church, something common to many of the buildings we visited, but to see these facilities granted equal billing on the website header is somewhat surprising. Clearly the church does not reject the business world and actively seeks to develop links to it as a way of acting in the world. One of the church administrators highlighted the fact that organisations as diverse as Amnesty, Oasis, and Sainsbury's use the church for product launches and meetings (interview at City Temple, 2009). This not only provides the church with much needed income, but has the additional benefit of drawing attendees into contact with the church, thereby making them aware of its existence.

Similar practices were undertaken by the mosques we studied. The Ishatul Mosque offers a variety of social activities designed to assist members of their community, such as services to assist victims of crime, or mentoring for families with problems. They also offer health advice. Like several other communities they offer celebrations with food which are open for anyone to join (interview at Ishatul Mosque, 15 December 2009). The East London Mosque is a huge organisation which claims the participation of some 22,000 people every week, with as many as 2000 at lunchtime prayers. Religious services are only one of the five categories into which the mosque divides its work, the others being education, social welfare, community cohesion and economic regeneration. Educational work is taken care of by the schools attached to the mosque, while there are also health projects, raising awareness of food issues and health services, as well as a listening service for women, and shops on the premises which not only keep the community functioning through the income generated, but also provide jobs for up to 50 people. As well as building dedicated facilities for women, the community are currently constructing a new visitor centre for non-Muslims and the press in an attempt to deal with the huge current interest in Islam (interview at East London Mosque, 2 December 2011).

Stepney Settlement is the main organisation in the locality which exists for Jewish people as a social and religious site, reconstituting its cafeteria space as a synagogue on Sabbath days. Here the coordinator of the project was strongly aware of the isolation suffered by an elderly Jewish population who had been 'left behind'. Recognising the need to provide a social space, she turned settlement into a day care centre to celebrate and support local Jewish cultural practices, and to provide daily meals and Kosher food, now unavailable across the borough, through a shop on site. As women interviewed explained: 'it's a life line', 'we come alive here', 'it matters to us its Jewish people, you're with your own people- not being racist-you're just comfortable with your own people they understand you, you can talk Yiddish here'. Most significantly she had organised a bat mitzvah for 12 women from 40-90 who had missed out on this ritual as a result of age, imprisonment in a concentration camp, lack of funds or simply as a result of the sexist notion that women needed no such rite of passage – rather this was a practice for young men (focus group and interviews at Stepney Settlement, 11 December 2009).

## **Conclusions**

Clearly the most fundamental source of attachment to religious communities stems from basic attachments to a particular faith, be it Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or some other religion. However, all the major monotheistic religions offer their believers a variety of places to worship, so that attachment to a particular religious community below the fundamental level of the particular faith espoused is not simply determined by availability. Our research suggests that attachment to a particular religious community is not simply determined by any one factor, such as ethnicity, nationality, liturgical preference, or locality. Rather, attachments are generated and sustained by a variety of interlocking factors, religious, social, material, geographic, economic, which coalesce to generate a feeling of belonging or involvement, or simply provide convenience and conviviality for particular individuals. There seems little reason to privilege any one of these factors over others, although it is clear that there are some

which render the generation of communities difficult. It is evident from the homology between the different practices for building communities and generating attachment to them across the different denominations and faiths, that although there are considerable contextual differences, all three major religions deploy similar practices of community shaping.

One might expect the liturgical approach of the community to be the most significant factor, and there is no denying that, often mixed with ethnically specific or culturally and linguistically differentiated congregations, this can be a hugely significant factor. This is illustrated, for example, in the cases of St Anne, St Peter's Clerkenwell, and East London Mosque, but was particularly relevant at City Temple which hosts two different communities, charismatic Christianity and the House of the Rock. These communities attract large numbers of worshippers coming from outside the locality where the premises are situated, when there would undoubtedly be alternative communities catering to their particular confession within easier reach for many.

However, the liturgical dimension is by no means universally determining, and is often difficult to separate from other sources of attachment. For example, the fact that Holy Redeemer attracts most of its congregation from the local area suggests that its Anglo Catholic orientation is not particularly relevant. Locality seems to be central for some communities, which may be coupled with the building itself and the nature of the community formed. Certainly, for some churches the material dimension and organizational practices are key to recruiting worshippers and creating a sense of community around religion. This is evident in St Etheldreda, which attracts people largely through the nature of the building itself, and the Guardian Angels, which unites a unique space and set of community practices. By and large, communities in areas with very little in the way of a local residential community to draw on inevitably have smaller and more transient congregations, drawing principally on the highly mobile, frequently changing population of workers for their worshippers. However, even these churches manage to find a way to carry out their work and to generate communities of one kind or another, by shaping their environments, social and material, and deploying an array of creative practices to encourage participation in and attachment to their ministry. This is the case for St Etheldreda and St Andrew, and Sandy's Row. Equally, it is worth noting that the effectiveness of these communities in generating attachment cannot be measured straightforwardly in numbers. Although there were some communities which expressed concern over their small size and the potential it had for the future, we also encountered very small communities with a very tight knit group with very strong attachment to the community, which rendered it durable despite the small numbers.

The social dimensions of the religious experience were often complementary to religious aspects and represent a strategy of ensuring the cohesiveness of the congregation. For some communities, such as St Peter's Italian Church, St Paul, Holy Redeemer, or the East London Mosque, the function performed by the religious community clearly extended far beyond a straightforward religious one, to the extent that it would be easy to ascribe it great significance in maintaining attachment. In these places the religious community is actively involved in generating community cohesion and giving a profile to the faith, the community or the area that extends far beyond its immediate locale.

In this context an increasing 'professionalization' of faith was also observed, such as City Temple's focus on training with intern programmes and links with local business at this site where the conference centre and space of the church is used for products launches and meetings. St Andrew's Holborn also has links with Analytica Consultants and is involved, like many other communities, in significant charitable work. East London Mosque manages to fund its substantial community work through its fee paying schools and through letting out commercial premises on its site.

Our research into the formation of religious communities has revealed a plethora of complex and differentiated processes. These communities have been active in developing sophisticated and multi-layered strategies for generating and maintaining attachment and fulfilling their ministry. Ultimately, we found that the mechanisms devised to practice faith, spread the word and form attachment between worshippers and their community, extended far beyond matters of identity or even religious belief: those religious groups that were able to assemble durable communities did so by forming an assemblage that was at once theological, liturgical, material, organisational and social.

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<sup>i</sup> Clearly their basic assumption that the ‘traditional religions’ operated in a context that was small, rural and based around a link between church and state is fundamentally problematic: whatever their origins, it is difficult to comprehend the history of Islam and Christianity, which spread themselves across an entire globe of different cultures, nations and states, including cities large and small, persisting over many hundreds of years, on these terms. However, setting this aside, we think that this collection does raise an interesting question about the impact of urban expansion and transformation on traditional religious communities in the contemporary city.

<sup>ii</sup> The interviews were carried out in November and December 2009 and July 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> See [www.stetheldreda.com/news](http://www.stetheldreda.com/news) 15 March 2011.

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