Afterword: Religion in Public Institutions. Methodological Challenges, Institutional Comparisons, and Key Variables

Abstract:

This aAfterword offers some reflections on the methodological challenges of conducting research in public institutions, especially prisons and hospitals. I consider the need to take an interdisciplinary approach and to properly involve stakeholders. The second part of the discussion considers the practical implications of being a researcher in an institution, including access, self-presentation, and reflexivity. Towards the end of the article, attention is paid to the way in which public institutions enable us to see new religious discourses in microcosm.

Keywords: qualitative research; methodology; prisons; hospitals; institutions; religion; public

1. Introduction

The rapid growth in the religious diversity of European societies in recent decades provides not only a political, religious, and social challenge, but also an important catalyst and opportunity for serious academic reflection about religion in public institutions, and the means by which research can be conducted. If we are to understand the ways in which religion is accommodated (or not) in prisons or hospitals across different European societies, this will necessarily require the development of methodological proficiency and the cultivation of skilled researchers who can become effective navigators of the constraints that are inevitably posed by conducting research in 'inhospitable' settings. Not only this, as the articles in this special edition of the journal indicate, the very category 'religion'—as it is constructed, negotiated, contested, and practiced in public institutions—carries the complex interpretations of numerous and variously positioned actors and stakeholders in ways that are often unique on

account of the particular institutional context. This makes the study of religion in public institutions intellectually and theoretically challenging, as well as methodologically and practically complex as a sphere of research activity. Whether 'religion' in public institutions is seen to be increasing or decreasing, changing or diversifying depends upon a definition of 'religion,' and... where any consensus about the proper definition of the word is likely to be elusive. Assumptions that may prevail in public life and discourse that religion is a 'private' matter are shattered within the confines of a public institution that is required to facilitate religious (and spiritual) provision for clients (who may not always be the prisoner or patient, soldier or student) on behalf of the state.

If we map the development of social scientific research about chaplaincy and religious diversity in public institutions, it is virtually impossible to find any major studies pre-dating the work conducted by James Beckford and myself in the mid-1990s, so I take the year 1994—the year that we started our research—as a convenient point in time from which to measure subsequent developments.[1] In light of this, we are still in the relatively early days of the development of a new, but arguably very important field of research that is significant in its own right, but also because some of the answers that are derived from questions about the accommodation of religious groups in public institutions, may have far larger implications for the place of religious minorities in society overall.

Additionally, the study of religion in public institutions can illuminate internal developments and the scope for entrepreneurialism *within* faith communities and by religious actors. As I argue below, the involvement of Muslims in chaplaincy has been a catalyst for pastoral and religious reflection and innovation within the Islamic tradition, while the paper on 'blurred religion' in Sweden illustrates the *inter-religious* possibilities offered by the practice

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[1] See James Beckford & Sophie Gilliat, *Religion in Prison: Equal Rites in a Multi-Faith Society* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998).

of religion in public institutions. For instance, as in the case of Muslim parents seeking support from the Jewish community in relation to circumcision suggest, these individuals may never meet beyond the hospital premises. Meanwhile, Julia Martínez-Ariño & Mar Griera, in this volume, point to the way in which chaplains can acquire greater institutional legitimacy by taking advantage of opportunities to widen their sphere of influence and action, most notably by acting as 'religious advisers' to the institution. As a 'field' of religious activity, chaplaincy is far from static, and offers possibilities within and beyond the usual boundaries of the faith tradition, all of which expand our understanding of what 'religion in public institutions' might entail. This is suggestive of a need for both 'bottom up' research methods that examine religious action on the ground, as well as 'top down' approaches that critically evaluate policies, regulations, and administrative arrangements that shape religion in public institutions. The meeting point of these methodological approaches, the actual practice of religion in a public institutions and the practical interpretation of regulatory documents—that is, the meeting point of these methodological approaches—become important sites for mapping the varied meanings that 'religion in public institutions' may have.

There has been a clear growth of sociological research about religion and the accommodation of religious minorities in different Western and European societies over the last decade. The collection of articles in this special edition of the journal is indicative of the fact that there is now a sufficient critical mass of researchers. Until the last decade or so, we have largely been working in isolation, sharing our findings at occasional workshops and conferences and mainly sharing information in relation to the experience of specific countries or particular types of public institutions. But we are now at a new point in terms of the potential for academic collaboration, the shaping of new research agendas, and the scope to undertake more comparative research that explores similarities and differences between different societies. To take a very simple example that illuminates the case for international possibilities,

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we might consider the fact that new prisoners entering establishments in the UK are asked about their religious identity, and hospitals also collect this data from new patients. Merely asking the question about religious identity at the point of entry to the institution assumes the public nature of religion. It makes the point that the state has a right to ask the question—even if the individual chooses not to answer it. From the limited research available in other European countries, there are huge variations in relation to whether (or how) the religious identity of new prisoners or hospital patients is recorded, and this variation tends to reflect broader church-state arrangements. Even if we begin asking these simple questions about religious registration, or the lack of such registration, we can begin to make international comparisons that might illuminate far broader issues.

But what are the methodological and fieldwork challenges presented by the growth of religious diversity in public institutions? The papers in this special edition, and some of my own earlier reflections on this question provide an opportunity to consider these matters in greater depth. [2] [3]

1.1. Inter-disciplinarity

The study of religion in public institutions takes place at the meso-level of society. Chaplaincies in prisons and hospitals are situated at the nexus of the private religious worlds of individuals and their spiritual needs, on the one hand, and the dynamics of society and major institutions,

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[2] Sophie Gilliat Ray, "Body works and Fieldwork: Research with British Muslim Chaplains," *Culture and Religion* 11/4 (2010), 413–432.

[3] See Sophie Gilliat-Ray, "Body-works and Fieldwork: Research with British Muslim Chaplains," *Culture and Religion* 11/4 (2010), 413–432; and Sophie Gilliat-Ray, "'Being There': The Experience of Shadowing a British Muslim Hospital Chaplain," *Qualitative Research* 11/5 (2011), 469–486.

on the other. This suggests the need for a very inter-disciplinary approach to research, probably involving a team who can bring anthropological, sociological, and theological perspectives together. The study of religion in public institutions warrants the collective expertise of scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, in order for us to fully appreciate the complexity of religion as it is manifested, practiced, negotiated, and contested in public institutions.

Unlike congregational studies, developed by sociologists of religion such as Nancy Ammerman ~~which~~ that also involves research at the meso-level of society [4], the study of religion in public institutions necessitates a broader methodological approach.[5] This is because religion is not the *raison d'etre* of the institutions in which chaplaincies operate; religious activity must be negotiated amid far more secular concerns, ~~around~~ including security and counter-terrorism, health and hygiene, educational excellence, military effectiveness, and so on. This means that we need to have some familiarity with a broader range of fields, the interests of a larger constituency of stakeholders, alongside an understanding of the sociology of organisations and institutions. In other words, we need access to a broader linguistic and conceptual toolkit, derived from a range of academic disciplines, if we are to understand the ways in which religious discourses intersect with and are translated into the discourses that circulate in different kinds of public institution.

1.2. Emergence of New Disciplines

Staying with the theme of disciplinary approaches, the research on the evolution of Muslim chaplaincy in Britain based at Cardiff University indicate~~sd~~ that a new field of Islamic pastoral

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[4] ~~Nancy Ammerman et al. (eds.), *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).~~

[5] Nancy Ammerman et al. (eds.), *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

theology is perhaps slowly beginning to emerge, at least in the UK.[6] For example, the practice of chaplaincy is giving some of the more able Muslim imams in Britain an opportunity to think beyond the theological binaries of halal-haram, and to forge an approach to their work that takes account of the prevailing ideologies within public institutions, with which they have to take into account. I am thinking here of policies around equality and diversity, individualised approaches to patient care or prisoner reform, respect for people of all faiths and none, and so on. Even if Muslim chaplains continue to hold conservative views about matters of religion, they are nevertheless usually 'playing by the rules of the game' in public institutions and this is significant both theologically and politically.

These kinds of developments are placing new demands on Muslim chaplains, as their client group begins to seek a more nuanced and contextually relevant form of Islamic pastoral care. While there is evidence that some Muslim chaplains in Britain are able to meet these demands, Farhad Khosrokhavar did not find the same capability in his recent study of Muslim chaplains in France. He notes that imams are unable to meet the need of Muslim prisoners for a more "personalised approach towards religion" that takes full account of their need to find "peace of mind" and relief from mental stress and anxiety.[7] He notes that unlike prisoners from any other religious group, Muslim prisoners often have not only personal religious requirements, but also a broader concern with the social and political wellbeing of their brothers and the ummah more generally—in Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and so on. A Europe-wide study might help us to establish whether these developments in France and the UK are isolated exceptions, or indicative of broader trends among both clients and chaplains.

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[6] Sophie Gilliat-Ray, Mansur Ali, & Stephen Pattison, *Understanding Muslim Chaplaincy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013).

[7] Farhad Khosrokhavar, "The Constrained Role of the Muslim Chaplain in French Prisons," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28/1 (2014), 67–82.

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1.3. Involving Stakeholders: Practitioners

If there is indeed an emergent Islamic pastoral theology, then a clear methodological implication of this is the need to involve practitioners in our research design and data collection as ~~far~~ much as possible. At least in the UK, the inclusion of Muslim chaplains in public institutions is demonstrating the new agency of Muslims and other religious minorities in re-shaping the public sphere~~,~~ and points to the emergence of an evolving European culture that now takes far greater account of religion in public life. Despite controversy and contests, the challenging of taken-for-granted assumptions can be viewed as entirely necessary and healthy for democratic and inclusive societies as they take account of changing populations and religious demography. The implication of this new involvement of religious minorities in public institutions and civil society~~,~~ is their necessary inclusion in our research, ~~in order~~so that we ~~take~~ account ~~of~~for their increasing agency in public life.

1.4. Involving Stakeholders: Staff

As Irene Becci ~~has noted~~notes in her paper, chaplaincy is only one dimension of 'religion' in a prison or hospital. For example, the increasing presence of Muslims in British prisons means that the functioning of the entire institution must now take greater account of Islamic practices, from the timing of the regime and the material culture of the prison (i.e.~~.~~ what religious artefacts prisoners are allowed to have or not have) to the structuring and allocation of spaces for worship or other religious activity, staff training requirements, and for menus and catering provision. Where chaplaincy might have once been the focus for religion in public institutions, religion is

now increasingly evident across all aspects of operational functioning, especially in prisons and hospitals.

~~Talking~~ Speaking of staff, much of the most developed research about religion in public institutions has so far focussed upon the clients~~,~~ and the effectiveness of chaplaincy interventions in relation to healing and well-being, reduction in re-offending, and so on. I am thinking in particular of the extensive US-based research reflected in healthcare chaplaincy journals. Besides the obvious difficulties of trying to place quantitative measures around relational and spiritual activity, much of this research (including in the field of hospital chaplaincy) leaves aside important questions about the impact of chaplains on institutional staff~~,~~ and the way in which they derive support from the work of chaplains. If we accept that religion increasingly involves all staff (not just chaplains) and that staff in most, if not all~~,~~ roles~~,~~ now carry some responsibility for the facilitation of religious needs in one way or another, then there is probably an emerging research agenda in relation to their role~~,~~ and their concerns and views. ~~In France, as Claire de Galembert shows in her article in this special issue, staff play a crucial role in mediating the implementation of the principle of 'laïcité' in penitentiary establishments. The research conducted by Claire de Galembert—together with Béraud and Rostaing—examines how staff perceive, manage and negotiate religious issues in eight penitentiary establishments. The authors stress the wide discretion enjoyed by staff in managing religion and the heterogeneity among prisons regarding this issue.~~ In the UK, religious belief is now incorporated into equalities legislation and has emerged as a significant category of difference that requires a new awareness and consciousness by staff—they cannot be 'passive' about it anymore. And because religion shapes the life of public institutions to a greater extent now, there are arguably more stakeholders involved in negotiations about religious issues. These include clients, faith communities, politicians, managers, the wider public, and so on. As researchers we are becoming minor players in a far more populous game.

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When talking about staff, it is also important to consider that institution-specific professional cultures have a major role in shaping ~~the~~ a given institution's approach towards religion. ~~The article by Valeria Fabretti included in this special issue, which focuses on schools and prisons, shows the importance of taking this factor into account in order to better understand the differences and similarities between various institutions.~~

2. Fieldwork Challenges in Relation to Religion in Public Institutions

When we undertake fieldwork, we find ourselves not only as 'guests' but also as people who are role-less in relation to the business of the institution. Public institutions, and especially prisons, are perhaps becoming less and less accessible to people who have no particular need to be in them. The increasing bureaucracy bound up with public institutions—reflecting concerns about human rights, confidentiality, security, and so on—means that those of us who have a track-record as researchers in this field and who have acquired trusting relationships with gatekeepers, perhaps have an obligation to carry on with our efforts! So here is a paradox. On the one hand, we face increasing obstacles in relation to our research in public institutions in the form of more stringent ethical approval processes involving committees within and beyond our universities, counter-terrorism clearance, and so on, and yet, on the other hand, public institutions are subject to increasing scrutiny by the media, policy-makers, and by the public for transparency about their efficiency. In the UK, there are regular TV documentaries about the so-called 'radicalisation' of Muslim prisoners, and hospitals are not immune from interrogation about their hygiene standards and competence in managing infections and super-bugs. As researchers, we must manage the paradox of increasing bureaucracy and the challenges of access, alongside the intensive debate and public scrutiny that surround

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institutions more widely. Our research about 'religion' in public institutions takes place against this contextual background and changing currents of policy.

At some point, we have to make decisions about what kind of fieldwork role to take up, and how to make ourselves 'fit in.'. In some public institutions we are immediately and obviously 'out of place' by not wearing a uniform, carrying keys, or having other accoutrements that explain our presence. We are likely to be conspicuous, and, consequently, the people with whom we interact will be trying to 'place us' and account for our presence in ways that are meaningful to them, in order to establish the terms upon which to engage with us. This means that we may need to have various narratives and descriptions of our project to on hand that we can adjust according to the audience, whether clients, managers, chaplains, or visitors, and so on.

Having achieved access, the consequence of our precarious role-less situation is the need to become more attentive to matters of reflexivity. For example, the way in which people interpret our presence and ascribe meaning to it can say as much about them as it does about ourselves. The degree to which we can move freely around an institution may be directly related to the agency and freedom of the chaplains with whom we may be shadowing. Sso, although mapping the trajectory of our movements around an institution may initially appear rather mundane, in due course it may take on an important significance. A good example of this need to map the way in which we may be 'moved around' an institution like pieces on a chess board—either willingly or unwillingly—arose from the Cardiff University Muslim chaplaincy project. Mansur Ali, one of the members of the research team, is not only an academic in his own right with a PhD in Islamic Studies, but is also a qualified imam, having graduated from one of the Islamic seminaries in Britain. When he went to undertake 'shadowing' of a prison chaplain over a period of a few days, on the last day in the institution he was asked to lead the Friday prayers and to deliver the sermon. He was immediately faced with the tension between

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his academic and his religious identity, and, by agreeing to the request, was immediately moved from being the 'observer' to the 'observed.'. Although this was not a comfortable transition, it was illuminating for him to experience the challenges faced by the regular prison imam on a weekly basis, as he tries to deliver a sermon that is relevant and uplifting to incarcerated Muslim prisoners.

These thoughts about reflexivity suggest that not everyone may be a good researcher of religion in public institutions, or able to manage the stresses that inevitably arise from continual exposure to matters of life, death, serious crime, or fears for personal security. Doing research in public institutions is intensive emotional work (if done well). Spending time with chaplains in prisons or hospitals is inevitably going to mean bearing witness to tears and pain. But for those who feel able to manage the stresses of doing fieldwork in such settings, the emotional responses within ourselves as we witness them in others may turn out to be illuminating to the subject of the study, and, thus, another potential source of data.

3. **Conclusion: The Significance of Research about Religion in Public Institutions**

The study of religion in public institutions is arguably an ideal context for mapping the evolution of new religious discourses, because of the way in which it is possible to see far larger issues in microcosm. Chaplaincy can be considered in some senses as a 'laboratory' for identifying broader religious trends, and, perhaps, predicting future changes. In a recent special issue of the journal *Qualitative Inquiry*, which was devoted to discussion of research and especially ethnography in prisons, Rod Earle cites Loic Wacquant's recommendation that we recognise the prison as a "*template* or vector of broader social forces, political nexi, and cultural

processes that traverse its walls."[8] or to put it another way, "prisons and jails are an early warning system for society […] they constitute the canary in the coalmine, providing an omen of mortal danger that often lies beyond our capacity to perceive."[9] This may be phrased rather strongly, but these quotes highlight the significance of research about religion in public institutions for policy makers and academics, in terms of the trends that may be observed and predicted in relation to religion in the public sphere more broadly.

I think we can safely say that doing research about religion in public institutions is not for the feint-hearted. As researchers, we have to work with the fact that our presence disrupts the flow of normal institutional routines and functioning, but also demands attention to the ways in which we craft a researcher identity as we cross the threshold of the institution. Which parts of identity do we obscure or leave behind? And how is our own religious or spiritual identity challenged by fieldwork? We will each have our own answers to these questions, but I hope that posing them is helpful for thinking about the necessary intersection of the personal, methodological, disciplinary, and practical challenges of doing research about religion in public institutions.

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[8] Rod Earle, "Insider and Out: Making Sense of a Prison Experience and a Research Experience," *Qualitative Inquiry* 20/4 (2014), 429–438, citing Lois Wacquant, "The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography," *Ethnography* 3/2 (2002), 371–397, at 386.

[9] See, respectively, Rod Earle, "Insider and Out: Making Sense of a Prison Experience and a Research Experience," *Qualitative Inquiry* 20/4 (2014), 429–438, citing Lois Wacquant, "The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography," *Ethnography* 3/2 (2002), 371–397, at 386 and Earle, "Insider and Out," citing Sharon Shalev, *Supermax: Controlling Risk Through Solitary Confinement* (Cullompton: Willan, 2009), 28.

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