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Diaspora & Religion: Connecting and disconnecting

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In attempting to understand the migration and settlement of people around the globe, the concept of diaspora has proven crucial, proliferating not only in scholarly discourse but also in public and policy domains. And, as many people move, they bring along their religious beliefs, ideas, practices, and objects, prompting renewed efforts to conceptualise ‘religion in motion’ (Vásquez 2008). Although diaspora first emerged as a religious concept – the Jews, exiled after the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem in the 6th century BCE, constituted the ‘prototypical’ diaspora (Cohen 2008) – this initial understanding of their entwinement gave way in the 1960s and 70s to more secular conceptualisations of diaspora. Taking the disentangling of diaspora and religion as its departure point, this essay considers how the relationship between them has been approached before turning its attention to current conceptualisations both of diaspora and of religion, which offer ways to think anew about their relationship. Adopting a processual understanding of both terms, it subsequently engages with the questions of how religious practices, discourses or objects might activate or deactivate diasporas, how they might connect or disconnect diasporic subjects with multiple others around them, and how they might be transformed in the process. These processes are addressed by exploring enduring issues of identification and belonging among diasporic co-religionists, and how they play out spatially and temporally – through practices and claims of territorialisation and deterritorialisation, and of continuity and discontinuity.

Diaspora and religion as process and practice

Despite diaspora’s early entwinement with religion, the term’s proliferation and dispersal across the social sciences from the 1970s onward contributed to scholarly disengagement of diaspora from Jewish Studies and, as a consequence, also from other religious elements, practices, and discourses. Rather than seeing religion as integral to an understanding of diaspora, the question that preoccupied scholars was in fact the antithesis, do religions (even) constitute diasporas? In Cohen’s (1997) typology, diaspora is defined predominantly as an ethno-national construct, bounded territorially to a homeland. Religions are seen to be missing an ‘idealization of a homeland and a return movement’, which would classify them as diasporas; they are ‘extraterritorial rather than territorial’. Cohen does acknowledge, however, that ‘spiritual affinity may generate a bond analogous to that of a diaspora’ (1997: 189), and in the revised edition of *Global Diasporas* includes ‘religious diasporas’ in his model as an example of a de-territorialised diaspora with ‘atypical’ imaginings of ‘home’.

Postcolonial and postmodern critiques in the 1990s problematised the relationships between ethno-religious communities and their homeland origins, just as they challenged fixed understandings of diaspora culture (Hall 1990; Baumann 1996; Gilroy

1993; Brah 2006). These critiques coincided with attempts, within religious studies and the social sciences, to deconstruct ‘religion’ as an essentialized and universal category for cross-cultural comparison. Reflecting on Cohen’s model of diaspora, we can see how it relies on a distinction between ethnicity-nationality and religion, which assumes the demarcation of religion as a separate, rationalized, objective and individualized sphere. The cultural and historical specificity of this distinction, premised as it is on a secular and modern understanding of religion dating back to the post-Reformation period (Asad 1993), makes it less applicable to other settings. In Katy Gardner’s (1993) famous study of *Desh-Bidesh* (Home and Away), for example, ‘homeland’ (*desh*) is associated with fertility, spirituality and religiosity, all of which are interconnected and reproduced through the circulation of people, as well as goods, images and ideas between the *desh* and foreign places (*bidesh*) of migration, such as, London. For many of Gardner’s interlocutors in Sylhet, ‘religion’ is not singled out as a separate domain distinct from their ancestral, ethnic or national forms of belonging. In her study, diaspora is not solely or primarily an ethno-national construct from which religious and spiritual ideas and practices can be divorced.

Yet within diaspora studies, the question of whether transnational religious traditions can be classified as diasporic, or whether they should be kept analytically distinct, continues to preoccupy scholars. Vertovec (2004: 282) maintains a distinction between diaspora, transnationalism and migration in his discussion of religion, viewing these as separate but interrelated terms. While ‘diaspora suggests dispersal from a homeland...it should be defined principally in terms of the continuing consciousness of a connection, real or imagined, to that homeland and a distinctive community of co-ethnics in other parts of the world (ibid).’ This contrasts with transnationalism, which he defines as the ‘actual, ongoing exchanges of information, money and resources—as well as regular travel and communication—that members of a diaspora may undertake with others in the homeland or elsewhere within the globalized ethnic community’ (Vertovec 2004: 282).

Moving beyond the question of whether religions constitute diasporas, Johnson (2012) attends to how diasporas are made, transformed, and activated through religion. He argues for delimiting the use of diaspora by retaining a territorially based definition, and suggests focusing on how diasporic religions include ‘territorial invocations made not just through residence or nostalgia, but also through imagination, ritual practice, narratives and the plotting of futures, as well as the summoning of ancestral pasts’ (Johnson 2012; 108). Yet his distinction between ‘religious diaspora’ and ‘diasporic religion’ – differentiated in terms of whether religious identifications are at the root or are a consequence of emigration – relies on assessing the intensity or importance of religious identification. It curtails an understanding of religion, limiting it to group identity, and allows insufficient space for an understanding of religion as dynamic, as collective and individual, and as embodied and discursive.

Rather than seeking to identify and label the religious element(s) of diaspora, we suggest that it is helpful to follow Brubaker (2005) in thinking about diasporas in processual terms, and as a category of practice. This approach aligns with conceptual shifts in studies of religion from a focus on texts and beliefs to a consideration of religious practices and of how religion is lived (Hall 1997; McGuire 2008; Vásquez 2008). Lived religion allows us to address ‘what people *do* with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds with them, and how, in

turn, men, women and children are fundamentally shaped by the worlds they are making' (Orsi 2003: 172, emphasis in original). Here, then, conceptualisations of diaspora and religion – as process, practice, claim, idiom, stance, and orientation, to name but a few – converge (Tweed 2009; Brubaker 2005). Such an approach, thus, allows us to explore the ways in which diasporas are activated and transformed by religious practices, ideas, and experiences. We can also consider how, and to what effect, the 'religious' is claimed, made sense of, constituted, made and remade in the process.

Universalising and particularising, territorialising and deterritorialising

Some religious traditions, such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, are categorised as having universal or translocal horizons – their spread facilitated by particular political formations, such as the Umayyads and Abbasids in the case of Islam or Constantine's Roman Empire and the Spanish and Portuguese crowns for the case of Christianity (Vásquez 2010: 30). Others, such as Hinduism, Judaism, or African-based religions, have been seen as more closely associated with a particular place or territory (ibid). For many Hindus, for example, India constitutes the sacred homeland. These are, however, analytical distinctions that do not necessarily reflect the ways in which diasporic religions are lived in practice. While the question of whether diasporic religions constitute attachments and orientations to particular territories or homelands has troubled diaspora scholars, approaching diasporic religions in more processual terms necessitates that we de-naturalise links between identity and belonging, on one hand, and territory and place, on the other. Rather than diaspora or religion referring to actually existing groups, it is important to study the practices of diasporic co-religionists that constitute senses of belonging and contribute to particular identifications. Returning then to the question of religions as universal or particular, we can explore universalising and particularising as practices and claims that believers adopt in their own self-positioning, as well as in their interactions with and in relation to co-believers and 'others', both religious and non-religious. Accordingly, diasporic believers might invoke or downplay their relationship to particular territories.

Troubling the relationships between religion, home, homeland, roots, and exile, for example, Boyarin (2015: 17) describes diasporic religious practices that are not oriented towards the homeland, but create new forms of territorialisation in the host country. Building on his previous work with his brother Daniel (1993), he draws on his ethnography of Yiddish culture in New York as 'an alternative to monolithic territorial nationalisms.' Crafted through a process of hybrid linguistic practices and memories, Yiddish culture, he argues, is not based on an absence from the homeland, but on 'fictive kinship' and creative practices of diasporic Jewish immigrants. Yiddish culture is diasporic – yet, despite its assumed orientation towards a homeland, it has become disentangled from a specific territory and has been transformed in a new setting.

While religious practices in Boyarin's case are reterritorialised abroad and enable the formation of new connections among diasporic subjects, religion and diaspora can also orient people in space in multiple, overlapping ways. As Tweed's (1997) ethnography of Cubans in Miami reminds us, religions can at once be locative, translocative and supralocative. More specifically, religions can engage with the territorial location where believers live and contribute to the re-making of home locally, while they may

also facilitate the creation of links across space where co-religionists live and transcend homeland and host land (Tweed 1997: 94-95).

The experiences of Somalis in Britain (Liberatore 2017) similarly point to the coexistence of multiple diasporic horizons, and further complicate the distinctions between universalising and particularising, and territorialising or deterritorialising processes. Somalis – who migrated in large numbers in the 1980s and early 1990s as civil war spread across the Somali regions – are often described as a global diaspora with strong ties to their homelands as well as extensive transnational connections across the diaspora. Religious memories, narratives, and practices have shaped their experience of movement and living abroad, as well as their continued orientations towards a homeland; religious idioms have served to both connect Somalis among themselves, to other Muslims, and to the host society, but have also led to intra- and inter-generational fissions. Some of the older generations of Somalis in Britain look back at the past critically, employing global Islamic reformist idioms to reflect on the immorality and corruption of socialist modern Somalia of the 1970s and 1980s. Since moving to the UK and engaging with global reformist discourses, they have begun reading and reasoning about Islamic texts, attending Somali mosques, and adopting new practices – such as the donning of the *jilbab* – which were uncommon prior to the late 1980s. Others are critical of the advent of reformist Islam and of Somalis who have begun to engage more fervently with Islamic teachings and practices. They view this transformation as an ‘Arabization’ of Somali culture and look back nostalgically at the Sufi practices which were widespread prior to the 1980s, but that have since been largely abandoned or eradicated. Some of the younger generations share similar outlooks, but those who have begun to engage more actively with pious teachings and modes of self-fashioning orient themselves towards the Middle East as their ‘religious home’ rather than the Somali regions. By joining other Muslims who are part of the global Islamic revival, and participating in a ‘transnational Islamic public sphere’ (Bowen 2004) they constitute relations to this homeland through visits, study trips and exchanges with scholars in person or online. Some are more interested in moving to the Middle East, or performing *hajj* or *umrah* (holy pilgrimage), rather than returning to the Somali regions. Within the Somali diaspora, therefore, different individuals and generations establish multiple diasporic horizons.

Young pious Somalis, like many young Muslims in Britain, have also begun to adopt an Islamic reformist discourse of ‘religion versus culture’ which prioritises a universal ‘authentic’ Islam over and above the culture of their parents, which they see as particularistic, and tied to a place or country. For young Muslims in Britain, Islam enables them to connect to a wider transnational *umma* (community of believers), but also to present Islam as a universal tradition that is applicable in all contexts, including Europe. Through this process, they invert political discourses in Europe which present Islam as a reified and homogenized ‘culture’ incompatible with universal liberal values. Similarly, in the context of Republican France, Fernando (2014) describes how young Muslim French men and women contrast a universal Islam with the particularities of Republicanism as a strategy for presenting themselves as integrated and as part of the French nation. Yet in doing so, similarly to Muslims in Britain, they also cast their parents’ generation as particularistic, bound by cultural constraints, and not sufficiently integrated into France. In sum, Islam is crucial to their home-making practices locally, including some and excluding others in the ongoing constitution of morally and emotionally significant communities of belonging. At the same time, their religious

affiliations connect them to co-believers around the world, as evidenced by the existence of extensive transnational religious networks (e.g. Werbner 2003), while fostering a sense of belonging within the de-territorialised, global religious community of the *umma*.

Continuity and discontinuity

Just as diaspora and religion orient people in space, they also do so in and over time. Given that both terms are often understood as being oriented to the past, and associated with nostalgia and tradition respectively, it follows that questions of continuity and discontinuity are fruitful to consider in relation to diasporic believers. As we know, continuity is not inevitable, but rather necessitates practices to ensure and perpetuate particular ways of life, values, and ideals. As Boyarin has commented, diaspora might be better understood as ‘a shared strategy of survival, continuity, and the production of meaning’, rather than about a ‘shared predicament of loss’ (2015: 21). Accordingly, we can productively explore how diasporic believers imagine and narrate the past in order to situate the present and engage with the future. They may strive for continuity with the past and constitute their relation to this past in different ways. This is evident, for example, in the Islamic practices of ‘embodying’ or ‘emulating’ role models from Islamic history in the processes of making sense of what it means to be a moral person in the present (Deeb 2009). In contrast, in accepting Jesus as their personal saviour, Pentecostals ‘make a break from the past’ (Meyer 1998), cast off immoral practices and corrupting relations, and are re-born as God’s children. Birgit Meyer highlights that, while this break may be discursively decisive, it is not so easy to effect in practice. Thus, as Pentecostals oscillate between a ‘past’ identity linked to family and a ‘new, individualist identity’, the ‘past’ comes into the present and must be continuously denounced if it is not to undermine their efforts to secure the future (ibid. 1998: 340).

In the diasporic context of London, Kenyan Pentecostals simultaneously make claims of both continuity and discontinuity with the past. Faced with political, economic and social uncertainty in Kenya in the 1990s, many coming of age in that era left their homeland, intent on realising their aspirations for social adulthood. Yet, once in London, they continued to struggle to realise their ambitions, and it was in this context of thwarted aspirations that many became born again and began attending Pentecostal churches. Like the young pious Somalis described above, Kenyan Pentecostals distinguish between ‘religion’ and ‘culture’, particularly vis-à-vis their families in Kenya and their ancestral forebears; they selectively retain some values and practices, which they gloss as non-religious, while forsaking others in an effort to realise the promise of being God’s children (Fesenmyer, in press, 2017). Heeding the Bible’s call ‘to go and make disciples of all nations’ (Matthew 28: 16-20), these born-again Christians seek to come together as brothers and sisters in Christ irrespective of race, ethnicity, and nationality. These social relations constitute bonds of what Boyarin (2015) has aptly referred to as ‘fictive kinship’ with respect to diasporic Jews; in the case of Kenyans Pentecostals, their kinship is rooted in the shared experiences of being born again and through the blood of Jesus Christ. These bonds can be read as evidence of their membership in a global Christian community. Accordingly, they envision their return to a ‘homeland’ in terms of their deliverance to God’s kingdom, one which is deferred to the future. At the same time, they claim continuity with Britain’s Christian heritage, marking a (re-)alignment ‘in relation to an extant and imagined Christian history’ (Engelke 2010: 179). Their claims of continuity, however, are made in the face

of an often hostile reception to their presence in Britain, with tensions playing out along racial lines and, thus, pointing to (implicit) enduring associations of Christianity with a particular race and specific nations. They remind us not to underestimate the salience of the relational context – a global power-geometry that locates those born in a poor, geopolitically weak country like Kenya in an inferior position vis-à-vis those in Britain (Massey 1993) – for understanding diasporic identifications.

Finally, as religious traditions travel and are reconstituted through the processes described in the examples above, they also mutate and are transformed. Caution must be paid, however, when investigating the changes brought about by diasporisation. In making sense of changes and continuities in diasporic religions, it is too often assumed that religious ‘traditions’ are bounded and fixed prior to movement abroad, and that migration and diasporisation constitute the main drivers of change. This is particularly evident in the scholarship on Islam in Europe that, by emphasizing the ways in which Islam has become more critical, individualized and hence more European (Cesari 2003; Mandaville 2001, 2003), has over-emphasised change and transformation brought about by migration. As Amir-Moazami and Salvatore (2003) have shown, this approach has neglected the ‘potential of transformation and reform that originates within Muslim traditions’ themselves (ibid 2003: 53). Religious traditions are not only shaped by encounters with external factors and circumstances, but are themselves internally dynamic (Asad 1986), just as individuals are inevitably active agents in processes of change.

Conclusion

We have suggested moving towards a processual approach to diaspora and religion that enables us to explore how diasporas are activated, maintained or transformed and dismantled through religion, but also how religious practices, idioms, objects, and imaginaries are shaped in and through individuals, collectivities and projects that present themselves as diasporic. Following Hall (1990) who highlights the ways in which diaspora is used to open up spaces and imaginative possibilities in places of settlement, we can then think of religion as a mode of engagement in diasporic contexts. Diasporas are constituted through engagements with people and places, whether imagined or experienced, affirmative or alienating, proximate or distant both temporally and spatially. As the examples of Somalis in Britain, Cubans in Miami, Kenyan Pentecostals, and Sylhetis between Britain and Bangladesh illustrate, religious practices create ties between people or, as Cohen has remarked, ‘generate a bond analogous to that of diasporas’. Yet, as Boyarin (2015) points out, these bonds are not necessarily oriented towards a homeland or a territory, but may take shape and reterritorialize in distinct places in the host society. Religious practices may generate new connections with spiritual homelands, which are not necessarily their places of origin – as in the case of young pious Somalis who orient themselves towards the Middle East – or connect co-religionists to a universal ‘imagined community’ that is not oriented towards a specific place or time. As with young Muslims in Europe, religious narratives of universality, unity and oneness can enable co-religionists to connect with multiple others outside of their faith communities.

At the same time, religious discourses, idioms, and practices can also deactivate or fragment diasporic communities or imaginaries. Pentecostals, for example, seek to ‘break’ with their families and their pasts in the process of entering a new community

of co-believers, and young pious Muslims similarly seek to differentiate themselves from older generations in order to join a universal community of believers. Yet these efforts to disconnect and connect are fluid and dynamic, they require constant effort to sustain, and are never fully achieved in practice. Attachments to, and detachments from, people, places and times are not only enacted in practices and interactions, but also through discourses and the imagination.

In the process, however, religious practices, discourses, and idioms are transformed 'in motion'. Rituals are adapted, institutions are transformed, and individuals seek to adapt dynamic religious practices and ideas to new settings and circumstances. Religious practitioners may strive to connect with religious figures from the past in different ways, but this process of bringing the past into the present is always selective and results in the transformation of a religious tradition. Religions and diasporas are inevitably dynamic, transformed through exchange and contestation, as well as through movement and diasporisation.

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