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Article Title: Home Shrines in Britain and Associated Spiritual Values

Year of publication: 2010

Link to published article:

<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/13617672.asp>

Publisher statement: 'This is an electronic version of an article published in Thanissaro, P. N., (2010). Home Shrines in Britain and Associated Spiritual Values. Journal of Beliefs & Values, Vol. 33(1), pp. 355-360. The Journal of Beliefs & Values is available online at:<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/13617672.asp>

Home Shrines in Britain and Associated Spiritual Values

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Mandy Robbins (Senior Research Fellow at Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit) who supervised the original research. Special thanks are also due to Revd. Prof. Leslie J. Francis for encouraging the present author to publish his dissertation findings.

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Abstract

In a quantitative survey of religious attitudes and practices in a multi-religious sample of 369 school pupils aged between 13 and 15 in London, the presence of a home shrine was found widespread in 11% of adolescents spanning several religious affiliations and ethnicities – especially Buddhists, Hindus and those of Indian, Chinese and ‘Other Asian’ ethnicity. Having a home shrine correlated significantly with spiritual attitudes such as agreement with filial piety, the Eightfold Path, subjectivity of happiness, meditation, Sikh festivals, reincarnation and opening Gurdwaras to all. It is suggested that teachers and the social services should be aware of the importance of shrines to many religious communities and recognize their potential as a spiritual asset and manifestation of religion outside the congregational place of worship. (124 words)

Keywords

home shrines, adolescents, spiritual attitudes

Introduction

A home shrine is usually a raised cabinet or shelf which houses religious artefacts – in some cases taking up the entire room of a house. Hindu shrines have been described for their potential to remind their owners of the vernacular heritage of an ethnic membership group (Tolia-Kelly 2004, 317). A shrine as a place of residence for family gods and used as a place for *puja* was found in 85% of a sample of American Hindu homes (Williams 1988). Buddhist shrines have previously been described in the American-Vietnamese community as the location where families may witness weddings, anniversaries of death, baptisms and New Year celebrations (Huynh 2000, 168). In Britain it has been described how tending a home shrine is an important part of a Buddhist child's informal nurture (Thanissaro 2011). No figures have previously been attached to the prevalence of shrines in the households of those of different (non-Hindu) religions or to the various ethnic membership groups present in Britain. Furthermore, the assumption that home shrines are a cultural accretion of religious tradition has never been quantitatively verified. Against this background, the brief of the present study was to quantify the presence of home shrines across religions and ethnicities in a sample of UK adolescents and examine the association between having a shrine at home and attitudes to a selection of spiritual values to explore how having a shrine at home affects the different adolescent spheres of religious life.

Method

Sample

Research was undertaken upon a convenience sample of 369 young people – 237 boys and 132 girls – aged between 13 and 15 years attending London schools. Ethnically the sample consisted of 150 whites (41%), 103 blacks (30%), 58 Asians (16%), 41 of mixed race (11%) and 7 Chinese (2%). The religious composition of the sample was 149 Christians (41%), 120 of no religion (33%), 45 Moslems (12%), 17 Hindus (5%), 15 Buddhists (4%), 5 Sikhs (1%), 3 Jews (1%) and 13 of other religions (4%).

Instrument

A multi-purpose survey dubbed 'PNTQ-RCBS-EN' (detail of the survey can be found in Thanissaro 2010, 184-191) was deployed as part of a wider research project. The survey contained biographical questions adapted from Francis's (2001) adolescent values inventory and 91 Likert five-point scale (strongly agree – agree – not certain – disagree – disagree strongly) attitude questions focussed on Religious Education, Buddhist and Sikh values adapted from previous qualitative and quantitative adolescent attitudes research in the UK (Kay 1996; Lewis and Francis 1996; Nesbitt 2000; Kay and Smith 2002; Thanissaro 2011).

Procedure & Analysis

Three schools volunteered their participation in response to a circular letter from their local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education. Surveys were delivered to participating schools in the quantities they required and administered to pupils by Year 9 and 10 teachers under examination conditions in their regular RE classes in the period January and February 2010. In keeping with constraints of ethical approval non-consenting pupils had the option of destroying their questionnaires after completion instead of submitting them and completed surveys were kept anonymous to protect participants from having their views traced back to them. The resulting dataset was analyzed by means of the SPSS statistical package (SPSS_Inc. 1988) using the frequency, correlation and partial correlation routines.

Results

How common were shrines?

Religion	% with shrine
Asian Bangladeshi	14
Asian Indian	50
Asian Pakistani	0
Any other Asian	46
Black African	9
Black Caribbean	8
Chinese	28
Mixed	8
White	2
Average	11

As indicated in Table 1, shrines were reported to be present in over a tenth (11%) of the participants' homes. Almost half (46%) of 'Any Other' Asians (by elimination the non-Chinese of East and Southeast Asia), half the Asian Indians and over a quarter (28%) of Chinese respondents having a home shrine. For other ethnicities, the presence of a shrine at home was less common – in decreasing order of prevalence, shrines were found in 14% of Asian Bangladeshi homes, 9% of Black African homes, 8% of Black Caribbean and Mixed homes and 2% of White homes. It was only those of Asian Pakistani ethnicity who seemed to avoid having any sort of home shrine.

Religion	% with shrine
No religion	4
Buddhist	50
Christian	9
Hindu	50
Jewish	33
Muslim	6
Sikh	20

As indicated in Table 2, exactly half the Buddhists and Hindus had home shrines. Lesser numbers of shrines were found in the homes belonging to other religions with presence of shrines in little over a third of Jewish homes (35%), a fifth of Sikh homes, less than a tenth of Christian homes (9%), 6% of Muslim homes and 4% of homes claiming no religion.

Religious attitudes associated having a shrine

Table 3. Association of having a home shrine with spiritual attitudes

	% agree No Shrine	% agree Have Shrine	χ^2	p<
I find it inspiring to hear Buddhist stories	29	54	6.40	.05
I would find an old peoples' home for my parents in their old age	22	15	8.55	.05
Eightfold Path seems a good way to achieve happiness	32	63	9.12	.05
Whether we enjoy life or hate it depends on how we see the world	65	94	6.51	.05
Like how Buddhists train mind in prayer and meditation	33	59	6.24	.05
Sikh festivals are inspiring to me	16	28	6.74	.05
The Sikh festival of Diwali is very meaningful to me	10	44	17.54	.01
The Sikh custom of opening temples to everyone is good	45	79	8.51	.05
Reincarnation gives me hope	29	65	8.77	.05

Only significant Chi-squared test-scores included.

The answers of pupils to 91 attitude questions were correlated with whether they had a shrine at home. For 82 of the 91 attitude questions asked, having a shrine at home made no significant difference to answers. Results for the remaining nine questions are summarized above in Table 3. Those who had shrines were more inspired to hear Buddhist stories and thought the Eightfold Path a good way to achieve happiness. They were more likely to see enjoyment of life as subjective and were more wont to like the way Buddhists trained their mind in prayer and meditation. They were more likely to be inspired by Sikh festivals – especially Diwali. They were also more likely to agree with the Sikh custom of opening their Gurdwara to everyone and were more likely to be filled with hope by the concept of reincarnation. The only attitude where having a shrine showed a negative correlation was that of wanting to find an old peoples' home for their parents in old age – the subtext of which is that old peoples' homes were an unsatisfactory way of caring for parents in old age – and therefore it can be concluded that having a shrine at home correlates positively with an attitude of filial piety.

Discussion

Shrines are much less common in White homes than the houses of Asians and Chinese in Britain and this may lead the importance of such shrines to be overlooked by the mainstream culture of the West. Since it has been shown that these shrines are associated with positive attitude to religious questions, it would be inaccurate

henceforth to regard shrines as a purely cultural artefact. This research may also serve as a reminder to outsiders, such as teachers and social workers, to treat religious behaviours relating to shrines with due sensitivity, if not importance, to avoid undermining self-esteem of the pertinent children – in order to avoid undermining self-esteem (Jackson and Nesbitt 1993, 162, 171) or causing ‘confusion and...negativity’ (Reddy and Hanna 1998, 393). Shrines and the religious values they seem to engender should not be overlooked as a spiritual resource and asset (Hodge 2000) since such values have been demonstrated as a means to ameliorate social problems (Juthani 1998). From an educational point of view this study underlines the importance for adolescent self-esteem of acknowledging the presence of a shrine as a focus of worship in the homes of certain religions, instead of portraying religion as something that happens solely in congregational places of worship (Good and Willoughby 2006). This study extends previously published analysis of home shrines – finding shrines less numerous in the Hindu homes of Britain than they were in the United States in 1988 – but adding depth to the quantification of home shrines by extending data capture to other religions and ethnicities while matching the presence of a shrine at home with adolescents’ religious values.

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