

Introduction

This paper explores geography as a reflexive and situated practice. Based upon a piece of collaborative research into Methodist communities in nineteenth century Cornwall (UK), we aim to show how the collective scholarly voice of three researchers is the contested product of negotiation between the practices (including methodologies), beliefs and identities of the researchers involved. Of critical importance to this argument, therefore, are the ways in which we construct an historical archive, the form of the sources we interpret and the imaginary and material spaces through which we move.

Feminist geographers have made significant progress in identifying the role of reflexive practice, positionality and the politics of research (Rose 1997, 2000). This work has clearly influenced historical geography, within which there has been progress in exploring the genealogy of the discipline, with a strong focus upon the institutional role of geography and specific geographers (Butlin 1988; Livingstone 1992; Driver 1995; Lorimer and Spedding 2002; Withers 2002; Withers and Mayhew 2002). Reflexive commentaries on the practice of historical geography have appeared in a special issue of *Historical Geography* in 2001 and *Practicing the archives* (Gagen, *et al.* 2007). Meanwhile, Steedman's (2001) *Dust* and Burton's (2005) *Archive Stories* expose the everyday routines of the researcher and relate them to the practice of research.

Steedman uses Derrida's (1996) metaphor of 'archive fever' to describe the emotions that accompany the performance of research, including the everyday anxieties

associated with the management of research resources, which accompany a desire to uncover the origins, archetypes or beginnings of phenomena. Wanting to know what happened in the past is connected to our development and self-understanding as modern individuals. Steedman (2005, 74-75) encourages the researcher to view archives as the “fissured place where the stirrings of desire can be felt”, with the proviso that the historian in the archive is “always the *unintended* reader of the book”. Concomitant to this idea of the researcher’s position in relation to the research, Burton encourages us to extend our notions of what constitutes an archive, noting that it is “really up for grabs now – and that is a very good thing” (Burton, 2005, 289). By encouraging us to read against the grain and think continuously about the presence and absence of archive resources, she foregrounds the place of the researcher in organising and re-imagining the past.

Participatory methodologies are one current manifestation of social and cultural geographers’ attention to the politics and practices of research conducted with living human beings as participants (Pain 2004). These methodologies focus on the relationship between the researcher and researched. Rose, (2002), McEwan (2003), and Lorimer (2003) amongst others have started to draw attention to the role of the researcher in historical geography, but there has been less attention paid to the relationships between different researchers working together. Can the creative tensions that emerge between researchers be highly productive and serve to animate (historical) geography? How do our contingent and historical relationships, as researchers, make a difference to the geographies we construct?

The catalyst for these questions is a research project, the anticipated outcome of which was an innovative contribution to the historical geographies of religion. In conducting this research it became apparent that we needed to be more reflexive about the ways in which geographical methodologies are influenced by the interpretive strategies deployed by geographers. These strategies are guided by our contingent and historical situatedness with respect to a great number of factors about which we have varying degrees of consciousness and knowledge. Mindful of these fragile interpretive strategies, the paper proceeds analogically by narrating a complex story about the construction of geographical knowledge by three geographers, working with a range of diverse historical sources associated with Methodist religious institutions in Cornwall, UK, c. 1830-1930. Crucially, each geographer possesses divergent beliefs about religion, but together they are bound by covalent professional goals and commitments in the construction of a 'collective voice' through which research outputs are communicated (to date, see Brace, Bailey and Harvey 2006, Bailey, Harvey and Brace 2007, Harvey, Brace and Bailey 2007).

Focusing on issues of positionality germane to the practice of ethnography, we examine who we are, and who we become, when we set out to pass comment on the transient lives of others, when we ourselves are figuratively, literally, theoretically and spiritually in motion through the archive that we have constructed, as well as a range of institutional spheres. In reflecting on the interconnected relationships between three geographers, a range of historical sources, a variety of institutional contexts and the collective voice that emerges, we highlight how important it is for geographers to maintain a reflexive approach to their historically grounded identities.

Immersed in collaborative research and the co-narration of various outputs (published papers, conference presentations, posters etc.) since 2003, we have been reflexively involved in the negotiation of difference in what Regard (2008, 1) terms the ‘poetic transaction of the self’. These poetic transactions refer in part to the practices through which the human subject is manifested through the multiple effects of geographical schemas. Practices such as writing journal articles, delivering conference papers, viewing and selecting archival material, visiting chapels, walking streets and inserting ourselves into historical lines of sight, have helped each of ‘us’ to gain access to the place of speech (Regard 2003, 2008).

A note about autoethnography

In the remainder of this paper we use autobiographical writing as a rhetorical autoethnographic strategy that narrates some of the key interactions that have shaped our interconnections as researchers. This strategy allows us to reflect on the interactions of difference in the research process, but we use it with caution. As Pile and Thrift (1995) point out, the human subject is difficult to map because it does not have precise boundaries. Non-representational philosophies have taught us to see the human subject as an embodied and relational construct that emerges out of lived everyday practices. Autobiographical writing, therefore, is problematic because it tends to create the illusion of a fixed identity that is not representative of lived experience. In this paper we want to avoid producing an absolute space from which each subject occupies a single point of speech, but to leave traces to the enigmatic and complex becoming of the human subject (Doel 1999, 2000). Through explorations of the heterogeneous relations between three geographers, therefore, we seek to provide

critical insights into the practices of geography and those that explore the geographies of religion in particular.

The paper proceeds with a brief review of the genesis of our research. This is important because it was the substantive empirical focus of the project – religious belief – that led us to write this paper on the politics, concessions, negotiations and contingencies of collaborative research and the importance of religious faith.

F/00144/U: stories from a Leverhulme Trust research project

After a gestation period of two and a half years, the project *Methodism and Cornish Cultures, c.1830-1930*, received funding from the Leverhulme Trust.¹ In its embryonic stage, the project was already influenced by the institutional and personal demands placed upon early career staff; departmental and University politics, the Research Assessment Exercise, and the need to conform to academic conventions about the course that legitimate research should take. We draw attention to this context because the institutional environment and the practicalities of research projects, in part, shape the quality and rigour of the intellectual engagement with, and construction of, historical archives. The archive, therefore, is always-already shaped by the trajectories of how the future dissemination of the research is imagined (Fish 2006). Moreover, the redactive stories we are presenting in this paper, the result of over twenty previous iterations, are influenced by our desire to shape different future trajectories for historical and critical geography. It follows that the research is significantly constructed by reference to the intended material outcomes (a certain

number of papers targeted at high ranking journals) as well as the intellectual outcomes, in as much as these can be disaggregated.

During the first few months of the project, David and Catherine, along with the newly appointed postdoc, Adrian, independently worked on ideas for a theoretical paper that would subsequently guide our empirical investigations. While David and Catherine sought to re-deploy theorisations of the social construction of space by geographers such as Anssi Paasi (1991), Adrian focused more upon the theological dimensions of religious experience from the outset. As a result, the initial drafts of a theoretical paper resulted in some intense discussion and disagreement about the construction of personal faith and its religious institutional organisation. After our initial trips to archives in Cornwall, it became apparent that the successful construction of a Methodist archive would not only require us to articulate our differences vis-à-vis faith and practice, but it would also require us to clarify how these differences were guiding our selection of material for review. We also had to negotiate our differences *viz* existing readings of Methodist history. For example, in relation to previous Methodist historiography (for a review, see Jaffe 1989), was the dramatic rise of Methodism in Cornwall responsible for the failure of working-class solidarity, or was it the mid-wife of political radicalism? This recognition of prior theo-political convictions led to an understanding that we needed to ask some probing questions about ourselves, as the shifting sites where religious, historical and geographical phenomena are simultaneously constructed, experienced and articulated.

It was clear from the outset, therefore, that we were entering into a series of metaphysical debates which we had not anticipated but which would shape our

approach to the research and its outcomes. Amongst these metaphysical conundrums is the question of how, and to what extent, we should include spirituality within the conceptual basis of the research.

This is an important question for two reasons. First, the study of religion is emerging as a key focus of contemporary geographical research (Kong 2001; Brace, Bailey and Harvey 2006). Given the diffuse character of geographers' engagements with religion, it is important that the discipline reflects on the methodologies used to research 'religion' as a phenomenon. All too often, existing methods, embedded within different disciplinary traditions, are deemed adequate to the task of gathering empirical data about religious faith and practice, without questioning their appropriateness, their relationship to the extensive connections informing the researcher and their effect on the processes under investigation.² Second, whilst other human geographers – notably social geographers and those inspired by feminist research practice – recognise the need for reflexivity in research practice, historical geographers remain to a large part hidden from view, despite their willingness to accept that both the personal and also the political inflect historical research.³

Throughout the research project, our conversations have returned to the aporia of religion, especially when debating what it is that differentiates geographies of religion from other cultural geographies. For differing reasons, we agree with Harrison's (2004) observation that, all too often, "the 'geography of religion' seems to be identity politics by another name, where the fact that these are putatively religious or spiritual phenomena makes little or no difference to their study". Our discussions led us to question whether it is possible, within the epistemological and methodological

terms of social science, to study religious phenomena without subjecting them to reductionist arguments about ideology or identity. We cannot claim to have fully worked through this knotty issue, but it was explored through reflections upon the embodied practice of geography and our different beliefs about the plausibility of theism. This latter approach involves rethinking the connections between geographers and their methods and giving voice to our certainties and uncertainties about religious belief.

It is clear to us that faith makes a difference to the theoretical and interpretative strategies adopted in research. We are not the first to dwell on this issue. Debates surrounding the observer/believer, insider/outsider, and poetic/political distinction have dominated social scientific attempts to study religion (McCutcheon 1999), and have recently been rehearsed by geographers (Ferber 2006; Kong 2001). Some geographers have attempted a kind of faith-based reflexivity, seeking to narrate the linkages between a personal confession of religious faith and professional status, including reflections upon belonging, place, suffering and memory (Cloke 2004; Megoran 2004; Olliver 1989; Pacione 1990; Slater 2004; Wallace 1978). Slater (2004: 246), for example, observes that “few geographers speak as ‘insiders’ when writing about religious geography from whatever faith tradition” and calls for geographers who profess a faith to spend more time reflecting on it geographically.

The criteria by which the position of insider/outsider might be determined, however, is far from clear, because this would require knowledge of religious/secular and sacred/profane distinctions that can only be experienced, sensed and traced as the research proceeds. Rather than attempt to adopt the positions of insider/outsider, we

have traced our shifting positions relative to the research, each other and ourselves, by telling stories. These acts of storytelling have taken many different forms and have been performed in various spaces; conversations huddled around a computer, whispered exchanges in the archive, heated debates around a kitchen table. It is this process of storytelling as part of autobiography that we now want to introduce.

Three geographers and...⁴

Autobiographical reflection as an expressive style forms a part of an increasingly important approach to geographical research (Bunske, 2004; Clifford and Marcus 1986).⁵ Influenced by the anthropological tradition, Cook (2001) argues that the researcher is the embodied subject at the centre of the geographical enterprise, a position forged out of the flow and practice of everyday life, which serves to articulate various material objects, knowledges and affects. Nevertheless, autobiography has not been widely used as a tool through which the embodied subject can be realised (see Daniels and Nash 2004; Moss 2001). There is a risk, identified by Eakin (1999: ix), that “autobiographical discourse tends to promote an illusion of disarming simplicity when it comes to self and self experience”. Undoubtedly there is a self-conscious ordering involved in the production of critical self-examination, but this should not invalidate the attempt to introduce reflexivity into the research process. After all, as Sack (1997: 6) argues, “the arrogance of reason in modernity stems from the belief that the partial offers little or nothing of value – that we could eventually be virtually impartial and still human. This is wrong. We will always be partially situated and in the world”. It is also, of necessity, a retrospective process, for as Eakin (1999: x) notes,

I prefer to think of 'self' less as an entity and more as a kind of awareness of process... We don't, I think, pay much attention to this process, not only because we want to get on with the business of living our lives, but also because identity formation is not available for conscious inspection as it happens... We never catch our selves in the act of becoming selves; there is always a gap or a rupture that divides us from the knowledge that we seek.

Some geographers are perhaps less comfortable with the vagaries of the autobiographical approach than with the idea that knowledge is made and situated. Geographers influenced by post-structuralism, for example, have recently turned their attention to the various ways in which ideas are related to the places and networks in which they are conceived (Barnes 1997; Murdoch 2006). The recognition that knowledge is situated marks a turn away from modern forms of Cartesian rationality, which presuppose the nature of human cognition and posit the mind as an inner realm of representations that floats free of the human body and the physical environment (Robbins 1999). This 'view from nowhere', as Nagel (1986) and Haraway (1991) describe it, overlooks the significance of place and the reality that ideas are always the 'view from somewhere' (*cf.* Barnes 2004, 4). The view from somewhere leads us to consider the importance of the non-representational, the notion that our embodiment and being in the world mean that we know significantly more than we can tell (Polanyi 1964, 1967; Thrift 1996). Representational forms of knowledge, therefore, are always partial and incomplete. The speaking subject is always in a process of becoming, and forms of self-disclosure are always ambiguous, precarious and open

ended. Therefore, the ‘truths’ of academic inquiry are dependent upon the negotiated and conditional achievement of particular narratives and research traditions, which are inseparable from networks of power-knowledge.

In the sections that follow, we present three stories, which crystallise in this paper because they have been the most frequently rehearsed in our working relationship. We argue that research methods and reportage cannot be abstracted from the practices and experiences of the researchers. We have to recognise the inevitable importance of our own voices and allow space for differences between us to be seen, and acknowledge that these differences are often (and necessarily) glossed over in the production of academic papers and research reports.

David’s story: secular and critical

I am an atheist, but from a large, extended family who are mostly from ‘Methodist communities’ in west Cornwall. Before the project began, one might have called me a ‘secular methodist’, in that I have always enjoyed the hymns and social occasions without actually *believing* any of it. Like many religious non-believers, however, I have never worn my atheism as a badge of identity that trumps all others. In other words, I do not wake up each morning with the thought of myself as *an atheist* and consider how I might demonstrate my atheism that day, in the way that a person of faith might recognise their religious identity and feel the need to practice their faith (or a ‘faith’) at all times. Engaging in the research, therefore, has made me think through and articulate my position with regards to religious faith and practice. Indeed, it is perhaps ironic that my work on the geographies of Methodism has tended to

underline my suspicion of Christianity (and of religious faith as a whole), particularly within the context of the war in Iraq and the supposed ‘War on Terror’ – that war could be waged and misery meted out on the basis of *faith* rather than upon evidence; *faith* both in a sense that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq for instance, and also in a sense of dogmatic imperatives based upon religious doctrine. I am certainly not claiming that all religious people support the War – nor do I deny that some religious people see such violence as the antithesis of their religious creed. But I do see the post-9/11 geopolitical environment as one in which people such as George Bush and Tony Blair (and Osama Bin Laden) have pursued their policies wholeheartedly based upon a sincerely held religious belief. Personally, I feel that they are deluded, but I have to acknowledge the integrity of their faith. It was in thinking through these issues at the time of the research, and relating them to the stories I was reading in the archives that has, for me, underlined my atheism and pushed it further to the fore, rather than challenging what was previously a fairly small part of my identity as a thinking scholar.

As a researcher who strives for a reasoned position, just as I have to acknowledge my own partiality, I must also acknowledge that other people’s partial positions are important, and must be recognised and given a voice: whether these people were nineteenth century Cornish Methodists or my colleagues today. By ignoring religious perspectives, we inadvertently place religious views onto a pedestal. We end up saying nothing about religion, leaving religious subject matter completely open to those that have been ‘guided’ by a supposed supernatural being.

A sense of reason is common to humanity and is needed to undermine the superstition or illusory elements of religion. However, by taking a 'reasonable' position, we have to make space for the material consequences of other people's religious faith/superstition. For example, many religious fundamentalists claim that faith and revelation precede and supersede reason, despite the fact that reason transcends intolerance, irrationality and narrow-mindedness. Hence, "disregarding other viewpoints diminishes the effect of reason in any age" (Sack 1997: 4). In other words, in order to more fully understand the decisions and experiences of Methodists in Cornwall, I had to acknowledge that these people really did *believe*.

Adrian's story: Methodism and Christianity

As a young person I attended a Methodist Sunday school and encountered many different aspects of contemporary Methodism as a member of a charismatic Youth Fellowship and as an adult member of a conservative rural chapel. At the University of Birmingham, I joined the student Methodist Society, attended Sunday worship and ran holiday clubs for local children. Nevertheless, I became disillusioned with certain aspects of Methodist ecclesiology and practice, which prompted an engagement with a Baptist church and the lesser-known Navigators organisation. In my experience these latter institutions provided a more integrated faith practice than Methodism, even though there were other discontents to wrestle with. My experience and opinions about Methodism are too complex to articulate in this paper. Suffice to say that a mixture of gratitude, admiration and critique of Methodism has undoubtedly influenced my reading of past Methodist lives in the archive.

During the project it was always apparent that I was working with a very different understanding of ‘church’ to David and Catherine. I have always understood ‘church’ as a theological ideal that is more or less realised in practice. Epistemologically, I do not think that either believers or sceptics have a privileged position from which to judge the morality or the actions of religious institutions. According to Gorringe (2002: 5), a “major strand of theological reflection has wanted to confine truly good action within the sphere of the church”. This historical attitude, grounded in the Augustinian tradition, perhaps accounts for the reaction of those who determine to find no truly good action *within* the church. On the contrary, as Gorringe asserts, “the Christian scriptures are quite clear that God is not confined to Israel and Church, and they invite us, therefore, from the narrative of the particular to discern God at work in all things” (2002: 5-6). Working on the historiography of Methodism, therefore, I felt able to embrace the complexity of the archives without resorting to partisan reportage, precisely because of theological convictions not in spite of them. Moreover, I do not believe that secular arguments necessarily oppose theistic ones, because the former are often a complex heterodoxy of various historically contingent positions that have been informed by and still display significant points of overlap with Christian theologies.

Working with colleagues from different backgrounds has sharpened my awareness of how geographers may be unaware that there is more than one form of Christian ethics and that Christian ethics is not exclusively practiced, if at all, by professing Christians. In the evenings after a typical day in the Methodist archives, I began to read Stanley Hauerwas’ *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1983). It was liberating to find a Christian (a former Methodist like myself) who speaks the language of post-Marxism,

who is cognisant of the importance of geo-politics, who argues that theology is anchored in the embodied practice of faith communities, and connects faith talk to radical praxis.

I have found that faith is nurtured through enacting historical narratives that purport to record/disclose God's presence in our world (e.g. Scripture). It is participation in the imaginative performance of these narratives, involving acts of cultural translation, which generate the 'proofs' of God demanded by sceptics. The 'objects' that religious narratives disclose as real, only appear as such to those who are enacting the narrative, which serves to exclude prior certainties to those unwilling to be situated in this way. Methodists in nineteenth century Cornwall didn't articulate faith this way, but having a degree of empathy with the performative assurances of faith helps researchers to understand why faith-based action can in some cases be transformative spiritually/politically. If our capacity to understand the past relies upon analogy, then it is reasonable to suggest that if we have limited analogues our research will be impoverished. As a person of faith, therefore, I have suggested to my colleagues that if our life experience is truncated for some reason, because of anxiety about what is permissible in academic discourse, or through lack of personal experimentation with faith, then our research will be impoverished as a result.

Catherine's story: ambivalence

Looking back at the project's gestation, it was a period in which I did not think hard about how my personal predilections would make a difference to the work. I always had an ambivalent relationship with organised religion and was stuck between being

ready to believe in some kind of spiritual dimension to human life but not ready to frame this in terms of the existence of a god and not ready to develop it through any of the organised religious groups I had encountered in my life. So I was ready to see Methodism as a social institution but also ready to acknowledge that Methodists were driven by a connection, that I did not share, to a supernatural force. Long conversations with Adrian have made us all think though and articulate our positions and mine remains one of ambivalence. This has opened up the unexpected dimension of the research: whether or not Geography can deal with God?

I am most comfortable with a geography that insists on social relativism; that all knowledge is a product of its social context. But I also recognize that geography's commitment to naturalism and materialism means that the practice, methods and epistemology of geography make it hard to accept that there could be divine intervention or divine knowledge. Despite interventions from people like Paul Cloke (2002), who argue for a greater enthusiasm for 'invisible powers', geographers seem to find it hard to deal with a god. After about a year of the research, the question that started to emerge for me is whether geography can adequately report spiritual encounters when it often radically undermines the ontological status of these encounters in seeking to reduce them to a metaphysic of naturalism, and materialism. I find it easy to talk about religion as a set of social relationships without feeling the need to discuss whether the motivations for these are human or divine. I am in little doubt that my ambivalence inflects my interpretative strategy – always seeking the evidence of social relationships in which religion could be read like politics or any other institution – no more special than that. For me, religion is always social. I can analyse the spatial consequences of conviction but I have no means of understanding

the spatialities of divinity. This take on the position of geography in respect of religion has a lot to do with my personal view of faith and belief. I cannot imagine being moved or motivated by divine intervention and I sometimes find it hard to accept that others are moved in this way. I cannot imagine what it feels like to be spoken to by God and compelled to act in His name. My views were clarified by my reading of Robinson's (2005) novel, *Gilead*, in which a Congregationalist Minister finds that, whilst his beliefs demand that he forgive unconditionally, his humanness gets in the way and he faces the possibility of failing to achieve the perfection that his faith requires. This perfectly illustrated my scepticism about religion and belief: surely, even if there is a possibility of making a clearly understood covenant with a God, humanness – weakness, temptation, free will, politics, context, doubt and difference of interpretation - gets in the way of the purity of its execution. Thus, for me, the performance of religion is always unequivocally social, a product of personal predilections, local relations of power, institutional politics and all the messyness, strangeness, inconsistencies and contradictions that make up the humanness of life. It is on those terms for me that Methodism in Cornwall had to be understood.

Our personal autobiographies, though partial and fragmentary, suggest differences of historical experience, political vision, philosophical commitment and ethical practice. Our personal predilections and beliefs did not map neatly onto each other, but our professional and academic training suggested a common ground from which to explore the construction of archives. However, the consistency implied by a common academic background was not manifested in practice. It was at the point of

constructing the archive, that these differences of interpretation and analytical practice manifested themselves most clearly.

Constructing an archive of Methodism

Foucault's (1969) seminal work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, refers to an archive as a 'system that establishes statements as events and things' (Steedman 2001, 2). As an institutional site of discursive formation, the archive appears to represent the now of whatever kind of power is being exercised (Derrida 1996). In other words, archives are not just a collection of historical records; they are active in constructing meanings that depend upon the power-laden interplay of past and present frames of interpretation. Archival material does not yield off the peg narratives that can be consumed from a stable past (Kurtz 2001). In practice, the discourses that appear to be crystallised in an homogenous past, are highly contested and in flux. The point at which these discourses crystallise is in the continuous present, as they are constructed alongside and within dominant academic and lay narratives. The tactics and strategies that are used to consume archives, therefore, are the partial product of research training, personal character traits and inculcated habits. This is suggested by the work of DeSilvey (2007: 43) who argues that "[o]ur acts of imitation, empathy, and appropriation [provide] the conditions for the creation of a new understanding of material and place". Assuming the subject position as researchers, therefore, the three of us prepared different routes through the archives with varying degrees of convergence. As we sat down to tackle the archives, through our own coordinated strategies, we encountered other lay and professional archivists with their own tactics and opinions. These encounters shaped the research experience in various ways.

Moreover, the materiality of archives and reading rooms exerted a degree of agency in shaping the research.

We worked in the Shaw Collection in the Courtney Library, Truro – a poorly catalogued chaos of newspaper cuttings, personal correspondence, letters, reminiscences and photographs (see figure 1). Catherine, in particular, was frustrated by the atmosphere of ramshackle disorder. The Cornwall Record Office (CRO), Truro, framed an ascetic encounter with the historical record. A well-lit reading room provided a clinical environment to explore the past in disciplined silence. In a similar style, the Cornish Studies Library, Cornwall Centre, Redruth, took us beyond Cornwall and introduced us to a renewed sense of Methodism’s national significance and connections through its collections of national magazines. The Methodist Studies Unit, Westminster Institute for Education, Oxford Brookes University, was visited only by Adrian, which raised the problem of conveying a sense of this archive’s importance to the project. Part of Adrian’s solution was to share full copies of his notes, but knowing the importance conveyed by the physical space of the archive, he also provided photographs of the research space. Finally, the Methodist Archive and Research Centre, John Rylands University Library, Manchester, elicited very different responses from David and Adrian (see below).

[INSERT FIGURE ONE HERE]

Personalised methodologies

David: proud but critical – and indignant

More used to the sparse evidence provided by medieval and early modern records, I felt overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of Methodist material. Knowing the region very well, I coped with this problem by aiming straight for the small towns and villages that I knew in west Cornwall, sometimes glossing over the seemingly mundane and picking out the ‘juicy bits’, particularly where they related to chapels and villages that I knew. I also tended to be less interested in what I saw as ‘theological ramblings’ when they appeared in the archive, since I very much saw the whole project as one of ‘historical-social research’ rather than of ‘theology’. Inevitably, therefore, I searched through the material for the best bits – making my decisions in the archive rather than afterwards. In this manner, I self-consciously constructed the archive identifying the inevitable partiality of minutes, for instance, from my experience as a minute taker within a number of secular social organizations such as the Hunt Saboteurs and (Old) Labour Party.

I am proud of my family connections with Cornwall. As I explored the archive, I was picturing relatives and places that I knew well. I was pleased to have the opportunity of representing some of the intimate geographies of west Cornwall. As a young person I had warm memories of Methodism and was aware of its connection to the Tolpuddle Martyrs and the anti-slavery movement. During the project, however, I became more critical of all Christian institutions. I wanted to show their contribution to the place-making process and forms of social control, but I was also very happy to reveal what I saw as their hypocrisy.

Given my desire to dig behind the sanitised and polite façade of Methodism, I actively sought material that would cast Methodism in a different light to that of the partisan ecclesiastical historian. I revelled in finding evidence of Methodist activity in dealing with, and even covering up, a range of misdemeanours (such as Ministerial extra-marital affairs) where it showed them in a hypocritical light, even though the stories were mostly not relevant to the wider project and were never used in any of our substantive published research.⁶ But I was also occupied by questions about the relationship between the Methodist clergy and the people they were supposed to be serving.

For example, we can observe the operation of the Circuit quota system, through which the District treasurer worked out how much each Circuit needed to pay into, or receive from, various funds. This exposed what I saw as hypocrisy when poor people were asked to support the clergy. In 1863, Devonport District spent just over 13 pence per child per annum running their Sunday Schools for more than 14,000 children. Their Day Schools cost just over 14s 7d per child per annum for around 300 children. Meanwhile, the Wesleyan ministers of the Devonport District were receiving the sum of £6.6.0 per child per annum from the *Children's Fund* to assist in the education of *their own* children. In addition, the *Worn-Out Ministers and Ministers' Widows Fund* paid out an average of £46.17.6 per person per annum for the upkeep of just six ministers and ten widows. There was also a District liability for £26,434 of debt.

These figures show that the costs of running the Methodist Church were very large, but that a significant proportion of the costs seems to be absorbed in the payment of

ministers' children's schools fees and other allowances, ministers' removal expenses, pensions, and sickness benefits etc. It cost the District more to keep just 16 'worn out' ministers and widows of ministers in their accustomed comfort than it cost to run Sunday Schools for more than 14,000 poor children. More than eight times as much money per child per annum was spent on paying the school fees for ministers' children than was spent on the day schools for almost 300 poorer children.

Inflamed by these calculations I sent a disgruntled message to Adrian and Catherine in which I complained (in the informal language of an email, capitals as in the original) "there is a real sense that the Methodist Church is NOT there to help poor people – they are simply encouraged to help themselves (by getting educated etc- which they pay for anyway) – a real sense of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. BUT if Ministers get sick, or are unlucky, they get bailed out!" (21st September 2004).

My angry note above clearly illustrated that "a life within historical scholarship is simultaneously a means of political commitment and personal expression" (Gagen *et al.* 2007: 6). If the case of the educational accounts noted above represents a certain 'political commitment', then a sense of personal expression was perhaps most deeply engaged when I unexpectedly came across a reference to the wedding of my grandmother's sister. I innocently mentioned this to my own sister and suddenly found myself dealing with a huge family secret that my grandmother had passed on to my sister before she died. As well as further undermining the positive views that I once held about early 20th century 'Methodist communities' in west Cornwall, these revelations also underlined the partiality of the extant written archive, which of course mentioned nothing of what my sister told me.

Adrian: critical empathy

My disagreements with David and Catherine revolved around the plausibility of religious faith and the implications this had for historical interpretation of the activities of theists. Our different positions are identified in the paper by our different spelling of god/God to denote a human construct/personal being. Unlike them, I understand faith as basic to any worldview, including any variant form of theism, agnosticism and atheism. These are properly basic beliefs, because they do not depend for their justification on other beliefs and as such are the condition of knowledge itself. As an anonymous reviewer of this paper pointed out, my role was pivotal “in translating spiritual questions”, as indeed I sought to explain the worldviews and theologies that I perceived were animating Methodist lives. The same reviewer correctly discerned that my colleagues held the Methodist archives and myself accountable for the reasonableness of Christian faith, which positioned me as both apologetic and apologist. I am apologetic because, to a greater or lesser extent, Christians do not act according to their authentic faith commitment. I am an apologist, because I believe that an encounter with God is personally and socially transformative, despite the need to constantly deconstruct the uses of the word ‘God’ in practice. Throughout the project, however, I have consciously striven to avoid reading my specific experiences of faith into the historical record; hence my position could be described as *critical empathy*.

Church institutions have structured my life and *visa versa* as part of a living interpretative community of believers. In part, I am connected to Methodists in

nineteenth century Cornwall, not through genes or geography, like David, but through traditions and theological beliefs about the continuity of faith through time. On many occasions this connection was helpful as a researcher, because I was able to identify references to that tradition in the ‘archive’. At other times, however, my familiarity with the tradition caused me to overlook the work that texts were put to; evidenced by David’s interpretation of the Manchester records (‘the plank in my eye’). Our differences as researchers’ vis-à-vis faith, therefore, were a key strength in producing rigorous interpretations in the archive.

David rightly questioned the relationship between the Methodist clergy and the people they were supposed to be serving in the material he read in the Manchester archive. However, we cannot assume that the poor were being exploited, because apart from pew rents, we have little information about the source of donations to the Methodist Societies, although we might assume that the majority came from wealthy patrons. Nor must we overlook voices of protest within Cornwall, such as the influential layman William Dale, who in 1839 complained about the burden of the *Children’s Fund* and the *Worn-Out Ministers and Ministers’ Widows Fund* on their “large and poor societies” (Ward 1976, 228). We must not forget that the characters in the archive were also reflexive about the politics of contemporary Methodist practices. The funds point to the contradictions inherent within the uneven economic geographies of nineteenth and twentieth century England and the imperfect attempt by Wesleyans to redistribute funds.

My own critical perspective, vis-à-vis the Methodist archives, was forged quite early in the project around the practice of charging pew rents. Individuals and families

were required to hire a box pew for each quarter they attended the chapel. Pew rents were charged regardless of denomination and were one of the principal forms of raising revenue to sustain the repayment of mortgages incurred during the building and repair of chapels. The multiplication of chapels belonging to different denominations in localities was itself a testimony to the partial failure of Methodism to offer a radical alternative to existing social divisions beyond the chapel. Pew rents did little to facilitate cross cutting relationships at the local scale, confining the poorest attendees to free pews directly beneath the pulpit with all the negative significations this entailed; if nothing else a sore neck! Long after pew rents had been abolished, I came to realise with some pride that the very pews that my own family had occupied each week were formerly 'free pews'. This personal connection was important in shaping my critique of the emerging archive. The charge of pew rents, and the visible hierarchies they produced within the chapel, was an institutional form of class segregation that demonstrated how the church was complicit with the industrial division of labour and bourgeois culture more generally.

Just because we observe the negative effects of religiosity in a particular historical moment, however, does not mean that we can construct all faith as essentially negative or violent. This would be to confuse an historical claim with a social scientific claim, and I do not believe that any universalizing rationality (e.g. social science) can adequately acknowledge the contingency of human relations. It is this contingency that historical research reveals, especially when this research is guided by theological narratives about the human being and the exercise of human agency; whether this is explicitly acknowledged, or merely implicit in 'secular' social theory.

Whilst upholding criticisms of Methodism, I am convinced that their congregations were heterogeneous entities, in other words, there were many methodisms. The Methodist church was a resource that could be mobilised in support of those on the margins of society, especially during slumps in the mining economy. Methodism was also the midwife for a range of temperance and educational institutions that were created to tackle the worst domestic abuses taking place in society. Furthermore, my experience of the disjuncture between meetings as lived events and the record of those events, made me cautious about reading Methodist minutes as a complete record of religious life, especially in isolation from other sources (e.g. oral histories). What was missing was any acknowledgement of the affective dimensions of faith and their (dis)connections with religious practice – the excess that evades abstract forms of communication. Unwilling to construct an argument from silence, however, I was left wondering about the everyday ethical practices and experiences of Methodism beyond the prosaic or romanticised descriptions of meetings and revivals that are available to us.

Catherine: being there matters

In my PhD I dealt with a vast repository of over 200,000 items, so I was not too worried by the scale of the archives. Knowing virtually nothing about either West Cornwall or Methodism, my approach initially was to trawl through lots of things, taking a glance, skim reading and trying to get a surface impression of what any given item might tell me. I wanted to build up a picture of what sorts of things we were going to find out from this giant pile of diverse sources. I saw this process of ordering as part of the challenge of preparing an archive to yield meaningful narratives, an

approach I would have used in any archive no matter what the subject. If I had been a lone researcher, I would have then set about working through the available data systematically. It was the first time I had ever worked with anyone else on a piece of archival research and I harbored some minor fears that my way of working – to be rigorously well organized, with a systematic plan to look at almost every single item on a village-by-village or circuit-by-circuit basis – might not be Adrian’s way of doing things. I remember being quite alarmed at the prospect of trying to make sense of an historical document that I hadn’t actually located myself. How would I know where it was in the catalogue? What had it been filed with? What other stuff was in the same box? How would I trace it again if I needed to? If the document was transcribed rather than photocopied, how would I know which bits had been left out and whether they were important or not? How would I know how to make sense of the document *away from the archive which contained it*? Of all the questions that working in a team made me ask about my professional conduct as an historical geographer, this last is, in my view, the most preposterous and yet the most provocative. All the other concerns were rapidly allayed by Adrian’s thoroughness and attention to detail. I learned to be confident in the material he collected, all of which was clearly annotated and traceable. But even relatively late on in the project, when Adrian put together a file of historical material about temperance for me to write part of a paper on the Band of Hope, I winced internally as I turned the pages. I still held onto the irrational fear that my interpretative skills – my scholarly instincts – might not work if I had not been there at the moment of identifying and assembling the material. I quickly overcame this moment of unreason and went on to use the material that Adrian had supplied. Yet it raised the question about just how important

the place of the archive is in my sense of myself as a researcher and how I had mentally connected *interpretation* with *location*.

Writing the paper about temperance and the Band of Hope put me in my comfort zone where I was able to maintain my sceptical position. I could glimpse the zeal of Methodists who chose teetotalism whilst, at the same time, observing a doctrinal dispute that, in my view, undermined the possibility of an unfettered transaction with god. Put simply, if god makes an effective transaction with believers, why do doctrinal disputes arise? I didn't share Dave's glee at unearthing the controversies of the past but they did enliven several long drives back to Exeter. Equally, I did not come with a prior knowledge, as Adrian did, about some of the institutions that structured Methodism in Cornwall. But the story of Methodism's engagement with Temperance contains both these aspects: the human and the institutional; the fallible and the divine. And for that reason, it appealed to my broad position that if a covenant with a god is possible, its execution will never be straightforward – it will always be embroiled in human social relations and, in my view, compromised by that. We used the example of Cornwall to explore how Methodist theological imperatives were translated into temperance practices and so it was a perfect vehicle for my scepticism.

The broad social movement of Temperance was picked up by the Methodists and used as a way of entraining young people through disciplining the body to teetotalism. There was great scholarly satisfaction for me in making the connection between historical events and theories of embodiment. I also had a sense of contentment that I had undertaken a critical reading of the sources that said something genuinely new

and interesting about temperance and Methodism. Of particular interest was the doctrinal dispute about whether the sacrament could be performed with non-alcoholic wine and the division between temperance (moderate use of alcohol) and teetotalism (total abstinence). These disputes and divisions were worked out in bitter pamphlet wars, local rivalry and national Conference resolutions. Eventually, the popularity of the Temperance movement led the Methodists to form juvenile Bands of Hope, designed to entrain children and young people into a non-secular form of temperance clearly yoked to the designs of Methodism.

Thus, though self-control and sobriety formed the foundation of spiritual discipline – evident throughout the New Testament scriptures – it was the particular context of society in Victorian Britain that enabled Methodists to realise this invocation. This message was carried into everyday life in the form of key Methodist goals of “personal assurance and social witness, personal holiness and social holiness, holiness of heart and holiness of life” (Keller 1999, 215). These amount to what Burrell (1999 93) calls the performative assertions that frame “authentic Christian doctrine”. This link between the social and the personal formed part of the Methodist justification for their intervention into people’s lives through temperance teaching. The Temperance movement’s principles, therefore, were shaped by, but also made an appeal to, a Christian discourse of bodily discipline and surveillance of the self in which the body is subordinated to reason, the will and the word of God.

Being sceptical about the way organized religion works always leaves me striving to glimpse the inspiration behind the actions of Cornwall’s Methodists. Adrian points out above that the lived experience of meetings was not discernable in the minute

books that remain. Similarly, the inspiration of faith can only be inferred by the actions of Methodists and, inclined always to be cynical about what motivates people, I want proof of faith. I see scripture as the context for understanding the justifications for action and, in that sense, it is just another historical source that allows us to understand what drives people to act. What Adrian taught me is that I, as a researcher, also have to exercise a form of faith: that people believe that scripture is the word of god. I have to have faith that people have faith. However, despite the many satisfactions in this project, I remain the sceptic who feels as if it is faith that my scholarly training won't let me believe in.

Conclusion

“Reasoning is not a solitary activity; it requires discourse” (Sack, 1997, 4).

In this paper we have examined the backstage production of our work to date. In this paper, we have examined what happens when three people who have very different viewpoints on religion come together in search of a reasonable explanation for a particular problem (that of understanding the formation of Methodist communities in late 19th century Cornwall). The paper has had many iterations in which much of the micro-interaction between us has been removed from the text, in order to present a more theoretical paper and to maintain confidences. Rather than try to produce an absolute space from which each subject occupies a single point of speech, we sought to foreground the heterogeneous relations between three geographers, in order to provide critical insights into the practices of historical geography and geographies of religion. As a result, the paper does not offer a final account, free from inconsistency

and incoherence. Like any reflexive text these reflections can only be treated as the things that we believed to be true of ourselves at a given moment. The autobiographies presented above are fictions, they impose hard boundaries on identities that are emergent and embodied. During the writing of these fictions, we have been unable to represent the jokes and winks, the friendly banter and the generosity that have enabled ideological differences to be explored and diffused differences of politics and faith.

Our paper encourages the development of an enlivened geography in which practitioners acknowledge their voices. In the process of constructing an historical archive, we became critically involved in the interpretation of a religious institution. Through this activity we became engaged in debating the possible existence of transcendentals (e.g. reason, forgiveness and love) and the work to which these were put by various institutions and ideologies. Each member of our research team held different beliefs about ontology, epistemology and the motivation for ethical action that influenced our judgments as historians – thus combining political commitment and personal expression in a way Kearns might approve of (Gagen *et al.* 2007).

Post-structural theoretical approaches led us to consider the practice of the historian as extending beyond the simple collation and analysis of extant material. In recognising the difference that working with others made to the research process, we embraced the idea of archives as relational constructs. These constructs are forged between the anvil of testimony provided by the material traces of institutions and the hammer of interpretive communities of researchers operating in the present. This notion of the archive demanded that we reflect on difference within the extant material, but also the

differences within the research team. It demanded that we focus attention on the play between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic as we weighed meta-narratives and metaphysics alongside the everyday practice of research and daily life in each other's company.

In other words, historiographical practice was led in two ways. First, by the compilation, organization and temporal spacing of Methodist records, which positioned us as researchers. Second, by the way in which we positioned those records within the dominant academic narratives currently shaping theory. Each researcher found that Methodism, and religion more generally, broke out of our frames of reference, resisted the narratives we sought to impose, and forced us to look with fresh eyes. The presumed neutrality of method in the historiography of religion is a precarious assumption, which negates the full range of human experience. The authors of this paper arrived at this conclusion from different perspectives which are indicative of their own specific and historically grounded experiences within intellectual, social and 'faith' based contexts. Regardless of these differences there are broad agreements that underpin our approach as historical and cultural geographers. This emphasis reminds us that the construction of geographical knowledge is always rooted in subjective, historical and contingent praxis. We believe that a failure to reflect upon research methodologies occludes the spatialities of religious organisation and the place-based subjectivities that are critical in the reproduction and reportage of religious identities.

It was the practice of reflecting on our situatedness that gave the project a political dimension that we had not anticipated, drawing us into contemporary debates over the

public role of religion and faith. As the project progressed we openly acknowledged the way in which we perceived our current perspectives to have been shaped by our encounters with Methodism, other expressions of Christian faith and Western philosophy more generally. Our powers of critique, brought to bear on the extant material, were frequently at their sharpest and most diligent when we were defending values that we had personally encountered as liberating. Far from acrimonious, what emerged during the project was a genuinely shared communal space in which difference could be safely explored.

This is resonant of both Michael Pacione (1999) and Paul Cloke (2002), who call for a reinvigorated human geography, which ought to include greater “normative reflexivity” (c.f. Sayer & Storper 1997, 11), whereby the religious, moral and philosophical propositions underlying the research are critically examined by the researcher. Put simply, this involves making explicit the role of one’s commitments in choosing between theories, while at the same time allowing others to scrutinise those commitments (Lyon 1983). It was Adrian’s strong beliefs and his willingness to articulate his commitments that first alerted us to the possibility that we were working from radically different understandings of faith and religion and that these were underpinning very different approaches to the research.

If this paper made complete sense, it wouldn’t be doing its job! This paper is not meant to be a seamless and completely coherent story – a series of agreements, disagreements, acquiescences, and compromises have informed the paper as much as the research process itself. We might not agree on everything, but we can say ‘something’ and we have produced work that is honest, reflective as it is of our

positions, predilections and personalities. We are still on the move figuratively, literally and spiritually – but the research has been richer because of the way that we have been arguing about it.

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¹ Chronology of the gestation period:

January 2001	outline ideas
Easter 2001	failed bid 2001 AHRB studentship
Autumn 2001	outline Leverhulme proposal
January 2002	go ahead for full proposal
July 2002	writing full proposal
September 1 st 2002	submitted bid
November 2002	received news of successful bid
March 2003	interviews and recruitment of Adrian as a research assistant
September 1 st 2003	commence project

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² This criticism could and perhaps should be levelled at researching other phenomena too.

³ Essays in a recent volume published by the Historical Geography Research Group (Gagen *et al.* 2007a) – a study group of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers - reflect an emerging interest in these issues. Of particular interest are the essays by DeSlivey (2007) and Kearns (2007).

⁴ We would like to acknowledge the journal editor and three anonymous referees as late entrants to our discussion and shapers of our revised manuscript.

⁵ See the work of, for example, Wylie (2005) and McCormick (2005), in which the enactments and embodiments that are produced through nonrepresentational experiment are, by their very nature, autobiographical.

⁶ For instance, the nocturnal activities of the of Methodist Minister, Mr. Wheeler, in Liskeard; the betrothal and break up of the young Minister, Mr. Garment, and a Miss Blaxley; or the 'entertaining' story of the Reverend Joseph Williams who procured VD medicine 'for a friend'. See CRO MR/LISK/121/2 UMFC Circuit, Liskeard: Quarterly Minute Book (1840-1862); John Rylands Library: Methodist Archive: volume 4: Reference: volume 1: MAB/D62.4 (September 1896-1915) [Wesleyan: Devonport District Minute Books (1839-1915)]; John Rylands Library: Methodist Archive: Wesleyan: Devonport District Minute Books (1839-1915) Reference: Volume 1: MAB/D62.1 (May 1839-May 1862).