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The Anthropology of Religious Controversy: A Masters Level Course.

Peter Collins and Yulia Egorova

Introduction: Encountering Contention and Controversy

I remember sitting in a departmental meeting, doodling, preoccupied with the image below. I had recently been involved in a research project seeking to document and explain the construction of religious/spiritual space in NHS acute hospitals in the north of England. What was becoming more and more obvious was the growing tension between the distinction that staff and patients were making between 'religion' and 'spirituality'. Although this was not especially surprising, and indeed can be understood, in principle, as a reflection of the ambient climate of religiosity in the UK -- as in many other western countries (Flanagan and Jupp (eds.) 2007; Heelas 2008; Heelas et al 2004).



Fig 1: The Hospital Chapel

In this case, the Chapel is rather typically Anglican: the pews, the pulpit, the cross, the hymn board. These are common features of the material culture of chapels in British acute hospitals. The default setting, as it were, is Anglican, not only in relation to the environment, but also in terms of staffing. The challenge posed by this form of organization derives from the number of people who work in and are treated in hospitals who are not Anglican, nor Christian, nor even 'religious'. We found that 'religious' people are perceived to be those who are

churchgoers, or more broadly, those who participate in organized religion, whether that be Christianity, Hinduism, or Islam. But the most common distinction is not between those who believe and those who do not, but between those who belong and those who do not (Davie 1994). Chaplaincy staff were keenly aware of this distinction. They often talked of spending time with those who denied 'being religious' while happily talking about praying, and believing in 'some higher power' – or some similar supernatural agency. The organization of the chapel, then, is a contentious process. On the one hand the Lead Chaplain and his (it is generally a male) team are expected to provide a space that is identifiably Christian, since many of those who use the chapel are self-defined Christians, whether Catholic or Protestant. However, on the other hand, a large proportion of users are non-religious, but most probably perceive themselves to be 'spiritual' in some sense. To ignore the needs and expectations of either category is to invite complaint and controversy. To remove those material symbols which most obviously represent Christianity (in particular) would be to upset one set of users, but to fill the space with too many such symbols would be to alienate another set.

And so we come, finally, to Figure 1 above, and to the realisation that things, as well as people, can be seen to have a social life. Just before I first visited this particular hospital chapel, a controversy had arisen relating to the organization of things in the room. The focal point of the chapel is the table-cum-pulpit visible in the centre of the photograph. This implies that the space above the pulpit is a particularly important space, since the gaze of those using the chapel will be drawn towards it. For some time, that space had been occupied by the large wooden cross, visible in the photograph to the right of the pulpit. Just a few weeks before I visited the chapel, the Lead Chaplain, after discussing the matter with colleagues, decided to move the cross and replace it with a rather striking piece of modern art. Subsequent conversations with the Lead Chaplain suggested that he had not expected the degree of angst felt by those who disagreed with this decision. Disapproval trickled in at first, from those Chaplaincy volunteers, upon whom the service largely depends. One or two suggested that moving the cross was a mistake, primarily because it seemed to relegate the most significant representation of Christianity -- and therefore Christianity itself -- to a minor position. One sadly noted that 'Now the cross has gone, we seem to be worshipping a splash of paint'. The cross had not gone, of course, it had been moved a few feet to the right. However, if the decision had simply involved repositioning the cross the result would have amounted to a reorientation of the room. To take the further step of replacing it with a piece of modern art had an entirely different effect. Leaving aside the aesthetic merits of the painting, the controversy clearly centred on the perceived diminution of 'religion'.

During conversations with the lead Chaplain, I discovered something of the tensions inherent in the job. He clearly felt the competing demands of those who felt that the religious life should be present in the modern hospital, and those who felt that while the 'spiritual' played a significant part in their lives, certainly during stressful times when they or their loved ones were sick, they had no interest in 'turning to religion' with all that involved. He reflected on the importance of encouraging as many people, both staff and patients, to use the chapel. A service that is underutilised in the brave new world of the British NHS is unlikely to survive for very long. On balance, and even as a minister within the Anglican Church, he appreciated the value of creating a place in which every visitor might feel comfortable. He was, at the same time, painfully aware of the impossibility of pleasing everybody, and set

about pacifying those ‘religious’ visitors to the chapel by pointing out that this was still a chapel, an environment which resembled in most ways, the churches in which they worshipped every Sunday: the pews, the pulpit, the hymn board and hymn books, the books of remembrance, the prayer request slips, the ready availability of Bibles, and so on and so forth. But what about the painting? Here, he argued, was a focus for spiritual reflection, a work of art in which one might lose oneself. He admitted that some visitors were left unconvinced.

Here, then, was a controversy, a religious controversy, which gave onto a number of issues central to the perception and practice of religion in contemporary Britain. We see, in this case, the materialization of questions of secularization, the tension between the ‘religious’ and the ‘spiritual’, the continuing significance of symbols in establishing a sense of identity and belonging, the construction and communication of narratives: a minor controversy then, but surprisingly illuminating given the variety of issues it raises. The thought occurred to me that here was an interesting and valuable subject for class discussion.

An Opportunity

So much of life is a matter of serendipity (Eco 2000; Merton & Barber 2006). As the meeting closed, and with my doodles still in front of me, a chance meeting took place with a colleague who suggested that the reorganization of Master courses at the university presented us with the opportunity to develop new modules (courses). After fifteen years at Durham, and despite being primarily interested in religion, the possibility of teaching a course dealing with the anthropology of religion had never presented itself -- until now.

With the chaplaincy controversy still in mind, an idea began to take shape and I met with a colleague with a view to developing a course that would be intellectually challenging, and fun to teach. In recent years it has been increasingly easy to look at the courses taught by other people in other places. We looked at some marvellous courses, some with a syllabus that was truly innovative, involving guest speakers from various religious groups, and incorporating fieldtrips to places of religious. However, we found that the tendency remains to focus on the communication of knowledge, to cover those issues which have long been central to the anthropology of religion: definitions, the sacred/profane dichotomy, witchcraft, magic, syncretism, shamanism, totemism, ritual, cosmology, myth... After discussing the hospital chaplaincy case, we agreed that it would be interesting and worthwhile to teach a course centred on ‘religious controversy’ – loosely defined! This would be to focus on the kinds of issues with which our students would probably be familiar – to start at that place where they already were, so to speak. After all, we would be teaching masters students, none of whom would previously have studied anthropology, and coming from disciplines as varied as modern languages, history, geography, economics, and theology.

Structuring the Course

The idea was to begin with the topic of religious controversy and to draw from it the kinds of issues that anthropologists find interesting and significant. But first we would need to convince the university that the syllabus would be coherent and the subject matter appropriate for masters students. The bureaucratic process, probably familiar to many readers, required that

we specify learning outcomes, including subject-specific knowledge, subject-specific skills, and key skills. The following indicates our stated intentions for the course.

Briefly, by the end of the course we intend students who opt for the module to have developed (1) an understanding of some of the key debates in the anthropology of religion, (2) an appreciation of the importance of anthropology in understanding public controversy, and (3) some knowledge of key concepts in social anthropology, such as power and authority, public culture, gender, ethnicity, identity. The course is to be delivered primarily via seminars scheduled to last two hours so that discussions need not be hurried or unduly curtailed. The primary subject of each session will be introduced by the tutor in order to introduce the students to the key theoretical approaches or data relevant to the theme of the seminar. These introductory lectures will be tailored to accommodate the differential knowledge and disciplinary skills of different cohorts and to make sure that students approach subsequent seminars with an appropriate level of knowledge and understanding. The tutor's introductory remarks will be followed by a seminar during which students will be encouraged to explore the lecture content in greater detail and to identify areas in which they require particular guidance, for example, further reading. The seminars will be geared to enable students to develop their abilities to conduct research, to communicate, to present theoretical alternatives and data, and to develop their own argumentation skills. Class discussion will encourage background reading, which will contribute to the students' independent learning, and will further allow students the opportunity to exchange ideas, to explore issues and arguments that interest or concern them in greater depth, and to receive feedback from both the group and the tutor on their own arguments and understanding. For one formative assessment, students will be required to make a 5–10 minute presentation during one of the regular seminars toward the end of the first term on the subject of their summative essay. In preparing for this presentation, students will begin to engage in the background reading necessary for their essays. This presentation will also serve as a dry run for the summative presentation to be given in the second term. Midway through the second term, students will prepare further for their summative essay by submitting a 500-word essay plan.

The Syllabus

From the outset, we decided not to dwell on our specialisms (Quakerism and Judaism), but to identify religious controversies which would also give us the opportunity to introduce discuss issues, ethnographies, and theories central to anthropology. We spent some time researching possible content and eventually produced the following list (in no particular order):

- Mormons & Marriage
- Priests & Paedophilia
- Judaizing Movements
- Israel and the law of return
- Islamic dress
- The Amish and the State.
- Ideologies and the religious right
- Sects & cults
- The war against terror
- The secularization debate
- Religion & ethnicity

The USSR and the erasure of Shamanism
Evolution and creationism
Satanic abuse
Catholicism, contraception & abortion
Local conflicts (Northern Ireland; Sri Lanka; the Middle East; Nigeria; Sudan, Iraq, Kashmir)
The ownership of Stonehenge

The list is provisional and we hope to add to it. We are developing cases that may be very narrow and specific in time and place, as well as broader-based cases in which we might ask students to research particular examples. The introduction of historical cases would widen our options considerably and although we have decided not to include historical cases during the first year, we may introduce one or two depending on the background of students opting to take the course. While it is important that students have a reasonably clear idea of the subjects presented for discussion. On the other hand, we wish to remain alert to the possibility of introducing issues which may arise in the media during the course. Unlike the hospital chaplaincy example with which we started, most of our cases provide a further opportunity, that is, to investigate the ways in which the media (as well as academics and participants) present (and sometimes generate) such controversies.

We tried only to include those controversies which would likely to inspire discussion and perhaps argument from which significant anthropological themes might emerge. The issues we identified would, we hoped, make clear to students that the anthropology of religion was not only a subject area which has been fertile in generating anthropological theory, but also one which deals with issues which are contemporary and socially significant. We would spend a couple of seminars introducing some of the key themes in the anthropology of religion, and set aside the final seminar in order to reflect on what we have learned from our reading and discussions. We are preparing relevant reading for each of these issues, drawing not only on anthropologists but also from those in related disciplines such as sociology and political theory. For each issue we plan to list the most interesting websites and will encourage students to contribute to these lists. We anticipate that considerable use will be made of the electronic discussion board, which should provide a continuing forum for the debates which begin in class.

Having generated the guiding principle of the course and also its structure and content we have arrived at a point where we have a clearer idea of what we believe to be the subject matter of the anthropology of religion, not merely what it is that constitutes relevant and valid empirical evidence. Our focus, we have decided, should be on controversy because it is in the midst of controversy that the vitality and significance of religious faith and practice, both for individuals and society, is most explicit.

Looking Ahead

At the time of submitting this article, we have not quite finished writing the course that we have chosen to call *Anthropology and Religious Controversy*. We will treat the first year as a trial and it seems likely that the course will eventually be made available to undergraduates. This would be an interesting development in that those students (unlike our Masters students)

will have already spent two years studying anthropology. We would undoubtedly need to tweak the way in which we deliver the course to these quite different groups, but hope that each would be able to contribute to its development. Having talked briefly about the course with current undergraduate and graduate students we are confident that teaching the anthropology of religion through controversial issues is likely to be popular. The challenge will be to ensure that debates focus on the issues in hand, and draw on what participants have learned from the material they have read and on which they have reflected.

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