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**‘Religion, place and space: a framework for  
investigating historical geographies of  
religious identities and communities’**

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## **‘Religion, place and space: a framework for investigating historical geographies of religious identities and communities’**

**Abstract:** Despite a well-established interest in the relationship between space and identity, geographers still know little about how communal identities in specific places are built around a sense of religious belonging. This paper explores both the theoretical and practical terrain around which such an investigation can proceed. The paper makes space for the exploration of a specific set of religious groups and practices, which reflected the activities of Methodists in Cornwall during the period 1830-1930. The paper is concerned to move analysis beyond the ‘officially sacred’ and to explore the everyday informal, and often banal, practices of Methodists, thereby providing a blueprint for how work in the geography of religion may move forward.

**Keywords: Geographies of Religion; Methodism.**

### **I Introduction**

This paper seeks to outline a broad research agenda for taking forward work on religion in geography, drawing on theoretical debates over such issues as institutionalisation and community construction, placed identities and public performance, together with notions of sacredness and private dimensions of faith. Despite a great deal of recent attention paid to the practices and politics of identity formation, geographers have been slow to fully acknowledge the place of religion alongside such axes of identity as race, class, nationality and gender in their analyses (Kong, 2001a). While the spatial practices and performances of place have been explored through a wide range of economic, political and cultural institutions (*cf.* Barnes and Gregory, 1997; Braun and Castree, 2001; Massey, Sarre and Allen, 1999), geographers have spent relatively less time investigating the form and

meaning of developing institutional frameworks of religious organisations. Furthermore, although some important first steps have been made towards the examination of contemporary geographies of religion (e.g. Kong, 1990, 2001a; Naylor and Ryan, 2001, 2003), rarely have geographers attempted to uncover a sense of temporal dynamism and depth by drawing on historical sources to enhance their understanding. Overall, 'geographies of religion' are both disparate and diffuse in terms of scope, purpose and direction, leaving geography as a whole in a weak position to engage with connected debates about religion that are current within other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history and psychology.

We argue that, in order to understand the construction and meaning of society and space, it is vital to acknowledge that religious practices, both in terms of institutional organisation and also in terms of personal experience, are central not only to the spiritual life of society, but also to the constitution and reconstitution of that society. We outline how, as geographers, we may bring forward approaches that will enable us to engage in larger, related debates that are animating other disciplines. The following review examines recent work that has been carried out within geography and other disciplines on the subjects of space, faith and religion. Working within an historical context, we then outline some new theoretical directions for geographies of religion, drawing on debates over locality, community and institutional identity. A research agenda is sketched which draws upon these theoretical underpinnings to critically engage with the important, yet neglected arena of Non-Conformism during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some methodological issues are explored before the paper concludes.

## **II Geographies of religion: sacredness and society**

Kong (2001a: 212) notes that “in many instances, in the same breath that race, class and gender are invariably invoked and studied as ways in which societies are fractured, religion is forgotten or conflated with race”. Despite some promising beginnings (Sopher, 1967; Meinig, 1965; Zelinsky, 1961), it is only in the last ten to fifteen years that religion has attracted some attention from a few geographers interested in the politics of identity, space as a social product and the interplay of secular and sacred meanings in place (Campo, 1991; Emmett, 1995; Graham, 1998; Graham and Murray, 1997; Holloway, 2000, 2003; Holloway and Valins, 2002; Levine, 1986; Pacione, 1999; Park, 1994; Stump, 2000; Winter & Short, 1993; Yiftachel, 1992; Zelinsky, 2001). Further, the literature related to ‘geographies of religion’ is located across a wide range of disciplines, but has yet to be adequately contextualised within geographical debates (Slater, 2004). Kong (1999, 2001a) has recently identified some common theoretical strands in this literature, but still notes how difficult it is to distinguish work on religion from within the discipline of geography from a wider literature emerging from across the social sciences. However, she joins Valins (2000) in asserting that geographers can make a distinct contribution to our understanding of religions, because of the manifold articulations between religion and conceptualizations of landscapes and place, and the contribution of religion in sustaining distinctive material cultures. Indeed, most geographers would acknowledge that aspects of religion - of faith, sacredness and spirituality - intersect with geography at every turn, from understanding the construction of identity or the meaning of bodily practices at a personal level, to unpicking the complex relationships and politics of institutional space and place at a regional or national level. It is this broad scope which perhaps becomes a problem when trying to make sense of what a ‘geography of religion’ should look like.

Part of this problem rests upon what Kong (2001a) sees as an artificial separation of the *sacred* from the *secular*, the *poetic* from the *political*. As Tuan (1978: 93) has noted, we tend to label certain buildings, such as mosques, synagogues and churches as somehow *sacred*, whilst we think of everything else - from villages, suburbs, cities or nation states, to landscapes, workplaces and economies - as, almost by definition, *secular* spaces. This dualism finds expression in, for example, Isaac's (1961-2: 12 cf. Kong, 1990: 358) misleading comment that the geography of religion should deal with the task of *separating* "the specifically religious from the social, economic and ethnic matrix in which it is embedded". More recently, however, this neat, instrumentalist and decidedly one dimensional conceptualisation of 'religion' has been overturned in favour of a number of more nuanced and complex understandings of how religion may enter into geographical readings of the social world. For example, contemporary research has engaged many diverse themes: the mobility of religious adherents in acts of pilgrimage and heritage tourism (Graham & Murray 1997; Huntsinger & Fernandez-Gimenez 2000; Turner & Turner 1978), the sacred dimensions of domestic space (Dwyer 2003; Kong 1993, 2002; Prorok 2000; Tong & Kong 2000), the iconography and symbolism of religious landscapes (Harvey 1979; Lane 2001; Rawding 1990), the sacralisation of nature (Szerszynski 2004; Deane-Drummond & Szerszynski 2003), the contribution of religion to workplace and industrial economies (James 2001; Taylor and Bell 2001; Wallace 1978), the geopolitical dimensions of religion (Fox 2001; Ó Tuathail 1999), the religious mediation of national and ethnic identities (Jenkins 2003; Palmer 2002; Pope 2001; Raivo 2002) and postcolonial perspectives on religion (Morin & Guelke 1998; Scott & Simpson-Housley 2001). By including the work of theologians (e.g. Ward 2000) and historians (e.g. Hempton 1996;

Valenze 1985; Wilson 1999) this list demonstrates the theoretical and empiricaleclecticism associated with research into religion, but which can all be considered geographical in respect of the arguments they develop. Indeed, De Rogatis (2003: 9) argues that “[a]mong the most suggestive studies are those that consider space as a point of cultural and religious contact, exchange, and sometimes conflict. Spaces may be read, therefore, not only as sacred or profane, but also as the reflections and reproductions of religious and social desires and anxieties.”

There are, however, significant gaps in this developing literature. Kong (2001a) identifies three linked directions for future research. First, she recognizes the possibilities of extending the site of analysis beyond ‘officially sacred’ spaces. Second, she argues that analytic categories must not be treated as substantive categories. “Religion, like class and race, must be a matter for historical and place-specific analysis rather than taken as *a priori* theory” (ibid. 226). Third, she sees the need for analysis at various scales: global, national, regional, local and bodily. To this agenda, we would add that relatively little is known about how community identities in specific places are built around a shared sense of religious belonging. After all, as Foucault noted “a culture cannot understand itself without first understanding its implicit connection and development within the constructs of religious belief and practice” (Carrette, 1999: 33). Finally, despite Holloway and Valins’s (2002) acknowledgement of the importance of a historical dimension to geographies of religion, such a consideration has been almost completely ignored by geographers, with the exception of Harvey (2000, 2002, 2003), Donkin (1978) and Sack (1986).

It is vital to understand the historical constitution of religious identities in space and place (Collison, 1999). As Eliade (1957: 17) notes, “there are differences in religious experience explained by differences in economy, culture and social organisation - in short, by history”. Religions of whatever kind demonstrate their legitimacy and establish their provenance by reference to specific histories and geographies, which are codified in cultic and banal texts, documents, devices, instruments, protocols and systems of discipline. The opportunity exists, therefore, to trace religious constructions of time and space, and their different effects, through the study of material cultures and discourse. Through the historical analysis of almanacs, church bells and ecclesiastical rounds, for example, Thrift (1988) was able to link the emergence of a new medieval time discipline to recalcitrant lay authorities and the challenge of a modernizing bourgeoisie.

The production of religious narratives and cultic traditions are vital ways in which communities remember, re-tell and re-articulate crucial aspects of their historic identity as the “basis for self-understanding and renewed ethical action” in the present (Middleton and Walsh, 1995: 93). For Ricoeur (1995), religious discourse contains interpretative schemas that bind significant events into sequences, or historical narratives, in which the tensions between the unpredictability of human contingency and the inevitable outcomes of divine sovereignty, for instance, are played out and rationalized. All religions construct space and time through their own specific ontological commitments, and so it follows that in order to understand the nature of religious landscapes, representations and practices, work must be contextualized within a temporal and spatial framework that is cognizant of these commitments. On the one hand, the spatialities of religion can help us to understand its histories. Religions are self-aware about history, constructing their identity within a series

of repetitive ritual performances. On the other hand, historical perspectives can inform the study of the geographies of religion. A sign of the growing interest in historical geographies of religion is the recent quantification and mapping of the 1851 Census of Religious Worship, which has provided fresh perspectives on the historical development of religious faith in the UK (Snell and Ell, 2000). But this by no means exhausts the exciting possibilities for historical geographies that engage with the spatio-temporal constructions associated with religion. In working to build on Kong's agenda and address some of the gaps and elisions in the literature, the next section considers both a new approach to understanding space, place, identity and religion and the neglected empirical example of nineteenth century Methodism.

### **III Methodism and Community**

In seeking to answer the 'big' questions about the dynamics of national political and religious change, historians of Methodism have failed to adequately address the local contexts and place-based communities in which Methodism arose (Hempton, 1996). Methodism has a presence in this literature in two main places. First, there is the work of church historians and theologians, which seeks to understand the development of Methodist beliefs and practices. This literature focuses, for the most part, on the early period of Methodist development in the eighteenth century and Methodism's founder John Wesley, although other periods and individuals have received attention (Rack, 2002; Oldstone-Moore, 1999; Ward, 1976). Geographers rarely cite theological literature, although recent work by MacDonald (2002), Valins (2000) and Slater (2004) has drawn attention to the importance of understanding theologies and religious practices involved in the social construction of space.<sup>1</sup>



A second Methodist presence is found in an extensive historical literature (Armstrong, 1973; Currie, 1968; Davies et. al., 1965, 1978, 1983; Edwards, 1943; Hempton, 1984, 1996, 2005; Taylor, 1935; Thompson, 1968; Wearmouth, 1945, 1954).<sup>2</sup> These histories are typically situated within the context of the rise of industrial capitalism, the growth of market economies, the rise of religious pluralism and the democratisation of religion and politics over the last 250 years. In particular, Halévy's (1938) proposition that Methodism drained the revolutionary zeal from the British working classes has dominated debate (Gilbert, 1976, 1979; Hobsbawm, 1964; Hobsbawm and Rude, 1969; Jaffe, 1989; Olsen, 1990; Thompson, 1968; Ward, 1972).

David Hempton argues that the focus on Halévy's thesis has stifled discussion of other aspects of Methodist belief and practice, asserting that,

[a]ll one can do is to restore the colour and texture of religious debates and personalities at a time when religion was important to people and to reapply Edward Thompson's words, to rescue Methodists 'from the condescension of posterity', not least of its historians (Hempton, 1984: 17-18).

Our review of Hempton (1996) highlights five neglected areas of enquiry. First, because so much theorizing has been conducted under the shadow of the Halévy thesis, there is great value in conducting more local studies of Methodist development. In so doing, Hempton recognizes the need to understand Methodism more adequately in its historical and locally specific spaces of emergence. Second, and in a linked point, Hempton argues for the development of many Methodisms at many times and in many places. Third, although the

theological literature is well advanced, Hempton notes that less is known about the respective commitments of full members, adherents, local preachers, class leaders, part-time officials and itinerant ministers. In other words, we need to explore the everyday social dynamics of this diverse set of people, who varied widely in their level of belief and commitment. As Gilbert notes,

There were many more chapel communities than there were ministers, and in much of England the possibility of adequate ministerial surveillance and control over the attitudes and activities of the laity simply did not exist. In any case, where their commitment is more than perfunctory the members of any voluntary association inevitably exercise a powerful influence on the character of the associational culture, even if it is not their views which are articulated in official pronouncements (Gilbert, 1979: 384).

Fourth, Hempton draws our attention to the gendering of Methodist practice and participation, and how this changed over time. Finally, Hempton suggests that the influence of Methodism in family life, the workplace, spaces of leisure or other institutional spheres is a neglected area of enquiry.

In sum, because of the scope and direction of historical debate, the re-creation of Methodism as a religious and social experience is poorly understood. Although Methodism was an international religious movement, it was expressed in communities and embedded in the particularities of time and space, thriving in expanding and pluralistic societies and benefiting from the erosion of old structures and the relative strengths and weaknesses of established denominations. “Methodism was carried by people to people”, but this is not

reflected in the academic literature, which is dominated by a focus on Methodist theology, ministry and organization (Hempton, 1996: 2).

It is our contention that these issues, whilst adding to an historical debate, are also fundamentally *geographical*, and that attending to the multiple practices, performances and spatialities of Methodism in the way that Hempton suggests, will begin to fill the significant gaps in the geographies of religion outlined above. Before addressing these issues, however, we outline briefly a practical application of our ideas to research on Methodism in Cornwall (UK) c. 1830 - 1930, an example that has suffered intellectual neglect by geographers and historians of religion (cf. Davies, 1997; Green, 1991; Milden, 2001; Rule, 1982, 1996). In doing so, we outline some ways in which it is possible to address the agendas of both Kong and Hempton through a place-specific analysis of religion.

#### **IV The neglected geographies of Methodism in Cornwall**

By focusing on Methodism in Cornwall, it is possible to reflect on the wider role of religion in society, not reifying religious expression into an homogenous or natural site of identity, but rather examining the complex and multi-faceted ways in which aspects of religious practice interact with processes of social construction. In particular it is necessary to move beyond the spaces of the church or chapel and pay attention to the links between community work and religious belief by focusing on the everyday, and often banal, formal and informal practices of Methodists, from involvement in education, charities and auto-didactic cultures, to the organisation of sports and social events.<sup>3</sup> Further, in reviewing the extant research on Methodism in Cornwall, it is evident that the notion of ‘Cornish

communities' and their cultural formation is poorly conceived and draws upon an inadequate conceptualization of religious landscapes.

The most commonly accepted narrative is that Methodism was first brought to Cornwall by a Bristol sea captain and Methodist Joseph Turner, who established a religious society in St Ives in 1743 (see figure 1, location map).<sup>4</sup> Two itinerant lay preachers, Thomas William and William Shepherd, also arrived to look into the possibility of Methodist work in West Cornwall, followed by John and Charles Wesley (Shaw, 1967). Throughout the 1740s, Societies were set up in over thirty different places, mostly in the west of Cornwall.<sup>5</sup> Preaching was mainly conducted in the open air, but society meetings took place in private houses (Shaw, 1967). On the day of the Census of Religious Worship in 1851, an estimated 113,510 people (both members and non-members) attended Methodist services in Cornwall (Orme, 1991). This number amounted to 32 percent of the population of the county and 65 per cent of its Church-going population. This rise in the strength of Methodism in Cornwall however, has to be understood in the context of frequent secessions from the parent body of Wesleyan Methodism, and various unifications, ultimately leading to the 1932 consolidation under one institution (see figure 2, simplified diagram of Methodist division and union in Cornwall).

The rise and fall of many of these sects have been outlined by local historians, who, while describing the neglected histories of leaders such as William O'Bryan (founder of the Bible Christian sect), Henry Mudge (Wesleyan lay preacher and temperance reformer), Samuel Dunn (founder of the Wesleyan Reformers sect) and James Teare (temperance agitator), have failed to investigate how these charismatic individuals mobilised and encouraged

constituency-forming processes in local communities.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, many academic historians have struggled to understand the different geographies of Methodism in Cornwall and the effects of division and unification on local communities in different places. David Luker (1987) has provided the most comprehensive attempt to describe the geographical diversity of Methodism in Cornwall. However, despite his sensitivity to local economies, the uneven development of ecclesiastical structures, and the agency of specific individuals, his work has preserved the notion that there is an essential Cornish identity, which has been mediated by Methodism. According to Luker (*ibid.*: xi):

...the particular regional identity traditionally sensed by the Cornish became more clearly defined and expressed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and as with nonconformity in Wales, Methodism in Cornwall came to serve as a badge of regionalism, and as a buttress to Cornish 'nationalism' in the face of encroaching forces and influences from 'up-country' England.

Not only does this offer a superorganic notion of Cornishness but also positions Methodism as an undifferentiated movement, acting in the service of Cornish nationalism. Rather than this unproblematic one-dimensional relationship, it is more appropriate to see Cornish identity as modified by, and in turn modifying, other kinds of identities constructed through religion, class, gender, locality and race (see for instance, Christie, 1998; Daniels, 1993; Dwyer, 1999a; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

In developing an historical geography of Methodism in Cornwall we contest the common perception that there was a monolithic and homogenous experience of 'Methodism' amongst an equally monolithic and homogenous 'Cornish Community'. According to Milden (2005) Methodism was weakly associated with perceived Celtic or Cornish

ethnicities at the turn of the twentieth century, and argues that although leading Methodists were involved in nationalist organisations like ‘Tyr ha Tavas’ (Land and Language, 1932) and numerous ‘Old Cornwall Societies’ (1920s), Methodism in Cornwall seldom operated as an ideological support for Cornish nationalism during the period 1830-1930. In contrast to Methodism in Wales (Pope, 2001), which served to mobilise and politicise collective national consciousness, therefore, Methodism in Cornwall, c. 1830-1930, forged strong local ties with particular places and landscapes, having more in common with the form of localised attachments identified by Fishman (1972) in Galicia (Spain) c. 1900.

In order to comprehend how a fractious collection of formal and informal religious Methodist institutions helped to configure complex local, communal and individual experiences in Cornwall, a robust conceptual framework is required that reflects and develops recent directions in cultural geography. This, we believe can be found in the work of Paasi (1991, 2002a, 2002b, 2003), Williams (1973), Gilbert (1991) and Pred (1984) through which it is possible to produce an ‘imaginative understanding of local structures of feeling, place-based identities and cultures of hybridity’ (MacLeod and Thrift, 2001: 670). The next section explores these possibilities in greater detail.

## **V Moving the geography of religion forward**

In order to arrive at an improved understanding of religious belief and practice, we argue that geographers should be seeking to make links with conceptual developments that highlight the spatial practices, techniques and scales through which communities are imagined and constructed (Anderson, 1991; Cohen, 1985; Gilbert, 1988; Ley, 1989; MacLeod & Thrift, 2001; Paasi, 2002a, 2002b, 2003). Drawing upon this literature, we

argue that it is possible to restore sensitivity to the historic and contemporary, symbolic and communal aspects of religious identity formation and its spatialities.

Central to the resurgent interest in community formation is the recognition that the production of meaning and identity are contested processes, which involve institutions and individuals in the co-constitution of place (Kong 2001b; Dwyer, 1999b; Putnam, 2000; Revill, 1993; Young, 1990). This approach rejects perspectives that situate history as a mere backdrop against which events take place in a spatial arena, in preference for approaches that examine how spatial units, like Cornwall, become institutionalised historically through cultural processes (see Harvey, 2000, 2003). Working within this framework, Newman and Paasi (1998) suggest that the key to understanding processes of place based identity formation and the social construction of space is found in the analysis of boundaries. They argue that the *institution of something*, that is, to give something identity, is a function of the establishment of socio-cultural boundaries and the creation of distinction. Likewise, Elias with Scotson (1965) in their micro-geographical analysis, argue that identification necessitates the social construction of difference, which involves the creation of socio-spatial boundaries and the cultural distinctions between insiders and outsiders, between the self-image (individual) and the group-image (society). Newman and Paasi (1998: 187) argue, therefore, that:

[b]oundaries and their meanings are historically contingent, and they are part of the production and institutionalization of territories and territoriality (Paasi, 1991). Even if they are always more or less arbitrary lines between territorial entities, they may also have deep symbolic, cultural, historical and *religious*, often contested, meanings for social communities (*emphasis added*).

Ansi Paasi's (1991) conceptual understanding of institutions is particularly relevant to our study of Methodism. Paasi positions institutions (in this case, the different manifestations of Methodist organisation) as some of the most enduring features of social life.

Following Paasi (1991), we see Methodism in all its variety as being sustained through three key groups of institutions. First, formal identity-framing vehicles such as education, law and local politics. For example, Sunday schools acted as a means of communicating the values of Methodism to young minds, inculcating a sense of belonging and responsibility as well as communicating key theological tenets. Paasi's second group of institutions includes organisations rooted in civil society such as the print media, societies and clubs. In Cornwall these took the form of Methodist magazines, temperance groups and self-improvement clubs, for example. Finally, Paasi highlights the importance of informal conventions such as social mores, which continually reproduce the material and mental existence of (in Paasi's writing) the region. These are the social contexts in which Methodism works as an axis of identity formation, but it is important to note that the particular configuration of people, places, institutions and events led to hybrid forms of communal identity. Paasi's conceptual framework allows us to take account of different Methodisms in different places – not just the ways in which different Methodist groups operated, but also the way that shared beliefs were played out in different local contexts. In so doing, we “remember the intersections between the politics and poetics of religious place, identity and community, rather than to treat them as inherently separate” (Kong, 2001a: 224-225). In this sense, we recognize that places themselves are hybrid expressions that are always in a state of becoming (Pred, 1984).



It is Pred's image of place being a dynamic and socially contingent category that alerts us to the view of community as a social process. Drawing on David Smith's concept of community, Gilbert (1991) shows that communities need constant nurturing and vigilance to give their constituents a meaningful sense of belonging. This is illustrated in Billig's (1995) discussion of the banal and often overlooked ideological habits that reproduce national identities. As Paasi demonstrates, these habits are present within everyday life and are sustained through a variety of techniques, discourses and practices. Moreover, "such habits include those of thinking and using language" (Billig 1995: 8). Schmidt (2000) and Matthews (1998), for example, draws our attention to the vocal culture of Methodist sound, whilst Lobody (1993), associates early Methodism with the rise of a public female discourse that was grounded in an emphasis on communalism, orality and liberty. Likewise, Hempton (2005, 56) reminds us that

The Methodist message was inexorably bound up with the medium of oral culture. Itinerants preached, exhorters exhorted, class members confessed, hymns were sung, prayers were spoken, testimonies were delivered, and revival meetings throbbed with exclamatory noise.

The communities that we are looking at in Cornwall, therefore, are not stable homogenous, unified entities, but are constantly rehearsed in and through performance and practice of Methodist ideals both inside and outside the church and chapel. During the nineteenth century there was scarcely a framework of life – public or private, national or local – that was not deeply affected by Methodist enthusiasm (Hempton, 1996: x). Therefore more research is needed on the 'language of Methodism' and its precise relationship with the

rhythms of everyday life. We argue that it is through the ordinary actions of everyday life that Methodists, building on their doctrines of sacred duty, created structures of feeling and a sense of belonging akin to Williams' 'knowable communities' (1973). It is necessary, therefore, to move beyond the performance of Methodist religious belief in formal chapel services to investigate the impact of Methodist spirituality and religious devotion in the life of wider communities in areas such as Cornwall. With this in mind, our study of Cornwall<sup>7</sup> seeks to critique a simplistic reification of the region as an homogenous stable block, which is characteristic of so much work on Cornwall in general and Methodism in Cornwall in particular (*cf.* Lake et. al., 2000; Luker, 1987; Du Maurier 1967; Harvey, 1938).

## **VI Questions of Method**

New ways of conceptualizing place-based identities have been developed in cultural geography, but historical geographers of religion have been slow to apply critical interpretive methods to existing well used archival sources, or recognize the potential of hitherto neglected material. Looking back over the last twenty years, it is difficult to name more than a handful of historically contextualised studies that apply new perspectives to research on Methodist institutions and sources. Significant exceptions include work on aspects of Methodism and gender (Valenze, 1985; Wilson, 1999), politics (Hempton, 1996; Mildon, 2001; Pope, 2001; Rule, 1996) and culture (Davies, 1997; Green, 1991; Rule, 1982). The limited perspectives on Methodist histories and cultures is in part a function of the dominance of Halévy's discussions and in part a limitation that has developed because of the exclusive use of certain official sources from chapel, Circuit, District and Conference. Indeed, Gilbert (1979: 384) warns explicitly against "reliance on official

statements or ministerial perceptions to construct an authentic picture of Methodism as a popular religious culture”.

There are challenges in tracing particular configurations of identity framing vehicles, organisations and social mores in particular places. First, Cornwall is a large county across which Methodist activity of whatever variety, both within and beyond the chapel and formal worship, was very diverse. This inevitably means that choices have to be made about where to focus intellectual effort. Linked to this practical issue is a second question about how to trace the work of community building within chapels, circuits and the district as a whole. The choice of sources that have traditionally underpinned research on Methodism in Cornwall reflect intellectual concerns with questions of theology and social history. Hence, the 1851 religious census, Circuit minutes, District minutes and Conference minutes have been used to reconstruct religious affiliation and chapel attendance, whilst the writings of key Methodist figures such as John and Charles Wesley have provided insights into the dimensions of Methodist theology in all its varieties. Circuit and Conference minutes only go so far in allowing us to trace the effort that went into creating a constituency beyond the spaces of the chapel. As Gilbert argues, “[t]he Wesleyan ministers were itinerants; while they came and went the chapel communities persisted” (Gilbert, 1979: 385). Third, it is necessary to pay attention to the construction of the archive itself, for, as Kurtz argues, “organisations are, in substantial part, a product of a particular, historically constituted filing system”, with their institutional technologies and practices that are designed to produce coherent organizational identities that can be more readily imagined and naturalized (2001: 26). Fourth, we have noted that Methodism was largely an oral movement, which presents particular methodological problems for

historians seeking to reconstruct the past using written sources (cf. Hempton 2005). One approach to this problem is suggested by Schmidt (2000), who argues that researchers must develop imaginative conceptual approaches to the study of past oral cultures that move away from the security of modern social scientific explanations.

Kurtz (2002) also makes important observations on methodology and the role of the historical geographer in the narration of local histories. Exploring the history of Stockbridge, Kurtz notes that the instrumentalist frameworks employed in critical geographical literature, often presume identity whilst showing that a particular version of history is invented. This one sided approach has led geographers to ask questions about “[w]hat actors, resources, and historical-geographic articulations” facilitated the production of particular historical narratives (ibid. 53). For Kurtz, it is important that we develop an understanding of history as a performed activity that has an ambiguous relationship to the events that Williams (1973) calls ‘real history’. Furthermore, it is important to recognise the Gordian knot of past and present interconnections, which are enshrined in communal performances of remembering and forgetting.

Thus the task of tracing Methodist constituency beyond the spaces of the chapel requires the creative use of documentary sources which have yet to receive critical scrutiny. For example, books of pulpit notices, which listed announcements to be made during the service, provide a glimpse of how Methodists engaged in efforts to create a constituency beyond formal worship. These efforts included Methodist Class meetings, choir practice, Sunday schools, parades, outings and gatherings at which buns were distributed to children. Other sources include newspapers like *The Cornishman*, *The West Briton* and *The*

*Cornubian*, which reported on activities like Sunday school anniversary celebrations, tea treats and parades. Likewise, the rise of teetotalism as a Methodist philosophy can be traced through newspapers, pamphlets, treatises, and through District and Conference minutes. These can be set alongside national magazines like the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* and *Bible Christian* which contain articles specific to Cornwall as well as broader reflections on Methodist history, politics, philosophy and missionary work. Add to these the personal diaries, letters and papers of individuals and there is a large amount of hitherto neglected historical material, which can provide significant new insights into the lives of Methodists in Cornwall between 1830 and 1930.

## **VII Conclusion**

It is clear that geographers have something to contribute to contemporary and historical debates about religion, space, place and identity emerging across a range of disciplines. In reviewing the central themes which highlight the value of a new direction in the geography of religion, we have not only contextualised recent work that has been done in geography but also identified how this work may be taken forward, drawing upon specific theoretical developments that have been influential within other realms of geographical research. In light of the eclecticism of method, theory and subject matter, together with the elusive nature of 'religious geography', it is vital to retain a focus on religion as an analytical category and to sketch out the ground over which the discipline of geography can engage with religion, where a geographical sensibility may help in our understanding, and the terrain over which geographers can converse with historians, sociologists, anthropologists and theologians in a mutually-beneficial light.

In this paper we have drawn on literature from the geographies of religion, community and the history of Methodism to build an argument for a renewed engagement with the politics, poetics and spatialities of religion, and specifically of Non Conformism. Methodists' beliefs in auto-didacticism, temperance and social engagement have a *spatiality* as well as a history that demands attention. Historical cultural geography requires an improved understanding of how religion as an axis of identity formation intersects with other axes of identity, belief and practice, and which, crucially, is often performed outside of the overtly 'sacred' spheres of religious adherence. The investigation of the spatialities of religion that lie beyond the church and chapel allows a critical examination of how aspects of religion intertwine with the construction and performance of everyday dynamic and hybrid place-based identities. Utilising the conceptual apparatus of cultural geography provides an opportunity to develop geographies of religion that are sensitive to historically contingent processes of identity formation. In this revitalised approach, religion is understood as a relational phenomenon with distinctive spatialities that are involved in human life.

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## **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> For the interested scholar, Methodist theological and church histories are available in the US (cf. Baker 1976; Collins and Tyson 2001; Richey et. al. 2000; Richey and Rowe 1985; Richey, Campbell and Lawrence 1997; Richey, Rowe and Schmidt 1993), UK (Semmel 1973) and Irish contexts (Cooney 2001). Theological and ecclesiastical perspectives are also developed in the *Proceedings of the Wesleyan Historical Society* (<http://wesleyhistoricalsociety.org.uk/>).
- <sup>2</sup> This historical literature is also available for an American context, (cf. Bucke 1964; Hatch & Wigger 2001; Norwood 1974; Owen 1998; Wigger 2001). The United Methodist Archives Centre is located at Drew University, New Jersey, and can be explored online <http://www.depts.drew.edu/lib/uma.html>.
- <sup>3</sup> For example, throughout the nineteenth century local Methodist societies became increasingly involved in the provision of Sunday schools, mutual improvement societies (which might run lecture series and lantern shows), libraries and reading groups, debates and recitations, musical events, sewing clubs, seaside trips, domestic and foreign missionary societies and temperance clubs (including the Band of Hope). Indeed, the Methodist church acted as a total institution that sought to colonize the entire spare time of many of its adherents.
- <sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the early history of Methodism in Cornwall, see Brown (1946), Hamilton-Jenkin (1945) and Shaw (1965, 1967). Many of these narratives are striking for their heroic format.
- <sup>5</sup> Wesleyan Methodism, along with other Methodist sects, was organised through a variety of different Meetings. Each Meeting performed a different religious and administrative function. At the most parochial scale was the Band Meeting, a weekly gathering of Methodists designed to foster fellowship and pastoral care. Bands typically comprised no more than eight people, who met to engage in mutual confession of faults and to pray for one another. The Band overlapped with a larger group, called the Class Meeting. The Class Meeting comprised a group, anything from eight to fifty in number, which performed similar functions to the Band. Individual attendance was carefully recorded in a Class book and a quarterly membership ticket was administered to regular attenders. Until the 1890s church membership was based exclusively upon membership of a Class, after which it was calibrated through attendance at Society Meetings. These latter meetings date back to the origins of Methodism and comprise the meeting of all the members in a local place. Society members gathered for worship and to elect representatives to the local Leadership Meeting. Co-ordinating and facilitating the activities of Societies was the Circuit Meeting. A 'circuit' is the basic organisational framework of the Methodist Church, being a regional preaching round. The spatial scale of circuits depended upon local conditions and the strength and number of Methodist Societies. Circuit Meetings were held quarterly and dealt with matters of finance, preaching, chapel building and Society rules. Circuits were themselves administered and monitored by bi-annual District Meetings. Being similar to an Anglican Diocese, District Meetings were themselves the intermediary for the annual Meeting of the Methodist Conference. The Methodist Conference was, and remains today, the supreme legislative body responsible for the oversight of the life of the church and the interpretation of its doctrine. The division between Wesleyanism and sects like the

Methodist Reformers and the Methodist New Connexion, were principally generated over arguments about the balance between lay and ministerial representation at Conference. In any case the Conference Meeting debated issues of national significance that affected Methodist organisation and operation (see Vickers 2000).

<sup>6</sup> See the work of the Cornish Methodist Historical Association, which was formed in 1960 as the county branch of the Wesley Historical Society. The Association publishes a bi-annual Journal and Occasional Publications. See Thomas Shaw (1967, 9-10) and Lake et. al. (2000, 116-122), for a list of key contributors and local historians of Methodism in Cornwall.

<sup>7</sup> Brace, C., Bailey, A.R. and Harvey, D.C. 2005: Beginning and Becoming: researching Methodist identities and communities in Cornwall (UK), c.1830-1930. *Paper presented at the 6th Irish Postgraduate Training Consortium (IPTC), Glencree, Co. Wicklow*; Bailey, A.R., Harvey, D. and Brace, C. 2005: Educating the Cornish Subject: Methodist Sunday schools in West Cornwall, c. 1830-1930. *Paper presented at Social History Society Conference, January 8th, Trinity College Dublin*; Harvey, D. Brace, C. and Bailey, A.R. 2003: Religion Place and Space: a framework for investigating Methodist identities and the construction of communities in Cornwall (UK), c. 1830-1930. *Paper presented at 12<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Historical Geographers, December 10<sup>th</sup>, Auckland, New Zealand*; Brace, C., Bailey, A.R. and Harvey, D.C. 2005: Disciplining youthful Methodist bodies in nineteenth century Cornwall. *Paper presented at Annual Conference of the Association of American Geographers, April 9<sup>th</sup>, Denver Colorado, USA*.