

***Forthcoming (2016) in Guest, M. and Middlemiss Le Mon, M. (eds.) Death, Life and Laughter, Farnham: Ashgate***

***Words and deeds against exclusion: Deprivation, activism and religiosity in inner-city Birmingham***

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## **Introduction**

In 2010 lampposts topped by surveillance cameras appeared in parts of Birmingham, Britain's second largest city. Unannounced, strategically placed at traffic intersections and along main roads, the cameras initially caused bemusement. The camera system, codenamed 'Project Champion', comprised over 200 devices explicitly targeted around two areas of mainly Muslim residence. The objective of the scheme was to 'Create a vehicle movement "net" around two distinct geographical areas within the city of Birmingham (and) Capture (...) CCTV evidence' (Thames Valley Police 2010: 7). In response local people soon expressed anger at public meetings in June and July 2010 at being stigmatized for being Muslim, their neighbourhoods portrayed as a seedbed for terrorism plots (Lewis 2010). Following a campaign uniting civil libertarians and concerned local residents, the cameras – part of what turned out to be a surveillance system funded by the UK Government's counter-terrorism budget – were covered with bags pending a review in the face of public disquiet. In one local resident's words, 'the blue bags over the cameras look like suspects when they are interned'. In December 2010 the system's removal without having been switched on was sanctioned by the local police force that had spent £3m on its installation, with all the cameras removed by summer 2011.

We open with this example of how a population countered a surveillance system to show how the relationship between religion and power encompasses the interface between local space, the state and technologies of remote monitoring. In an era where communities are distinguished by the style in which they are surveilled (also see Fiske 2000), some religious faith is equated with greater risk of terrorism and becomes the basis for the attempted installation of a centrally held database of all vehicle movements into and out of a locality.

In this paper we reflect on our ongoing qualitative research in Alum Rock, one of the two areas in inner-city Birmingham covered by the cameras, to examine the complex local intersections of religiosity, power and inequality. Following an outline of the theoretical context to the argument developed below as well as of our research location and methods, we discuss the following thematic foci emerging from our data: social actors' complex emotional investments in a 'troubled' locality that is simultaneously experienced as 'home'; the local significance of religiosity in fostering resilience in the face of deprivation; and the discursive significance of religion in interpretative frameworks used to make sense of (local) frustrations and perceived social ills; we then conclude by very briefly returning to the implications of the above-mentioned 'Project Champion' and local opposition to it and offer some reflections on how this may feed into the contemporary and inter-disciplinary study of urban religiosity.

## **Theoretical context**

In *Death, Ritual and Belief*, Douglas Davies detects in the 'words against death' uttered particularly in the context of funerary rites a 'way people transform the given facts of biological life into values and goals of humanity' (1997: vii). Invoking Maurice Bloch's (1992) theory of 'rebounding violence' and its underlying notion of a 'transcendental order', which echoes conceptualizations of religion as premised on diverse understandings of – and approaches to – a 'superplausible', 'transcendent

other', an 'ultimate reality' or 'ultimate moral authority' (Davies 2011: 7; 67; 241), Davies analyses how the end of a biological life is discursively and socially utilized to 'gain a sense of power which motivates ongoing life' (1997: 1). Crucially, however, this is not a one-sided engagement with the discursive (and more or less self-conscious) aspects of religious life, but it reflects Davies' general and often re-emphasized appreciation of religions requiring *both* words *and* deeds, language and ideas as much as ritual and embodiment. In a later formulation, Davies (2007: 313) thus emphasizes the value of 'exploring diverse modes of participation in religious ideas' such as the 'complementary topics of embodiment (...) and philosophical enquiry'. Located on a 'knowledge continuum', philosophical enquiry and embodiment imply different degrees of implicated consciousness or lack thereof, which warrant detailed attention in their own right. Elsewhere, we are reminded of how the appeal or efficacy of ritual or embodiment often outweigh those offered by reflection and debate, especially in emotionally charged circumstances:

[R]eligious responses to life experience regularly address the problematic, troubling, bizarre and contradictory aspects of life, providing an enclosure for, and a mode of response to, them. It is this ability to respond to problematic areas through action that furnishes an extremely powerful adaptive feature of human life. When philosophy fails, ritual may succeed. (Davies 2002: 15)

In this chapter, we ask whether Davies' insights can be meaningfully extended to another arena, in which religious words and deeds arguably also effect a transformation for those articulating or participating in them: do the residents of a deprived, ethno-religiously diverse inner-city area of Birmingham, in which we have been conducting research for the last seven years, utilize religious words and practices in order to respond to the 'given facts' of their social (rather than biological) life? And if so, which 'values and goals' are being affirmed in the process? Finally, what are the implications of this for the (sociological) study of religion? In what follows we analyze parts of our data collected in the Alum Rock area of inner-city Birmingham by building on key arguments Davies develops in his recent discussion of *Emotion, Identity and Religion* (2011). These central conceptual threads pertain to the emotional significance of specific localities – or 'home' – and the particular relevance of religion in late modern urban settings; to the importance of 'hope' and often, though not invariably, religiously underpinned resilience in the face of deprivation and suffering; and to the discursive uses of the category 'religion' in people's attempts to explain the divergences of 'realities' from 'ideals' or what Davies terms the 'unsatisfactoriness of life' (2011: 75).

In addition to the theoretical connections we draw in what follows, this chapter also resonates with another aspect of Davies' wide-ranging activities throughout his career. For a number of years Douglas Davies acted as a Trustee for St. Martin's Trust, a charity supporting the activities of the Anglican Church in Birmingham (see <http://www.charityperformance.com/charity-details.php?c=177885>). Our research, and the resulting discussion presented in this chapter of religious beliefs, activities and organisations prominent in Alum Rock, thus also echoes geographically with Davies' work as well as in terms of our shared interest in the public, civil societal manifestations and workings of religiosity. Before exploring these and related issues, however, we turn to an outline of our ongoing research in Saltley, Alum Rock.

### **Researching Alum Rock**

The population of the Alum Rock area east of Birmingham's city centre, and part of the Washwood Heath ward, comprises a South Asian majority (mainly of Pakistani and Bengali descent), a minority of longstanding white English, Irish and Afro-Caribbean working-class residents, more recently arrived Somali refugees and eastern/ central European migrants. In terms of the religious categories employed in the 2011 census, 77% of residents of the Washwood Heath ward self-defined as Muslim

and 12% as Christian. Applying categories of ethnicity, the 2011 Census recorded 57% of the local population as Pakistani, 6,5% Bangladeshi, 1,9% Indian, 8,7% 'Other Asian'; 12,3% as White; , 8,7% as Black, 2,8% as Mixed, and 1,8% as belonging to 'other ethnic groups' (Office for National Statistics 2013a). Alum Rock in particular ranks amongst the most deprived parts of the UK, with local average life expectancy seven years below that in affluent suburbs only a few miles away (Birmingham Public Health Network 2005), and a recent report on wealth distribution in Britain estimating half the local population to be living in breadline poverty (Dorling et al. 2007: 50). More widely, households in the Washwood Heath ward have the lowest income in all of Birmingham, 94% of the ward's population live within the 5% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country, and in April 2013 Job Seekers Allowance claimants in the Washwood Heath ward constituted 11.0% of the working age population (Office for National Statistics 2013b). External media representations have almost invariably depicted Alum Rock in particular as fostering 'parallel lives' (for example in the context of the widely reported arrests of several local men on terror-related charges in January 2007) and as qualifying as a 'no-go-area' for (white) non-Muslims (e.g. Nazir 2008; Harrison 2008). Most recently, this has manifested in media headlines pertaining to a 21-year-old man from the area being charged with terrorism offences (*Birmingham Mail*, 1 May 2012) and to 'Guns and gangs fear after man shot in Alum Rock' (*Birmingham Mail*, 20 April 2012).

In this chapter, and extending our previous research (Karner and Parker 2008, 2011; Parker and Karner 2010, 2011), we draw mainly on some 80 extended semi-structured interviews conducted in Alum Rock between 2006 and 2012 with a variety of local residents and entrepreneurs of different ethnic/ religious backgrounds, whose homes, businesses or places of worship are (or previously have been) near the main commercial artery, the Alum Rock Road. Our interviewees have also included two local councillors, activists and religious spokespeople (from different strands of Islam and Christian denominations). Focusing on local biographies and the quotidian, our interviews centre on people's experiences of living or working in the area, their responses to media representations of the locality, the significance of religious and ethnic boundaries as well as their everyday negotiation in Alum Rock, interviewees' thoughts on local politics, and their feelings, hopes and visions for the area. Other methods of data collection employed in our research have included ethnographic immersion in various local organizations (e.g. in an inter-faith network, a neighbourhood association, a local football team), and social historical research focused on various cultural representations that have emerged from the locality since the period of initial South Asian migration to, and settlement in, the area in the 1950s and 1960s (see Parker and Karner 2011).

Before turning to three particular themes recurring in our data, it should be stressed that this research was not initially conceived as a study in the sociology of religion. We started this research committed to understanding a locality, its deprivations, identity politics, and everyday struggles. As such, we have attempted to avoid the trappings of treating an ethnic or religious group, a priori, as the central or only unit of analysis (see Levitt and Glick Schiller 2007). Seven years of interviews and ethnographic engagement with Alum Rock have shown time and again that whilst the locality cannot be understood without paying close attention to religious beliefs, practices, boundaries and identity politics, the area cannot be reduced to religiosity – as external, often derogatory representations of the area tend to do – either. This, as we argue below, strengthens the case *for* a 'locality approach' (also see Karner and Parker 2012), capable of researching *across* ethno-religious boundaries, and *against* a community study confined by such boundaries. As such, this analysis runs against the grain of 'congregational'- (e.g. Cavendish 2000; Green 2003; Marti 2008) or single ethnic/ religious community studies (e.g. Khan 2000; Yukleyen 2009). Instead, we add to an existing body of work, important contributions to which have been made in the US (e.g. Lee 2006), the UK (e.g. Baumann 1996; Dench et al. 2006; Knott 2009) and continental Europe alike (e.g. Tufte and Riis 2001), that take a particular urban locality as a starting point for an investigation of the multiple identity negotiations and intra- as well as inter-group interactions unfolding there. Our particular contribution in this

chapter lies in connecting such a 'locality approach' with Davies recent work on the interfaces of religion and emotion.

### **At home in a 'troubled locality'**

Echoing recent work on *Emotional Geographies* (Davidson, Bondi and Smith 2005), Douglas Davies (2011: 13) has commented on the profound emotional salience and meaning of 'some special place', with locations 'carrying deep religious significance' in countless people's biographies. Whilst this echoes traditional religious studies concerns with sacred spaces, it also manifests in profane places that, though part of the more mundane realm of the everyday, are no less significant for it. In this latter sphere of the quotidian, the emotional resonance of, and investment in, particular localities shows most clearly with regard to people's experiences of 'home', which Davies relates (2011: 250) to 'the mutual commitment of support from familial others in familiar territory', to a shared (Bourdieu-ian) habitus, and a resultant 'sense of security, of being safe, and of sanctuary'.

In the context of Alum Rock, this raises important questions: (how) do local residents experience a place that suffers multiple deprivations as well as stigmatizing external representations as home? Is the locality, by those who know it as home, perceived as outsiders perceive and portray it? Conversely, and its negative external 'reputational geography' (Parker and Karner 2010) notwithstanding, does Alum Rock evoke positive emotions and enduring attachments amongst those 'born and bred' there? Our interview data includes ample evidence of a profound mismatch between the monolithic, invariably negative representations of Alum Rock by outsiders on one hand, and local residents' profound attachment to – and distinctly more positive, though rarely uncritical portrayal of – the area, on the other. The following extract from an interview with a prominent religious (i.e. Christian) figure in the area is a case in point:

I'm not saying that it isn't an area with major problems, because it clearly is, and different problems from other parts of this city, but the perception that it's a no-go area, or that it's an unfriendly area, or that you won't be made welcome? If you want to be made welcome round here, you will be made welcome, and the welcome you'll get is a welcome you won't experience in other parts of the city, it's just so, so loving. That's not something from just the Afro-Caribbean community, it's from all communities, right the way across. We've got to remember that Saltley has always been the traditional landing-pad for new communities coming in.

Yet, rather than replacing Alum Rock's external representations as an alleged 'no-go-area' with a similarly reified, over-romanticized counter-image, there is considerable ambivalence in the sentiments and judgments offered by many locals. Rather than reproducing an unrealistically simplistic either-or logic (i.e. either a place offers opportunities *or* hopelessness, is experienced as a source of pride *or* shame), many of our interviewees have painted more nuanced pictures. In those, the locality's many problems and tensions are fully acknowledged, but so are people's deep-seated attachment and felt responsibility to the area, despite the odds:

I've done youth and community work throughout my childhood there, and I know how many bright people there are, there are quite a few educated young people I've met who've gone off to university, and there are doctors, and people with Masters degrees, and there's actually a lot of potential in Alum Rock that isn't being focused on because of all the negative aspects [...To those who criticize Alum Rock...] I've said there's community work and youth work that happens in the area, and the people who live in Alum Rock, a lot of them love it, people who live in Alum Rock do love it, they don't like hearing bad about the area, and I've said, 'OK, if there's nothing else you can say about Alum Rock, I'm from Alum Rock, you know

me as a person, you've known me for however many years, Alum Rock is part of my history and part of my life, say something bad about me'. ('Myra', local resident)

Further, there is a significant temporal dimension to some such more nuanced accounts. Articulating a discourse of loss and some nostalgia, several of our research participants have contrasted present-day Alum Rock with the area as they remember it from the 1970s or 80s. This earlier era, they have argued, was a time of true and 'successful' multiculturalism. One Muslim family, for instance, spoke with affection of the Jewish family from which they bought their business in the 1970s:

When we first took over the Goldbergs told us where they were buying from, and surprisingly enough I don't think that kind of business would happen now because of the religious state of life. But they were 100% Jewish and we were 100% Muslim. The two could gel together like the way we did because there were no barriers put up. Everybody was open-minded. ('Riz', local businessman)

One long-standing local shopkeeper reflected on his experience of the 1970s:

There was a good Irish community, and West Indian, Asian was not that strong then, but it was good integration, there wasn't any tension or problems. There were obviously English people as well. I think everybody felt akin. If you were Irish, if you were West Indian, if you were Asian, you had your problems, but you always felt, "Well, we're all coming from the same background", so at the end of it we know the same feelings, so we've got to get on with each other as well. ('Ahmed').

Such findings strongly resonate with existing arguments about the emotions attached to particular places or memories of those places (e.g. Jones 2005), and with the realization (Parr, Philo and Burns 2005: 90) that being 'placed' involves a 'psychodynamic' that is shared rather than purely individual, structural rather than exclusively personal. Put differently, an understanding of the affective dimensions of space demands – in C. Wright Mills' spirit (1959) – the application of *The Sociological Imagination* capable of structurally contextualizing the biographical and of thereby understanding seemingly 'private troubles', or sentiments, as 'public issues'. Alum Rock, as any locality, confirms that 'neighbourhood[s] (...) [are] social formations[s] within which particular structures of feeling are produced' (Appadurai quoted in Tufte and Riis 2001: 335).

### **On 'hope' and resilience**

Experiencing a 'troubled locality' as a place of rich meaning and enduring emotional importance does not, of course, in itself predict how one responds to local difficulties and deprivations. It is with regard to this second dimension, people's interpretations of local problems and attempts to counter them, that religion assumes particular significance in Alum Rock. There are two strands in Davies' recent work that relate directly to some of our empirical findings pertaining to these very issues.

First, Davies detects a particular power in urban religiosity, which many an influential urban sociologist – both 'classical' (i.e. as in the case of much of the Chicago School of the inter-war period) and contemporary (e.g. Dear 2002) – have tended to overlook:

The mass of humanity now living in cities cannot be aware of the complex emotional lives of those passed daily in the street or even met at work. This is one reason why religious groups are important in urban life, providing space and time for sharing experiences, for evaluating them in moral terms and, often, for fostering positive goals despite the negativities of life (...) Such small-scale communities show the importance of contexts in which individuals may

experience shared emotion in ways that are intelligible to others and conduce to a sense of meaning in life. (Davies 2011: 184)

Without being reducible to such experiences of collective meaning and derived resilience, local religiosity – whether Muslim or Christian – in Alum Rock is indeed able to counter-act the potential for urban anomie and fragmentation as one local Christian minister argues:

We have a role to play here, and we have a role to play for the potential Christian community, but we have equally a role to play for those who aren't of our faith, in a supporting way, and showing that Christians and Muslims can work together (...) We can show a picture here of where very, very strong Christian views as within the Christian church can exist easily alongside other faiths, provided they're sensitive to the differences and respectful of those differences. (Father 'Robert')

Rather than reflecting a general 'urbanism' that advances an atomization and 'secularization of life' (e.g. Wirth 1938), the institutional and everyday workings of Alum Rock derive much of their impetus and structure from religious organizations and networks (also see Karner and Parker 2009). Asked to comment on the local significance of religiosity, two key actors in two different local Christian congregations offered the following observations:

There's lots and lots of talk about Britain becoming a secular society. Personally I don't think it will ever be possible to understand communities like this one unless it's recognised (...) that religion with a small and big 'r' is a major issue and without understanding that communities like this can't be understood at all, and I think that would go for many comparable communities.

I would say the universal God has a much bigger part to play in everyday life than in other parts of the city (...) I couldn't imagine a Saltley or Washwood Heath without what is now such a diverse religious community, it just wouldn't work.

Significantly, observations such as these also relate, at least in part, to relationships and experiences that cross ethno-religious boundaries. In currently fashionable terminology, such accounts reflect social capital both of the 'bonding', or intra-group, and of the 'bridging', or inter-group, kinds (Putnam 2000). Or, and without intending to simply invert the area's negative external portrayals with a similarly distorted, romantic counter-image that would overlook tensions and conflicts that certainly are part of the local life-world, Alum Rock also displays what Paul Gilroy (2004) terms 'conviviality': a taken-for-granted pluralism, which accepts or positively embraces diversity as intrinsic to contemporary multicultural living. Religious institutions, networks and initiatives are crucial to channeling and facilitating such conviviality, whether in the form of inter-faith initiatives, a religiously diverse neighbourhood association, or the everyday sharing of sacred space across religious boundaries (as in the case of a women's sewing group meeting in the local Methodist church).

The second strand in Davies' take on religious emotions highly pertinent in this context relates to what he terms the creation of 'hopeful meaningfulness':

[A] major function of historical religions (...) involve[es] the management of human emotions in the face of life's sorrows and joys (...) [H]ope becomes an inescapable attitude that helps orient people towards their future activity by bringing a sense of significance to their current endeavours. (Davies 2011: 21-22)

Davies places particular emphasis on religious rituals in fostering such resilient hopefulness. Whilst this echoes wider social theoretical insights into the largely unconscious psychological benefits of ritualized action in maintaining social actors' 'ontological security' (Giddens 1984), it is also of obvious empirical relevance to the numerous contemporary contexts, in which our era of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000) has widened inequalities and intensified uncertainties, and to which – in turn – religious faith, networks and practices provide seemingly much-needed antidotes (see Karner and Aldridge 2004). However, our Alum Rock data also suggests that the link between religiosity and resilience in the face of adversity does not always and inevitably rely on rituals providing religious actors with ontological security on a barely noticed, semi-/un-conscious level. On the contrary, some local activists cite – in positively self-reflexive manner – religion as the very reason why they are committed to working in and for the area:

The teachings of Islam stay with a believer 24 hours a day, every step he takes. And that is true of me, that's how I look at it, here, at home, on the street and everywhere. It's not something that when I go to the mosque or I go to Friday prayers, so therefore Islam stays with me for just that half an hour, not when I come out of it. ('Majid', local resident).

I have fear of God in me, and anyone who holds a position of power and is educated, and can change things and who doesn't and sits back, when he goes up there he will be asked. Being a religious person, that scares the life out of me. I don't want to stand in front of Him and say that I could have done something and didn't, or I made the wrong decision for the community ('Imran', local resident).

In appropriation of different strands of Davies' work, we may thus describe important aspects of religiously inspired or underpinned social action in Alum Rock as providing *words and deeds against the multiple effects of multiple deprivations*. What is more, such diverse reactions emanate from different points of the above-mentioned 'knowledge-continuum', stretching from self-consciously political actions (i.e. in the form of social activism) to highly ritualized behaviour and, correspondingly, implicating various degrees of consciousness or lack thereof.

### **Explaining local 'ills': 'Religion' vs. 'culture'**

Much religious practice is of course deeply embedded in people's biographies and daily lives, taken-for-granted, and rarely explicitly spoken about. In wider social theoretical terms, religiosity of this kind is part of what Pierre Bourdieu (1977; also see Davies 2011: 275) describes as *doxa*, the 'universe of the undiscussed', or, in a similar vein, what Anthony Giddens (1984) defines as 'practical consciousness' (Giddens 1984) enabling routinized action without yielding itself very easily to translations into, or explanations through, language. Alongside these highly significant though rarely explicitly problematized dimensions of religious life, however, religiosity also assumes – certainly in Alum Rock – distinctive discursive dimensions.

The category of 'religion' thus assumes a common sense-making function in the accounts local residents offer of the social changes that have profoundly affected the area over recent decades. Put slightly differently, *religion* provides recurring interpretative frames in the accounts of many of our research participants. The first form this assumes articulates the earlier mentioned discourse of nostalgic loss, which presents the period of the 1970s and 1980s as a golden era of 'real multiculturalism'; this, it is argued, has since gone into decline, a deterioration attributed to the rise of certain forms of religiosity and religious politics. One female resident dates the emergence of what she termed 'Islamism' to before the events of September 2001, citing the Iranian revolution and the Salman Rushdie affair as significant influences on the religious biographies of some of her relatives:

I watched one nephew of mine (...) he started going to a mosque (...) he was suddenly not even wearing Asian clothes, but the Arabic tunic, so suddenly religion was taking over. There were more religious shops, and what I saw was more and more the British Asians were (...) at first I thought they were immigrants (...) but then I saw more of the British Muslims starting to wear the beard, and the Asian clothes, and the Palestinian scarves ('Sameena' local resident).

Certainly not all accounts of recent social changes in the area report or focus on alleged local inroads by forms of Islamic radicalism. Other Muslim residents have criticized the recent proliferation of mosques and madrasas of different devotional leanings in the area; this, it has been suggested to us, has produced a counter-productive form of religious fragmentation:

You have this huge mushrooming of religious places of worship, where religious priests have been shipped in from Pakistan because of their knowledge and experience. Once they've arrived here they've seen the potential, and built up their contacts (...) Some religious establishments have become almost like power bases, and if you own that or run that particular mosque, the people that come to your mosque and the activities that you do gives you this power base. ('Abraham', local resident)

I think the worst thing the British government did, or local authorities ever did, is giving permission for so many mosques to open up, and I'm a Muslim saying this. I was talking to an elderly man and he said this to me, 'They destroyed our community with these mosques.' He goes, 'This is not Islam, what have they done to it?' What's happened is that these people are promoting their own brand of Islam. Everybody's got their own brand. ('Bilal', local resident)

The second recurring discursive function religion performs in the narratives of some of our research participants also bemoans the status quo but employs the categories of religious belief and practice very differently: social ills affecting Alum Rock, it is argued in such accounts, are due to the absence of religiosity or of what is presented as the 'right kind of religiosity':

Now, there's a lot of things happening that bear no resemblance, no correlation whatsoever to the teachings of Islam. Most of these people claim to be Muslims, but the tragedy is, the tragedy that I know, and it's not going to go away (...) is that just by saying that I'm a Muslim and going to the mosque, doesn't make anybody a better Muslim than anybody else. (...) If people knew the basic responsibilities, the very basic responsibilities and teachings [of Islam], honestly Alum Rock and Saltley would be a far better world to live in. ('Abdul', local resident).

Another key observation contained in *Emotion, Identity and Religion* is highly relevant here, namely Davies' observations concerning religiously informed responses to the perceived 'unsatisfactoriness of life':

Experiences of misfortune, disappointment, shame and illness all reflect the many ways in which human identity is felt to be fractured or life circumstances problematic, with a major function of religions then consisting in answering these concerns. (Davies 2011: 74-75)

In Alum Rock, one recurring manifestation of this is encountered in how some local residents explain the divergences between the ideals they orient their lives towards and the realities they live with. In a prominent discourse in the area, people juxtapose 'religion' and 'culture' as mutually exclusive discursive-interpretative categories: whilst the former, religion, thereby stands for the ideal of the right(eous) way of living life, 'culture' is blamed for people's shortcomings and the many problems

experienced in the area. Whilst religion is positively connoted, culture is used as an interpretative device for explaining what is wrong in Alum Rock. The following accounts exemplify this:

Most of the Asian councillors - they win the seats on the grounds of family clan, rather than on the grounds of being elected as the right candidate - I mean that if you belong to a certain tribe. These Kashmiri or Pakistani people they have tribal structures, for example there will be a Raja or a Chaudhry, or some other tribe, but if my majority is the Chaudhrys, who are in the majority. Most of the councillors are Chaudhrys. ('Ihsan', local resident).

Some of the present, emerging future leaders, movers and shakers, everyone's got hidden agendas, but some of them are roped up in the old schools of thinking, the old clanships unfortunately and those clanships are beginning to play out their negative effects even among people in their 20s, 30s and 40s. So the present councillors, they're all on a clan basis, and because they're on a clan basis they've had to make their compromises and go with the clan mentality to give the skips, facilitate the planning applications and all the rest of it (...) And that's one of the things which has resulted in people moving out and disengaging with change in this area. Potential good, honest, sincere leadership has moved away because of this kind of environment, there is a more sinister side. ('Zaheer', local resident).

'Zaheer' also spoke of what he saw as an emerging religious 'regeneration and reinvigoration' drawing on Islamic tradition with a specifically Sufi inflection encouraging service to the wider community:

One of the things I've noticed here, and in other areas of the city, is a contribution to society element (...) One of the things is that this whole issue of service to humanity is quite deeply ingrained in Islamic teaching (...) but there's this movement and I think more of it falls within a Sufi domain (...) there's this element of social welfare and of contribution back to humanity (...) and I think in my opinion it has grown for the better, because I think it tends to disseminate tolerant views, and it tends to also facilitate change with patience and compassion. ('Zaheer', local resident).

In other words, 'culture' in the guise of allegiances described as 'tribal' or based on 'clan' is portrayed as the realm of human misunderstanding, mis-direction and shortcomings. 'Religion', by contrast, is associated with a divinely sanctioned blueprint for the ideal life. Importantly, this also provides religion with the 'disruptive' potential (also see Smith 1996) to inspire social change and political activism, thus challenging the common conflation of religion with tradition and structural reproduction. Were it not for cultural misunderstandings and constraints, we may paraphrase such discourses, people would be able to live more righteous lives and areas such as Alum Rock would be better off.

In terms of the analysis of such data, this presents somewhat of a conundrum: if or how to attempt to resolve a potential contradiction between the two layers of what Anthony Giddens describes as the 'double hermeneutic' (1984: 284) intrinsic to social analysis; whilst the first hermeneutical layer relates to social actors' interpretations of, and meanings given to, their lives, the second layer pertains to the analyst's 'second-order' interpretations of insiders' local discourses. Returning to our data reported above, this double hermeneutic includes the potential for a contradiction between emic categories and meanings and our meta-interpretations of those to arise. On one hand, as we have seen, the distinction between 'culture' and 'religion' is crucial to the interpretative frameworks employed by some local residents in making sense of their local lives and frustrations. On the other hand, and to quote Davies once more, though we know that 'in complex societies religion is often differentiated from other aspects of social life, we reiterate the fact that

religion is a difficult entity to define and to separate out from many other aspects of human activity' (2011: 186). This re-emphasizes the value of the aforementioned 'locality approach' informing our work, to which we return by way of a conclusion to this discussion and which offers a possible means of 'thinking our way through' such analytical tensions.

### Concluding remarks

Alum Rock with its deprivations and resilience can only be understood through a serious engagement with the centrality of religious faith and networks in the lives of many of its residents. As we have argued in this chapter, there are several crucial dimensions to the local significance of religiosity. These include its ability to inspire hope in an area that is both 'troubled' and a 'home' with all the associated emotional resonance; to motivate activism in the face of deprivation; and to provide central categories in various interpretative frameworks employed to make sense of local problems or, more generally, of the 'unsatisfactoriness of life' (Davies 2011: 75). Yet, and all this having been said, Alum Rock cannot be reduced to the local importance of religion either, as indeed those external commentators alleging religiously underpinned 'parallel lives' in the locality tend to do. The simultaneous importance of the non-religious in Alum Rock was reflected, for example, in local opposition to the earlier mentioned and enormously controversial 'Project Champion'. This opposition was not led by religious organizations but, feeling targeted as a security risk on the grounds of religious faith, was allied to the secular vocabulary of civil rights violations in the campaign against the cameras (<http://spyonbirmingham.blogspot.com>).

A more helpful approach to understanding Alum Rock must start with an acknowledgment of the multiple forms of social action and diverse institutions, both religious and non-religious, that shape the area: mosques, madrasas, churches and inter-faith groups; neighbourhood associations and youth clubs; convivial, conflictual as well as ambivalent encounters and relationships in the spheres of business, work, education and quotidian interaction. These local entanglements of the religious, the inter-religious and the non-religious justify and strengthen the case for a 'locality approach', which – rather than pre-defining religious or ethnic groups as *a priori* units of analysis – aims to capture as many kinds of relationships and interactions occurring in (but also transcending) a particular locality. Through such a 'spatially-informed approach to the study of religion in locality', we may indeed hope to 'reconnect' religion with other aspects and dimensions of social and cultural life (Knott 2009: 154; 159). In a similar vein, Tufte and Riis have argued (2001: 332-333) that a localized and distinctly 'multiethnic approach' to our ethno-religiously diverse inner-cities enables us to avoid 'essentializing culture' and to thereby sidestep what Paul Gilroy (2004) describes as 'the problem of ethnic absolutism'. As this discussion has shown, a more nuanced, less reified and distinctly local approach derives important conceptual momentum from Douglas Davies' work on the interfaces of *Emotion, Identity and Religion*. Further, and as part of this theoretical borrowing, a locality approach also furnishes a possible answer to the hermeneutical conundrum mentioned in the previous section: i.e. the seeming contradiction between a local discourse that insists on separating 'culture' from 'religion' and the analytical realization that, in historical terms and indeed in terms of people's everyday practices, this distinction is hard and sometimes impossible to maintain. In examining the many lived entanglements of the religious with the non-religious, a locality approach echoes Davies in appreciating that there is much more to social and religious life than 'philosophical enquiry' (or discourse); a complementary focus on embodiment, ritual, and multi-faceted lived identities is indeed urgently needed.

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