

INTERVIEW WITH ANTHROPOLOGIST SIMON COLEMAN

by **Marijana Belaj**

Simon Coleman is currently working as a Chancellor Jackman Professor at the University of Toronto, Department for the Study of Religion. Before this he worked as a Full Professor at the Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex and as a Reader at the Department of Anthropology, University of Durham. Among other awards, in 2012 he was listed as one of the three most-influential Religion researchers in Canada (*Globe and Mail*, March 27, derived from Hirsch-Index Benchmarking of Academic Research). In the same year his paper 'Prosperity Unbound? Debating the "Sacrificial Economy"', *Research in Economic Anthropology* (2011, 31: 23–45) was chosen as Outstanding Author Contribution Award Winner at the Emerald Literati Network Awards for Excellence.

During most of his career he has focused on the study of various forms of Christianity. His earliest project, begun in the 1980s, examined the emergence of new forms of Prosperity-oriented charismatic (neo-Pentecostal) Christianity in Sweden. He was originally interested in the national controversies surrounding such developments, but later began to analyse them through the analytical frame of religious globalization. Some of this work was published in his book *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (2000; pbk 2007; Cambridge University Press). Subsequently, he has developed projects on pilgrimage, such as his ongoing work on the English shrine of Walsingham. During the early 2000s, he worked on a collaborative research programme based at the University of Durham examining the role of hospital chaplains in the north of England, and also with Katrin Maier at Sussex University on a project studying the global spread of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, in particular, its presence in London as a Nigerian diasporic denomination. Currently, he is working with colleagues in history and sociology in an interdisciplinary project, sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK, called 'Pilgrimage and England's Cathedrals: Past and Present'. Currently, he is also a co-editor of the journal *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* and co-editor of the book series *Asgate Studies in Pilgrimage*.¹

In this interview Simon Coleman talks about religion and religiosity today, particularly about the concepts of spiritual marketplace, religious pluralism and spiritual revolution. He also talks about his fascinations with contemporary religiosity and about challenges, blind spots, ethical issues and research directions in the anthropological study of religion today.

How does your research respond to the question about why people need religion today and what kind of religion do they need?

I think the question of identifying 'need' is an interesting but problematic one in relation to religion. I have worked on very different kinds of Christianity in my career, ranging from apparently deeply committed Pentecostals to pious Roman Catholic pilgrims to disillusioned Anglicans. From an anthropological point of view, I'm not sure that applying any single or simple anthropological model of 'need' would have been appropriate

¹ Full bibliography in the attached CV is at <http://religion.utoronto.ca/people/faculty/simon-coleman/>.

for any of these groups of Christians. As a concept, it does not highlight the very mixed motivations and frequent ambivalence behind participation in the kind of religious action I have studied. I would prefer to think of this question as pointing me toward reflections on where and how religion appears to play a role in the lives of the people I have studied, as they wrestle with numerous issues in their lives.

In these terms, I want to emphasize two dimensions of religious practice that have stood out for me. Through my work on Prosperity Christians in Sweden and the Nigerian diaspora in London, I have been fascinated by the links between religious engagement and processes of what I call 'reaching out' – manifested in prayers, gifts, forms of mission, travel, preaching, and so on – all of which involve a sense of projecting the self into and over the world at large. Such 'reaching out' thus consists of ritualized and imagined ways in which believers understand themselves to be going beyond normal barriers of expectation and etiquette in their interactions with each other and with non-believers. It refers to how believers can perceive themselves as relevant to, and capable of having an influence on, all areas of life, ranging from personal relationships to success at work. Furthermore, I see such 'reaching out' less as a reflection of already-existing and stable religious commitment, but rather a way constantly to reinforce it.

Let me contrast that kind of religious experience – which responds to processes of globalization that have helped to form much of contemporary charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity – with the kinds of engagements I have found among many visitors to the Anglican and Roman Catholic shrines of Walsingham. A large proportion of such visitors see themselves as non-believers or as lapsed Christians, and yet – sometimes even unwillingly – they may find themselves drawn into the rituals on offer. I characterize such engagement as involving forms of semiotic and experiential *risk*. It seems to me that such risk is more common than we think in contexts of secularization: the aesthetic and emotional power of religious and ritual forms may provoke feelings of ambivalent – or what I call 'lateral', sideways – participation that we have not yet examined very much in anthropology.

What does it mean to be religious today and in what ways religion permeates everyday life? In particular, what does it mean to be a Christian today, in what dimensions of life and where we can find Christian religiosity?

From the standpoint of much Western analysis of religion, it seems that religion has made something of a 'comeback' in recent decades in the form of numerous varieties of fundamentalism as well as looser, more diffuse forms of spirituality such as the New Age. However, it would be equally valid to say that, in many if not most parts of the world, religion never went away. What we are seeing is that religion coming from the global South is increasingly seen as normative rather than peripheral. At the moment, these developments are being played out fascinatingly in a religious context that increasingly interests me: the worldwide Anglican Church. This Church may locate its ostensible ritual and administrative centre in the United Kingdom, as mediated through the Archbishop of Canterbury, but current debates over gender and authority, the meanings of religious orthodoxy, and the power to define and reproduce the Church, indicate that voices from other parts of the world are helping to remake the post-colonial Anglican communion.

One of things that the current state of worldwide Anglicanism reveals is the increased relativization of faiths in national contexts such as Britain or indeed Canada. I am struck by the fact that the multi-faith centre is one of the most distinctive religious organizations to have emerged in these countries over the past few decades. These are institutions often

engaged in something different to conventional ecumenism or dialogue, since they encourage forms of physical and material co-presence and complex mutual accommodation.

According to your research, what could you say about religion itself: what is religion from the perspective of believers today, what makes religion (or some of its aspects) attractive, what does religion do and offer to believers? Could you demonstrate how does religion (Christianity in particular) respond to the contemporary problems of the modern world?

I sometimes teach a course to final-year undergraduates to Toronto aimed at asking them, at this late stage of their degrees, to re-examine what they understand by religion. I call the course *Constructing Religion* because I want them to think about how the ways in which we define religion will have profound impacts on what we consider religion can 'do', as well as what methodological tools we consider appropriate for our work. Overall, I do not think that we can consider religion to be a 'natural category' in any simple way.

This issue of identifying religion is obviously one that scholars of religion have to deal with as they consider their own writing, but it also emerges as they try to understand how their informants think about what 'religion' is. Let me give a brief example of the ethical and intellectual dilemmas that can result from such complications: many of the Swedish charismatics whom I studied would be regarded as deeply religious – indeed excessively religious and very conservative – by others in the country. However, these 'believers' (another problematic word) would probably deny that they are at all 'religious'. This is because the term religion to them implies an overly standardized, institutionalized, self-conscious faith. Instead, they call themselves 'Christians' or 'believers', to indicate their alienation from what they see as conventional, or externally imposed, understandings of religion. What should the analyst do under such circumstances? I don't think our job is simply to accept the definitions of religion or belief of those whom we study; but our use of the word will have political as well as epistemological implications, of which we must try to be aware.

Let me say something else about such believers in Sweden. What strikes me about their engagement in religion, their forms of 'reaching out' as I have described it above, is that it is certainly not a harking back to an old-fashioned, nostalgic faith as a simple response to modernity. Rather, it is a loose framework – intellectual, emotional, embodied – exploring and remaking what it might mean to be Christian in a world of ideological and material flux. So contrary to outsiders' understandings of how such Christians believe, it is not about inserting people into firm and entirely insulated religious conviction: religious engagement has to be made and remade constantly.

What changes does the spiritual marketplace and religious pluralism introduce to the contemporary understanding of the term religion?

The notion of the marketplace has a clear rhetorical function in scholarship on religion: it promotes the idea that religions 'naturally' compete with each other under conditions that encourage them to appeal to individual, sovereign, religious consumers; it suggests that such consumers operate under conditions of free choice; and it provides an all-pervasive economic metaphor to explain the ways in which many contemporary people approach religions. Thus a client-based model replaces one based on ascribed identity or location.

This idea of the marketplace does help to capture something of the flexibility and mobility of certain forms of religion, but it encourages us to see religious adherence as free-floating rather than – as with any social practice – often also rooted in and mediated by family, territory, culture, and so on. I think that the notion of the marketplace has been

particularly problematic in the way it has influenced the way we have thought about, and analysed, New Age spirituality as a set of non-rooted practices and ideas.

The spiritual marketplace as I have described it has clear resonances with the way we think about pluralism: the market after all depends on ideas of a plurality of goods and services that are put on offer. But, like the market, a simple notion of pluralism can make the mistake of assuming that all religions are somehow equal, equivalent and autonomous actors in a world of infinite variety and choice. Religious phenomena clearly still differ in their relationships to the state, access to resources, modes of self-organization and reproduction, levels of prestige in different contexts, and so on.

Is it legitimate to describe spirituality today in terms of a spiritual revolution and why?

Spirituality is often contrasted with the word religion, as in the phrase “I’m not religious, I’m spiritual”. It thus contains within it the seeds of protest and alienation that may help to foment revolution. In this sense, the notion of spirituality has curious parallels with the attitudes of Pentecostals that I described above: both involve a revolt against form that is also rather Protestant in attitude (a kind of permanent reformation). However, surely the existence of so many varieties of spirituality indicates that we cannot talk of a *single* transformation? In addition, and relatedly, the notion of revolution implies a unified, relatively goal-directed phenomenon, which I think is too neat as a description of multiple current forms of alienation from conventional forms of religion. Where the notion of the spiritual is perhaps more helpful is in encouraging us to take popular, inchoate, diffuse forms of quasi-religious behaviour seriously, and not to see it as merely another form of secularization or debased religion.

How do you explain the rise of religiosity and the rise in the number of religious communities?

As I’ve suggested, I’m not sure that religiosity ever went away: it all depends on which part of the world you focus on: Africa is hardly the same as Europe in this sense. But I shall respond to this question from a slightly quirky, more focused perspective on one religious ‘community’ that I have studied. I chose in the 1980s to study Pentecostalism in Sweden, supposedly the most secularized country in the world, partly because I wanted to see how such firm expression of religious adherence worked in a context that seemed deeply unpromising. Through that research I came upon the Word of Life ministry, based in Uppsala, which at one point claimed to run the largest Bible school in Europe. How could such a school exist in Sweden, of all places, and how could the Word of Life more generally appear to thrive under such conditions? There are many factors one could mention, but one was the way in which the Word of Life managed to create an environment for its activities that included but also went beyond Sweden: its congregation was complemented by attracting people from around the world to its Bible school and university, but also by forms of mission and congregation-building elsewhere, for instance in Eastern Europe. At the same time, participation in Word of Life activities in Sweden and elsewhere has not always implied exclusive membership in the ministry: many people have engaged with the group but kept religious affiliations elsewhere. So my overall point here is that a group such as the Word of Life has managed to persist in part because it is not a single ‘group’ as such, and nor is it confined to a particular part of the world, even though it is so closely associated with Sweden. It represents a multi-sited, multi-functional form of organization that confounds simple descriptions as a church, denomination, corporation, and so on. Such flexibility has allowed the group to flourish even in apparently unpromising ‘national’ circumstances.

When we talk about the so-called new forms of religiosity (e.g. new age or NRM²) to what, if any, extent are they truly new? What is new in them?

The word 'new' tends to date very quickly! As far as I can see, many New Age practitioners have themselves used the term 'new' to describe a dawning shift of consciousness, even though they have also referred to what they see as ancient sources of 'wisdom'. On the other hand, NRM is a term generated by the academy itself to describe an array of movements, many of which – among other things – have reflected the ability of a younger generation of people, often affluent, to experiment with religious and spiritual styles.

What, if anything, fascinates you in contemporary religiosity?

One of the aspects of contemporary religiosity that is not discussed enough is its persistence in informal, fragmented, unofficial ways, though of course we do have such terms as folk, implicit, lived etc. religion. I am most interested in how to think about *ritual* in these terms. As anthropologists we still focus most of our attention on what appear to be central, core, ritual forms. It is not surprising that as researchers we gravitate towards seemingly coherent ritual events that have their own integrity and logic. So ritual's role as distiller of culture, marked by what we assume to be its reproducibility and intensification of focus, is still evident in much of what we write. But I also want to explore the potentialities of what happens when we direct our gaze towards occasions when ritualized qualities of action are much more inchoate, perhaps not even understood by some informants *as* ritual. Or when ritual articulations are re- or disarticulated through ignorance, incompetence or indifference displayed by participants. My interest also extends into how we might deal with the disengaged 'participant', and with what in some situations might be defined as boredom or alienation. Of course I am creating something of a catch-all category here, but the basic point is to try to draw attention away from the focus on so-called ritual cores. My work on Walsingham, hospital chaplaincies and cathedrals all contains elements of this search for the inchoate and the fragmented in religion.

What is the real research challenge in the study of religion today and what are the blind spots?

I have hinted at one of the blind spots that I am personally concerned with: the persistence of liberal forms of Protestantism, which has received hardly any attention at all by anthropologists, in part because of the emphasis by many scholars (including myself) on the spread of global Pentecostalism. While the latter is important, we need to be careful not to simply adopt the triumphalist, world-conquering rhetoric of many Pentecostals themselves in assessing the impact and spread of this form of Christianity. Thus, 'reaching out' as I describe it is a stance, an orientation, towards the world at large: it does not necessarily imply that Pentecostals are indeed converting all whom they encounter.

More generally, it is frustrating that cognitivist and social constructivist approaches to religion persist in mutual comprehension, bolstered by the deployment of analytical languages that deny the possibility of dialogue.

What issues of anthropological research of religion can be detected as the most challenging in ethical terms?

Of course I could respond to this question by referring to the numerous moral dilemmas we face in carrying out, and writing up, our work in ways that do justice to our 'informants'. Those are certainly important to consider. I want to emphasize a slightly different

² New religious movements.

kind of challenge, however. How do we think of the anthropological study of religion as an ethical practice in itself, with significance for the way we live our own lives within and beyond the academic world? And should we consider the ways in which what we teach about religion may also have ethical as well as intellectual implications for our students? What kinds of responsibility do we have to ensure that wider publics are reached by our work? The high profile of religion in many parts of the world gives us an opportunity to reach many and varied audiences, and this is both an ethical and a practical challenge in itself – especially for a discipline that has tended to revel in its own obscurity, at least in the West.

What direction is your own research moving towards?

I have never wanted to abandon any fieldsite after I have worked in it, and so I still keep an eye on all of the places I have worked! In this way, one not only gains a long-term view of any given site, but different projects may start to speak to each other in productive ways. Thus the Walsingham fieldwork has always been in dialogue with the work on Pentecostalism in my mind, allowing for comparative reflections on such issues as religious mobility, materiality and aesthetics. More obviously, I started the work on the Redeemed Christian Church of God in order to gain another perspective on what might be thought of as the global, or at least transnational, landscape of Prosperity ministries and congregations – a landscape that I first glimpsed through working on the Word of Life.

My most immediate and current fieldwork, however, examines a space for religious practice that has rarely been studied by anthropologists: cathedrals. I am working with historians and other ethnographers in ‘multi-cathedral’ fieldwork across four different sites in England (Canterbury, Durham, York and Westminster). An aspect of this work that I find exciting is that it allows me to observe cathedrals as sites of religious practice that are also deeply engaged in and with urban spaces. Part of the challenge becomes how to see such spaces through analytical lenses that can, for instance, combine anthropological analysis of ritual with the insights of urban geographers on spatial practices.

What direction do you see or would like to see anthropology of religion moving towards?

I will emphasize just one further point here. I think the anthropology of religion always needs to remind itself that its primary object is humanity, rather than religion per se. In other words, religion (however defined and demarcated) happens to be the particular means through which we try to understand how humans live and have lived.