THE GROWTH OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

BRITAIN FROM 1945

VOLUME II
ISSUES

EDITED BY GERALD PARSONS

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CONTENTS

	Preface	*4*
	Introduction: deciding how far you can go ***Gerald Parsons***	*5*
1	How many ways to God? Christians and religious pluralism ***John Wolffe***	*23*
2	Britain's changing faiths: adaptation in a new environment ***George Chryssides***	*55*
3	'And there's another country ...': religion, the state and British identities ***John Wolffe***	*85*
4	From consensus to confrontation: religion and politics in Britain since 1945 ***Gerald Parsons***	*123*
5	There and back again? Religion and the 1944 and 1988 Education Acts ***Gerald Parsons***	*161*
6	Women and religion in post-war Britain ***Kim Knott***	*199*
7	Between law and licence: Christianity, morality and 'permissiveness' ***Gerald Parsons***	*231*

PREFACE

This book is the second part of a two-volume set on the history of religion in Britain between 1945 and the early 1990s. It is published by Routledge in association with the Open University. All of the essays in both volumes were written with the needs of Open University undergraduate students primarily in mind. But the authors also hope that the essays in both volumes will be of interest and value to many other readers with an interest in the place of religion within British society in the period since the end of the Second World War.

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INTRODUCTION: DECIDING HOW FAR YOU CAN GO

by Gerald Parsons

Multifaith petition to Downing Street for peace in Yugoslavia, 26 August 1992. Left to right: Mohamed Chahid Raza (Secretary to Imams and Mosques in the UK), Rabbi Hugo Gryn (West London Synagogue, Chair of Inter-faith Network for UK), Bishop Victor Guazzelli (Roman Catholic Bishop of East London), Ajit Singh (Interfaith Relations for the Namdhari Sangat UK), Michael Feeney (refugee officer for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Westminster), Revd Jonathan Lloyd (Anglican Diocese of Southwark Board of Social Responsibility). Photo: Carlos Reyes-Manzo, Andes Press Agency.

In his novel *How Far Can You Go?* David Lodge presents a witty and amusing, but also deeply serious and at times profoundly moving, portrait of a group of English middle-class Roman Catholics as they move from the restrained stability of their student days in the early 1950s, through the turbulent excitement of the 1960s, and into the complexities and ambiguities of the mid 1970s. Along the way, the various characters are confronted with the dissolution of the distinctive, disciplined and precisely defined Catholic subculture of their youth and early adulthood in which their Catholic duties, beliefs and obligations were clearly and meticulously set down. In its place there emerges a very different Catholicism: less distinctive and much closer to the mainstream of both religious and cultural life in modern Britain; no longer disciplined and precisely defined in its beliefs and obligations but, rather, amorphous, ambiguous and pluralistic in nature. Thus Lodge's novel is also a portrait of an entire religious community and tradition in transition (Lodge, 1980a; 1980b, pp.187–8).

As they live through this transformation in their church, the various characters in the novel find first the desire, then the increasing possibility, and finally the necessity to 'choose for themselves' in matters of religion, of personal morality and of lifestyle. Inevitably, because one of the most profound – and most profoundly unresolved – controversies within Roman Catholicism during this period (and since) concerned the church's teaching on sexuality and contraception, questions of sexual morality and practice are central to the narrative of the novel and to the choices which the characters make. How far they can go in the expression of their sexuality becomes intimately and inextricably bound up with how far they can go in questioning, challenging, dissenting from, or remaining loyal to, the teachings of their church.

But the novel is by no means simply or even predominantly about Catholics and sex. On the contrary, as a key passage in the text makes clear, the central question posed by the novel is not simply 'how far can you go in sexual morality and practice?', but rather, 'how far can you go in questioning and dismantling your religious tradition and belief without throwing out something vital?' (Lodge, 1980a, p.143). And the answer the novel offers is ambiguous. The characters end up at various distances from the Catholicism of their youth and student days. Some remain highly committed Catholics, albeit now variously committed to the very different versions of the pluralistic Catholicism of the mid 1970s. Others stand at a distance from the church, some of them in more or less creative tension with the new Catholicism, questioning even its more liberal parameters; some of them nostalgic for at least a few of the old certainties. Others are now barely Catholic at all – and a few have ceased to believe in even a residual Catholicism. Even the priest and chaplain of their student days has played out a long theological version of 'how far can you go' and ended up

outside the priesthood, married, and no more than 'a kind of Catholic' (Lodge, 1980a, ch.7).

In raising such questions, *How Far Can You Go?* is far more than merely a 'Catholic novel'. The issues the novel raises concerning the relationship between religious authority and religious questioning, the tensions between individual conscience and communal beliefs and practices, and the consequences of dismantling a distinctive religious subculture, are pertinent to other religious traditions and communities as well. The relevance of Lodge's narrative to other Christian churches in Britain during the period since the 1950s has been recognized a number of times (Ecclestone, 1985, p.47; Houlden, 1989, p.268; Parsons, 1992), not least in the companion to this volume. Thus, in these other Christian churches and denominations, the decades after 1945, and especially those from the 1960s onwards, also brought an increasingly intense series of debates over how far you could (or should) go in theological, liturgical or moral experiment and reform, or in ecumenical relationships, or political action and commitment. In addition, however, the novel and the underlying questions that it raises are highly relevant to other religious traditions present in Britain since 1945, and also to a variety of more general questions about the place and status of religion in recent British life and society. Indeed, the explicit theme of this introduction is that the question 'how far can you go?' constitutes, in varying ways and specific formulations, the implicit and underlying theme of all the essays in this volume.

This is most obviously the case in essay 7, in which in examining some of the relationships between religion and changing attitudes to sexual morality the author uses *How Far Can You Go?* as a key text in analysing this theme. Implicitly, however, the theme of how far you can go also lies at or near the heart of the other essays in this volume. Characteristically, though not exclusively, and with varying degrees of directness, the essays focus on questions of how far religious groups or communities can go in adjusting or (re)asserting their allegiances and beliefs in the particular context of recent British life and society. In particular, the essays explore the adjustments and reassertions which have taken place within the overall context of a shift from a society which, in 1945, might still be described relatively unproblematically as 'Christian', to a society in the early 1990s which was unmistakably – if also ambiguously – religiously plural.

Such questions of adjustment or reassertion arise most obviously in relation to particular religious traditions – and not only for those religious traditions that constitute, in a British context, 'minority religions', but also for the historically predominant Christian traditions of Britain. Thus, the author of essay 1 examines the various stages that may be discerned in the responses of Christians and of the churches in Britain to the steady growth in religious pluralism in Britain in the decades since the Second World War. Significantly, he not only notes the relatively slow start made by the

churches and individual Christians in recognizing this new dimension to British religious life, but also emphasizes the variety and diversity of the responses that did eventually emerge. For the Christian tradition in Britain, no less than for other religious groups, the challenge of responding to an increasing religious pluralism included both attempts to adjust traditional Christian doctrines and also reassertions of conventional Christian claims. The encounter between Christianity and other religions within Britain thus included continuing and renewed emphasis upon 'witness and evangelization' as well as 'inter-faith dialogue' and explorations of 'multi-faith worship'.

The accuracy and importance of this emphasis upon the variety of Christian responses to the increased religious pluralism of modern Britain – and the tension between adjustment and reassertion of traditional Christian claims which resulted – is well illustrated by the ongoing debate within the Church of England concerning multi-faith worship. Thus, on the one hand, there are those within the Church of England who vehemently oppose multi-faith worship on the grounds that it compromises the Christian duty to proclaim the gospel in terms that unambiguously assert the uniqueness and finality of Christ. On the other hand, there are other members of the Church of England who enthusiastically support such ventures, seeing them as an important contribution to a positive understanding and response to the *de facto* religious pluralism of contemporary British life; and there is a further group – probably by far the largest – who would occupy a middle position somewhere between these two poles.[1]

The second essay in this volume illustrates no less strikingly the pressing issues raised for a variety of religious traditions by their position, in a British context, as minority religious groups. Such groups, it is pointed out, are confronted by profound questions concerning what is fundamental to the religious tradition in question – and therefore non-negotiable, whatever the cost in terms of alienation from the mainstream of society as a whole, or opposition from the majority – and what is inessential or peripheral, and therefore open to adjustment, adaptation, or even being discarded altogether. The essay suggests three broad alternatives available to a minority religious tradition and its adherents: 'apostasy', involving the

[1] The opponents of multi-faith worship are particularly associated with the 'Open Letter Group' and the organization 'Action for Biblical Witness to Our Nation', for both of which see the introductory essay by Christopher Lewis in *Many Mansions* (Cohn-Sherbok, 1992), a collection of essays that illustrates graphically the sheer complexity of the ongoing debates over interfaith dialogue and its implications. For the response to the issue of multi-faith worship of an official Church of England Consultative Group, see *Multi-Faith Worship? Questions and suggestions from the Inter-Faith Consultative Group* (General Synod Board of Mission, 1992).

abandonment of the very heart of the religious tradition in question; 'accommodation', involving the adjustment and adaptation of a religion, discarding the peripheral, retaining the essential, and expressing it in new terms; and 'renewed vigour', involving the reiteration and reassertion of the religion in question in full, traditional terms.

The dividing line between these responses, it is acknowledged, is by no means clear or fixed. Nor, moreover, is it suggested that the three options of 'apostasy', 'accommodation' and 'renewed vigour' are the only way of defining the alternatives available to religious minorities in Britain.[2] What is clear, however, is the sheer inevitability of having to confront the underlying issue. Whatever response is offered in any particular case, the need to respond to the challenges and dilemmas of 'minority' religious status within a society and culture that is historically 'Christian' – and is now arguably dominated by an imprecise combination of Christian and secular presuppositions – is in itself inescapable.

As recent studies of the changing character – in a British context – of the religious traditions of communities of South Asian origin have shown, the factors involved in the interaction between these traditions and the predominant religious and cultural traditions of recent and contemporary Britain are immensely complex. A proper understanding of the interactions involved will require awareness not only of the particular religious tradition, but also of particular social, cultural and religious backgrounds in the Indian subcontinent; of the ongoing religious life of the subcontinent and its potential impact upon those who have migrated but retain family, cultural and religious links with their former home[3] ; of the history and context(s) of initial migration; of the reactions, both initial and subsequent, of British society to the presence of new religious groups and communities; and of the corresponding reactions and responses of the newly domiciled groups to the demands, dilemmas, challenges and opportunities of their new context (Knott, 1991 and 1992b).

Similarly, it is essential to recognize that the various minority religious traditions have not been (and will not in the future be) simply passive and reactive in their relationship with British society and culture. On the contrary, the various minority religious traditions in recent and contemporary Britain are themselves dynamic and possess varied

[2] Thus, for example, in Volume I, essay 3, the alternative strategies available to Muslims in recent and contemporary Britain are defined as 'assimilation', 'isolation', 'integration' and 'redefinition'.

[3] Thus, for example, ongoing relationships between Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims in India can exert a significant influence upon Sikh, Hindu and Muslim self-perceptions and senses of 'identity' in Britain as well. A particular example of such influence is the impact upon Sikh consciousness in Britain of the storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar in 1984 – for a brief discussion of which see essay 5 in Volume I.

resources for the encounter with the British context – not least in supplying important symbols and senses of identity for young people who might otherwise have found their inherited religious and cultural traditions and identities steadily eroded (Knott, 1992a, pp.12–14 and 1992b, p.5). Nor was it only religions of South Asian origin that displayed such potential in responding to the British context – both Judaism, with its much longer presence in Britain, and the distinctive religious experience of Britain's Afro-Caribbean community, displayed similar vitality.[4]

The fact remains, however, that an engagement with the demands and dilemmas posed by the British context was (and is) inevitable. Such engagement occurs most obviously at 'official' levels – as leaders of religious communities and representative organizations seek to formulate policies to promote and protect their communities' interests in a whole range of areas, including education, the right to observe dietary and other customs, the provision of appropriate facilities for worship and the observance of rites of passage. But it occurs also less obviously – but perhaps equally or even more significantly – in 'unofficial' contexts: in playgrounds, shops and clinics, and on street corners (Knott, 1992c, p.98).[5]

Such engagements and encounters will, inescapably, entail change for those involved – at both official and unofficial levels and in the lives of both communities and individuals. The responses may be in the direction of adaptation, adjustment, assimilation or accommodation; or they may be in the direction of reassertion, renewed vigour, restated distinctiveness or resistance. But whichever the direction of the response, there will have been change; for even the fiercest of reassertions of distinctive and traditional identity will have been given new dimensions precisely by virtue of the new context and challenge which has produced the 'return' to tradition. Moreover, for the community or individual that reasserts or 'returns to' tradition, the very act of 'reasserting' or 'returning' in response to life in Britain constitutes a change from their previous position – change, after all, may be in a conservative direction, as well as a liberal one. And behind such processes of change – whether conservative or liberal – there lies the common underlying question: 'how far can you go?' Thus the

[4] For accounts of the diversity of responses within these and other particular religious traditions in Britain since 1945, see the essays in Volume I.

[5] It is also likely that many of the 'unofficial' engagements will tend to prove distinctly subversive of 'official' attempts to impose clear and rigid distinctions and boundaries – a point neatly illustrated by the case of a fourteen-year-old Valmiki girl in Coventry, who expressed the fact that her parents came from families which followed, respectively, distinctively Hindu and Sikh traditions by saying simply, 'My Dad's Hindu. My Mum's side are Sikhs' – a disarmingly accurate personal statement of identity which might well frustrate and irritate those concerned to define and draw distinctions with undue precision (Nesbitt, 1991, p.9).

'conservative' who reasserts distinctiveness is, in reality, answering Lodge's question by signalling that you cannot go *that* far, or indeed, that things have gone too far already, so that something vital has, already, been lost. Conversely, the 'liberal' is engaged in an ongoing process of calculation and assessment of how far she or he can still go in adjustment and reinterpretation, but without compromising on 'essentials' or endangering the 'integrity' of the religious tradition concerned.

It was not only minority religious traditions, however, that faced variations on the theme of 'how far you can go' in either the adjustment and modification or the maintenance and reassertion of a distinctive religious identity and the association of this with a particular cultural or national community. Indeed, it is possible to read the third essay in this volume, on the relationships between religion, the state and a whole variety of recent and contemporary British identities, as an implicit commentary on precisely this theme.

As the author of essay 3 demonstrates clearly, in the period from 1945 to the early 1990s, the relationships between a variety of particular Christian traditions and denominations and equally varied concepts of English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish identities were matters of concern and controversy. How far did the Church of England still represent something important about English religious and cultural 'identity'? And if it did still represent something significant in this respect, how far was it morally and politically acceptable in an increasingly religiously plural society that it should retain an established status and at least nominal privileges and salience? Or again, how far were 'Scottishness' and Presbyterianism intimately related? And what did claims that they *were* intimately related imply about the large number of Scottish Catholics? Or for that matter about the smaller numbers of Scottish Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Quakers, Jews, Muslims, agnostics, atheists and various other groups?

Similarly, how far was there a historical relationship between the Christian religion and concepts of Welsh identity, culture and nationality? And again, if there was a historic relationship between them, how far did this present profound moral and political implications in the increasingly pluralistic context of the late twentieth century? And in Northern Ireland, meanwhile, the continuing potency of long and deeply held associations between particular traditions of Christian belief and particular cultural and political communities contributed all too painfully to the continuing tragedy of sectarian violence. Nowhere in Britain in the late twentieth century were the various versions of 'how far can you go?' – how far in compromise, how far in determined distinctiveness – more desperately pressing in their implications or more passionately debated than in Northern Ireland.

Such questions were openly debated within the Christian community. Indeed, after the rearrangement of the organizational structures for ecumenical relationships among the British churches in the late 1980s, one of the early publications of the newly constituted Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland was a collection of essays on the theme 'Belonging to Britain'. Subtitled 'perspectives on a plural society', the authors of the essays explored critically many of the questions identified in the preceding paragraph and related their discussion to issues of race and community in recent and contemporary Britain (Hooker and Sargant, 1991). Yet even this very publication and its origins embodied, in a minor but significant way, the ambiguities of this whole area of debate. The general tone of the volume was questioning and critical of received associations between religious and national identities in Britain: although not rejecting such associations out of hand, the authors urged caution in their expression and awareness of their potential dangers. And yet the volume itself was one of the first products of a reconstituted ecumenical body which self-consciously replaced the former single British Council of Churches by four councils for, respectively, England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, linked in turn to an overarching Council for Britain and Ireland. The paradox of an ecumenical structure – exploring how far the churches could go in overcoming historical divisions – divided according to 'national' boundaries is suggestive. Although not to be pressed too far, it provides an effective reminder of the enduring ambiguities in the relationships between Christian and national identities within late twentieth-century Britain.

Nor was this the only ambiguity to be found in late twentieth-century discussions of the relationship between Christian and national identities in Britain. Thus, for example, as shown in essay 3, in Wales the Anglican Church, after disestablishment and thus constitutional separation from the Church of England, became increasingly a self-consciously Welsh institution. Indeed, it has been argued that, as Welsh Nonconformity has declined, the Anglican Church in Wales, with its continuing commitment to a nationwide parochial structure, has become in recent decades the church with the broadest national status and range of pastoral ministry in Wales (Price, 1989). In England, meanwhile – where the Church of England remained established – while a significant (and perhaps increasing) number of the Church of England's own clergy appeared to favour the severing of the remaining links with the state, defenders of the Church of England's continued establishment in the early 1990s included, notably, a leading Roman Catholic church historian, Adrian Hastings (1991) and the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks (1991, pp.68, 97–8).

Significantly, however, such defences of the continued value of the established status of the Church of England tended to depend, crucially, upon the appeal to establishment as a witness to the continued importance and value of religion in general in British society, not the specific virtues or

claims of the Church of England – and also upon the assumption that the Church of England would not take on a role or assert its privileges in a manner that was prejudicial to other religious groups. How far you could go in defending establishment was thus clearly and closely related to how far the continuing establishment was willing *not* to go in asserting special privileges or priorities over others. It was establishment as symbol, rather than establishment as substance that was thus defended – and even this, for some commentators, was going too far and represented an unhealthy constraint upon the development of a genuinely and wholesomely pluralist society (Smart, 1989).

It was, then, a broad (one might also say 'weak') and rather 'cultural' concept of Anglicanism that was at stake in such defences of continued establishment. But that, in itself, posed further questions about how far such a broadly conceived Christian establishment was sustainable in a society which – according to some observers – showed increasing signs of losing touch with its inherited legacy of Christian belief, culture and assumptions. Thus commentators on religion in both England and Scotland discerned an increasing decay in the general awareness of Christian beliefs and in knowledge of the Bible, of hymns and of the 'classic' literary and musical texts of Christianity in Britain. By the 1980s and 1990s, it seemed, the effects of liturgical revision, the decline of Sunday schools, changing patterns of religious education, and a host of other similar developments had already gone too far for a hitherto taken-for-granted familiarity with a whole variety of Christian concepts, texts and phrases to be still sustainable (Brown, 1987, p.255; Osmond, 1993).

Even if this were so, was there a morally and politically viable alternative? For any reassertion of the Christian identity (or, rather, identities) of Britain presented a variety of other issues and difficulties. As both essays 4 and 7 demonstrate, there were potentially sharp controversies about how far various Christian groups were entitled to go in seeking to influence government policies and legislation in relation to both social and economic issues and questions of personal – and especially sexual – morality. How far were the churches and church leaders entitled to go in criticizing particular government social and economic policies, or in defending the principles and provisions of the welfare state? And how far were morally conservative Christians entitled to go in seeking to (re)impose on society in general their particular perception of a proper relationship between the law of the land and a variety of areas and aspects of personal and sexual morality? Meanwhile, any reassertion of the specifically Christian identity of Britain – whether 'liberally' or 'conservatively' conceived in theological terms – also raised acute questions concerning the position and status of other religious groups and traditions. This was made inescapably clear by the heated and prolonged debates over education – and in particular the relationship of religion to

education and the appropriate form of provision for specifically religious education – which were an important feature of religious and political discussion during the 1980s and early 1990s, especially in relation to the 1988 Education Reform Act. As demonstrated in essay 5, attempts to emphasize the historical and contemporary predominance of Christianity in Britain, even while explicitly acknowledging the presence and importance of other religions, promoted a debate which was as fierce as it was enduring.

Moreover, the issues raised by the debate over religion and education were in turn part of a much wider debate about the extent to which – and the ways in which – the distinctive religious customs and values of minority groups in British society were to be respected, defended or protected. Significantly, both of the essays in this volume that address the relationships between religion and politics directly, identify this as an area of debate that became increasingly important in the latter decades of the period under review, and especially from the 1980s onwards. Whether about education; the right to slaughter animals for meat according to religious requirements; the right to wear the symbols of one's religion; the right to observe daily, weekly or life-cycle rituals in the religiously appointed manner; the right to observe traditional customs concerning marriage and relationships between the sexes; or the right to protest and seek redress against perceived insult to one's religion – beneath and within all these particular issues there was an underlying continuity of concern over how far the state could (and should) go in accommodating the separate and distinctive customs of the various minority religious traditions of recent and contemporary Britain.

The discussion of these issues, moreover, was also intimately bound up with wider discussions and debates over race, racism, the claims of 'multi-culturalism', and the rights of racial as well as religious minorities. Thus, for example, in response to the Rushdie affair, the Commission for Racial Equality organized an important series of seminars on the relationship between the law and concepts of 'blasphemy' and 'free speech' in a 'multi-faith society', and on the possible meanings and implications of 'pluralism' or a 'plural society' (Commission for Racial Equality, 1990a, b, and c). Similarly, in the wake of the 1988 Education Reform Act, the Commission published a review and discussion of the issues raised by the debate over the case for extending to Muslim schools the 'voluntary maintained' status already enjoyed by some Church of England, Roman Catholic and Jewish schools (Commission for Racial Equality, 1990d). Or again, examination of the articles that appeared during the 1980s and early 1990s in the journal *New Community* (which was sponsored by the Commission for Racial Equality) reveals a steadily increasing recognition of the relevance of religious themes and issues in the discussion of race relations in recent and contemporary Britain – an interaction also reflected

in the pages of one of the standard histories of race relations in Britain in the post-Second World War era (Hiro, 1991).

However, recognition of such interaction itself prompts two further questions: namely, how far is it possible to discuss questions of race, racism and ethnic minority identities in Britain without attention to religious issues? And conversely, how far can you go in equating the two issues? That the two are intimately and importantly linked is clear. What is perhaps less clear in much discussion of such issues is that the relationship is extremely complex. Thus, on the one hand, it has been pointed out that in discussions of the relationship between race, ethnicity and religion it is often – mistakenly – assumed that religion is a relatively passive, 'given' factor in the construction and maintenance of ethnic identities. Yet to assume this is to neglect the potentially active, dynamic role that religion may play in defining and articulating a given ethnic community's identity and deepest concerns (Knott, 1992a, especially pp.11–14; see also Knott, 1986). Arguably, then, it may be said that discussion of race, race relations and ethnic minority identities in Britain cannot meaningfully go very far at all without a proper regard for the subtle, complex and potentially creative role of religion in such matters.

On the other hand, however, it has also been argued forcefully that in much recent discussion of race, religion and the identities and rights of ethnic minority communities, there has been a potentially dangerous tendency towards the 'racialization of religion'. In particular, it has been argued, many discussions of 'multi-culturalism' have collapsed ideas of culture into matters of religion – a trend much increased in the wake of the Rushdie affair. In the process, it is urged, stereotypical images and conceptions of ethnic minority communities and their religions have, paradoxically, been perpetuated; the restrictive agendas of particular groups and (usually male) leaders within those communities have been facilitated; and the rights of dissenting groups – and especially women – within the ethnic and religious communities concerned have been correspondingly neglected and ignored (Sahgal and Yuval-Davis, 1990 and 1992; Yuval-Davis, 1992; see also Knott, 1992c, pp.96–7).

The particular case of the experience of women within such communities thus presents a compelling caution against going too far in imposing a spurious uniformity upon the religious traditions of minority communities – or indeed taking at face value the claims to 'orthodoxy' or 'normativeness' of particular groups or leaders within such communities. Indeed, as shown in essay 6, the rich variety of women's religious experiences and practices in recent and contemporary Britain demonstrates graphically the danger inherent in taking any merely formal or institutional statement of the nature and norms of a given religion as definitive. Thus, in the last four and a half decades, women in a wide variety of religious traditions and communities in Britain have explored

and developed an increasingly diverse range of religious forms and practices, both within and across 'official' religious boundaries. And in examining such developments the author of essay 6 also poses the further question: how far can you go in identifying distinctively female religious insights, experiences and perceptions?

Religion, then, in the closing decades of the twentieth century, continued to pose a variety of difficult, pressing and intriguing questions for British society. Nor were these simply the particular and peculiar concern of a variety of actively religious minorities within late twentieth-century Britain, a minority interest of little relevance to a generally secular and secularized majority. On the contrary, quite apart from the question of just how far late twentieth-century Britain was or was not in fact a secular society, many of the religious issues which forced themselves onto the agenda of public and political debate in the 1980s and early 1990s carried with them profound implications for British society as a whole. Thus, for example, where (as demonstrated in essays 4, 5 and 7) religious groups sought to enter more effectively into the political process, and influence public policy and legislation on education, broadcasting, attitudes to the family, abortion, and a whole range of issues related to sexual morality, they presented an important challenge to the broadly privatizing and secularizing trend which predominated in British social life and legislation at least from the 1960s onwards. They also posed the question: 'how far should society go in reversing such trends?'[6]

It was the Rushdie affair, however, that stood as the most compelling and potent symbol of the resurgence and continuing relevance of questions about the claims and status of religion in late twentieth-century Britain. This was so not only because it raised so many complex and demanding questions about the rights of religious minorities and the relationships between race, ethnicity and religion, but also because of the particular concept and issue that lay at the heart of the matter. The allegation against Rushdie was one of blasphemy: a quintessentially and fundamentally religious accusation.

Until the late 1970s, the law on blasphemy was commonly thought to be – in practice – a dead letter: an obsolete leftover from a previous era. Then, in 1977, Mary Whitehouse brought it back to life with a successful

[6] For the view that the emergence in the 1980s and early 1990s of an increasingly assertive and well-organized network of Christian groups committed to political lobbying was appropriately interpreted as an attempt to reverse secularizing and liberalizing trends, see, for example, Thompson, 1992, passim, but especially p.85; Tracey and Morrison, 1979, chs 1, 9 and 10; and Weeks, 1989, pp.277–82 and 292–8; as well as essays 4 and 7 in this volume.

prosecution of the publishers of the magazine *Gay News*.[7] Blasphemy, then, remained a potentially 'live' offence in late twentieth-century Britain. As pointed out in essays 2 and 3, the *Gay News* prosecution and conviction in turn prompted a debate on whether the law on blasphemy should be abolished or extended to include religions other than Christianity. That debate, however, proved inconclusive and reform – of any kind – was therefore left unattempted. But the Rushdie affair brought the issue of blasphemy back again into British life and debate and, additionally, sharpened the controversy by extending the range of issues involved: by 1989 the Rushdie affair had moved beyond blasphemy alone to include issues of race, racism and ethnic minority rights; questions of free speech and censorship; and the limits of legitimate protest in response to perceived religious offence.[8]

The ensuing debate was as complicated as it was heated, but the underlying issue in many of the different questions raised was the one with which we have already become so familiar. How far could Rushdie legitimately go in his literary critique of Islam? How far could the Muslim community go in legitimate protest against the book in question? How far could other religious believers, from other traditions, go in supporting them? How far could the state go in meeting Muslim grievances in this matter? How far could you go in maintaining that Britain was a genuinely plural society if these grievances were not met (or at least treated with a similar seriousness and potential for redress as had applied in the *Gay News* case a decade or so earlier)?

Conversely, just how far could Muslim action go? And how far could sympathizers with Muslim outrage go in their support of such protest, without causing equal – though opposite – offence to those in Britain who believed the issue of free speech, and the avoidance of censorship on

[7] For an analysis of the origins, aims and conduct of the *Gay News* prosecution, see Tracey and Morrison, 1979, pp.3–17. For the place of this case and its importance within the broader pattern of debates over personal and sexual morality in Britain in the period since the Second World War, see Weeks, 1989, chs 14–15 and, more briefly, essay 7 in this volume.

[8] It was also significant that, in both the *Gay News* prosecution and the Rushdie affair, the allegations of blasphemy were directly associated with writing – in one case a poem, in the other a novel – of a sexually explicit nature, an association that also occurred in the campaign mounted by some evangelical Christians to prevent the screening of Martin Scorsese's film version of the novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Thus, as Sara Maitland has observed in a discussion of the relationship between artistic creativity and blasphemy (prompted by the controversy over *The Satanic Verses*), recent attempts to use the blasphemy laws as a means of censorship have centred on 'areas of sexual fear'. There is, she suggests, a widespread neurotic sensitivity about sex, as a result of which, 'writing that raises questions about and explores the connection between sex and religion touches raw nerves' (Maitland, 1990, p.124).

religious grounds, to be the primary issues at stake? Or again, how far could critics of the Muslim reaction go in supporting Rushdie without themselves being guilty of offence to Islam? And if Rushdie were to be regarded as having gone too far, then how far could any writer – whether poet, novelist, academic, critic or journalist – go in criticizing particular religious beliefs and traditions without being accused of 'blasphemy' or giving offence to the religious community in question? How far, indeed, were religious opinions and sensibilities entitled to claim protection from criticism or offence at all? How far could you go – supposing you wished to at all – in defining, legally, what constituted criticism or portrayal of a religion in an offensive and unacceptable manner? Indeed, it has been observed that to think seriously about the latter question was to begin to realize how fundamentally unworkable any extension of the blasphemy laws was likely to be. Such reflection was apt to suggest that, once begun, a process of seeking to prohibit publications which caused offence to the religious convictions of others would quickly cease to be a matter of 'how far can you go?' and become instead a problem of 'where on earth – or beyond it – do you stop?' (Easterman, 1992, pp.89–140).

Where, then, do such reflections leave us? And where do they leave the essays in this volume? The essays tend, on the whole, to identify questions rather than to provide answers. They suggest the complexity and the importance of a variety of religious issues within recent and contemporary Britain. They are thus intended as contributions to a continuing debate, attempts to clarify what is at stake and to encourage recognition of the fact that the issues involved are difficult and demanding, not simple or easy to resolve. And they suggest, in particular, that a unifying theme within most, if not all, of the diverse questions and issues addressed is the underlying and enduring dilemma, 'how far can you go?' More specifically, they ask how far any of us can go in any particular direction without throwing out something vital to the preservation of a viable balance in British society between the interests of a variety of particular religious groups, the interests of dissenting groups and individuals within them, the concerns of those who stand outside and claim the right to criticize all religions, and the well-being, coherence and creative co-existence of the community of communities that is Britain at the end of the twentieth century.

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HOW MANY WAYS TO GOD? CHRISTIANS AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

by John Wolffe

Interfaith celebrations at Westminster Cathedral Hall, 28 October 1990. Left to right: Mr J.S. Bhambra, Cardinal Basil Hume, Sir Sigmund Sternberg. Photo: Carlos Reyes-Manzo, Andes Press Agency.

From Greenland's icy mountains,
From India's coral strand
Where Afric's sunny fountains
Roll down the golden sand,
From many an ancient river,
From many a palmy plain,
They call us to deliver
Their land from error's chain.

Can we, whose souls are lighted
With wisdom from on high,
Can we to men benighted
The lamp of life deny?
Salvation! oh, salvation!
The joyful sound proclaim,
Till each remotest nation
Has learn'd Messiah's name.

(Hymns Ancient and Modern, 1909 edn, p.663)

These verses were written in the early nineteenth century by Reginald Heber, subsequently Bishop of Calcutta, and opened the 'Missions' section in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, still used widely in the Church of England in the later twentieth century. This particular hymn, however, tended to fall from favour in more recent anthologies and it can be inferred that Christians in our period were reacting to it in a variety of ways. Some could share wholeheartedly in the spirit of Heber and the missionary movement, convinced that adherence to their own creed was essential for salvation and that the full-blooded proclamation of the Christian gospel to adherents of other religions remained as vital and challenging a task as ever. Others might find a nostalgic attraction in Heber's words as reaffirming traditional certainties, but at other times were increasingly perplexed that not only was there little sign of 'each remotest nation' learning 'Messiah's name', but also that a growing number of people in Britain itself were adherents of different creeds. Others again came to see Heber's sentiments as those of a vanished age of religious dogmatism and imperial arrogance, embarrassing and even offensive in the multi-religious society of post-war Britain.

The purpose of this essay is to explore this range of responses to other religions on a variety of different fronts. Firstly, we shall examine the historical development of Christian thought regarding other faiths and the relationship of these to the theological self-understanding of Christianity. Secondly, there will be a discussion of the various practical measures taken by Christians, including both traditional mission and various forms of dialogue and co-operation. Finally, and more briefly, we shall survey the wider public reaction to other religions, among both the adherents of the churches and those outside them.

1 Ideas and attitudes

It is worth dwelling a little more on the perceptions which lay behind Heber's hymn. There was a clear polarization of 'truth' and 'error', with the beliefs of Innuits, the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh creeds of India and the primal religions of Africa, all bracketed together by the negative definition of being not Christianity. Moreover other religions were perceived as exotic and remote, and the appropriate manner of engagement with them was considered to be an explicitly missionary one, both in the original sense of the word (from the Latin *mittere*, to send), and also in the conviction that the objective had to be the full conversion of their adherents to Christianity. This endeavour was not felt to be offensive to the adherents of other faiths, who were portrayed by Heber as themselves calling for deliverance, because it offered them their only prospect of salvation. Their acceptance of Christ would mean joy and spiritual security in the present life and eternal resurrection with him in the hereafter. In a frequently cited analogy of missionary rhetoric it was no kindness to a man whose house was on fire to refuse to wake him up; equally those in peril of hell fire would (literally) be eternally grateful to those who rescued them from it. Furthermore the 'idolatry' of which other religions were guilty was an offence to the majesty of God, which must be vigorously confronted by the Christian.

These perceptions reflected the conservative theology of those who spearheaded the British missionary movement in the Victorian period. During the second half of the nineteenth century, however, alternative approaches were gaining some ground. Liberal Anglicans such as Frederick Denison Maurice and Rowland Williams acknowledged positive qualities in other religions, while still judging them to be distorted and partial revelations that needed to be completed by acceptance of the Christian Gospel. The combination, however, would open new spiritual possibilities, as anticipated by Brooke Foss Westcott, Bishop of Durham, in 1901:

> 'The races of the East we can hardly doubt will in their season lay open fresh depths in the Gospel which we are unfitted to discover ... [in] our own India, through which lies the entrance to all the missions of the East.'
>
> (Quoted in Maw, 1990, p.162)

This approach, which was focused particularly on Hinduism as the dominant creed of India, became known as fulfilment theology, from the sense that other religions would meet their own deepest aspirations in acceptance of a modified but still consistent Christianity. This view was widely accepted by missionaries in India by the time of the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 and received its most influential statement in John Nicol Farquhar's book, *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913). As the title implied, Farquhar argued that Christ is the culmination of the

spiritual searchings of the Hindu (Langley, 1982, p.132; Maw, 1990, p.325; Sharpe, 1977, pp.24–32; Thomas, 1988, pp.288–94). Meanwhile Max Müller and Monier Monier-Williams pioneered the comparative study of religion. Müller translated numerous *Sacred Books of the East* thus introducing the texts of other religions to an English-speaking readership. He came to see all religions, including Christianity, as springing from 'the sacred soil of the human heart'. Monier-Williams on the other hand, although profoundly sympathetic to Hinduism, still held firmly to the primacy of Christianity (Thomas, 1988, pp.294–7).

During the first half of the twentieth century, the idea that other religions had positive value as a preparation for Christianity was very influential, particularly in Protestant missionary circles, especially after the horror of the First World War had further weakened presumptions to total moral and spiritual superiority. There was also a growing interest in mystical experience, which provided an important potential area of contact (Sharpe, 1977, pp.45–6, 76–81). However at the same time other theologians were reasserting the view that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ was absolutely unique and, accordingly, that all religious activity in which this was not explicitly acknowledged was at best 'misdirected' and subject to divine judgement. The starkest statement of this position was implicit in the work of the great Swiss neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth, but the argument was developed by the Dutchman Hendrik Kraemer (1888–1965) in *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, written for the international missionary conference at Tambaram in India in 1938. Kraemer held that 'God has revealed *the* Way and *the* Life and *the* Truth in Jesus Christ and wills this to be known through all the world.' The religions of people who did not submit to Christ were ultimately human constructions of self-justification. However Kraemer was concerned to separate this theological affirmation from claims to Christian *cultural* superiority, which he strongly opposed (D'Costa, 1986, pp.52–60).

During the two decades after the Second World War the primary context for discussion in Britain of the relationship of other faiths to Christianity continued to be that of overseas mission. An important exception to this was the attitude to the long-standing Jewish community in Britain, now overshadowed by appalled recollection of the Nazi holocaust (Neill, 1961, p.21; *The Times*, 25 June 1946). In general, however, until the 1960s the issues seemed of little relevance to the situation of the churches at home. When the Modern Churchmen's Conference discussed 'Christianity, A Faith for the World' in 1958, the presence of adherents of other religions in Britain was acknowledged, but as something of an afterthought in a discussion in which it was presupposed that encounter would continue predominantly to take place outside Europe (Smith, 1958, pp.83–4).