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# Contesting the Boundaries of Religion in Social Mobilization

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to contribute to an understanding of the dynamics of religion in social mobilization. It argues that existing approaches to the study of the role of religion in social mobilization have been insufficiently nuanced and have failed to probe the multiple and often contradictory influences that religion can have on mobilization channels. On the basis of three qualitative case studies from Malaysia, Bangladesh and the United Kingdom, we identify three key factors of religion that can catalyse social mobilization: theological resources, religious spaces, and the interaction of both with the wider context. This leads us to conclude that the boundaries of the 'religious' dimension of social mobilization are fluid, and that the religious element of social mobilization can never be disentangled from its social and political context.

**Keywords:** Religion, social mobilization, theology, politics

## Introduction

In the late 1960s, Peter Berger – one of the world's most renowned modern sociologists and former president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion - argued that the emergence of modern economic systems would reduce the influence of religion in public life (Berger 1969). Building on the work of Max Weber, the core of Berger's thesis was that as societies modernise religion would be driven from the public sphere to the private sphere. Today it is clear that the so called 'secularization thesis' has little or no traction in our global modern world. Even among the most industrialised countries, religion is alive and well; and there is consistent evidence of a resurgence of religious activities throughout the world (Norris and Inglehart, 2004:9).

One of the key characteristics of religion is its role in social mobilization and action. There are a number of famous and recent examples of this kind of mobilization including the Iranian Islamic revolution in the late 1970s, the roles of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the recent opposition of Buddhist monks to the Burmese dictatorship, and the actions taken by the Catholic Church in communist Poland during the 1980s. However although these and similar cases have been well documented, the academic literature has on the whole failed to examine the mechanisms through which religion leads in some cases to social mobilization. This we argue, is a result of the ongoing influence of the secularization thesis in certain social sciences disciplines. In a recent review published in *Political Science & Politics* for example, Steve Kettell (2012) examines the previous ten years of publishing in leading political science journals and found

that the discipline had failed to produce research related to religion. Sociology, he argues, fares better but is still some distance behind anthropology<sup>1</sup>. In explaining this lack of attention, Kettel argues that the intellectual framework for political science is rooted in assumptions about the declining influence of religion in modern public life. Assumptions which are not mirrored in reality. In this paper, we attempt to address this gap by proposing a framework able to better understand the dynamics of religion within social mobilization. We hypothesise that religious social mobilization contains three core factors that determine its shape.

First are theological resources, by which we mean broadly the teachings, discourse, interpretation and knowledge associated with a religion which are used to inform practice. We are aware of the potential ambiguity of the phrase ‘theological resources’ but we want to use it here to capture the range of religious ideas, values and dogma which have a norm setting function. Within Christianity for example, theological resources encompass formal sources such as the Bible and the writings of theologians, but also embrace more informal, localised or popular theological expressions developed by communities. The significance of the latter should not be underestimated. It is widely recognised for example that the whole Liberation Theology movement was inspired by multiple ‘theologies of the masses’ (as opposed to what Gustavo Gutierrez described as the ‘theology of the experts’) articulated by communities as they sought to make sense of and ultimately change their worlds (Gutierrez, 1983). Our case study on dalit social mobilization provides another good example of communities developing and adopting an alternative theological framework that rendered their worlds more meaningful, and facilitated greater social mobilization. Linked to the issue of theology is the key question of interpretation. How are theological resources interpreted in a given social context? Are theological resources more likely to be deployed in a violent way when a religion or its adherents are threatened violently? This was the conclusion reached by Appleby (2000) who argued that those who adhere to a religion and who live it radically may be tempted to resort to violence, especially when they face situations in which others use violence against them. How a religious community translates its core teachings into social practices, including social mobilizing, depends on the interpretative power of both leaders and believers at the grassroots level. For example, the social mobilization of the Catholic Church in Latin America in

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<sup>1</sup> In this article we rely on literature mostly from political science and international development studies. We agree with Kettel that anthropology has a much richer tradition of research into religion, and acknowledge here the anthropological literature which looks at the relation between religion and mobilization. Pertinent examples include Burdick (2011), Bradley (2011), Tomalin (2006), Mahmood (2005) and Darlington (1996). We thank one of the reviewers for drawing our attention to this rich anthropological tradition.

the 1970s and 1980s was greatly indebted to the interpretative power of the bishops who translated the documents of the Second Vatican Council within a context of authoritarianism, widespread poverty and inequality.

A second key factor of religiously motivated social mobilization that we hypothesise is that of 'religious spaces'. Like 'theological resources' the idea of 'religious spaces' is not without its ambiguity. We use it here again as a shorthand to refer to the physical spaces offered or used by religions such as churches or mosques, but also to the institutional channels offered by religions which facilitate room for manoeuvre, negotiation or engagement. 'Religious spaces' are often important because they can offer moral authority, social protection or political influence while remaining relatively insulated from political interference or control - even in undemocratic contexts. This has been particularly the case in authoritarian regimes where religious spaces were the only spaces that could be used for resisting political repression. In Brazil, for example, some churches were used during the dictatorship period (1964-1985) for trade union meetings because this form of activism was banned by the ruling regime. This was also the case for example during the apartheid period (1948-1994) in South Africa. After the banning of the ANC, the churches became the only place where social mobilization against apartheid could happen. Similarly, but perhaps to a lesser extent, the churches played a large role in the United States during the civil rights movements. The 'religious space' became a political space where black people could articulate their concerns and acquire the skills for their non-violent resistance. Our case of Broad Based Organizing in London gives a good example of religious space being used for social mobilization in a non dictatorship context. Space of course is not restricted to location. In 2014, Cambridge University's Partha Dasgupta and Veerabhadran Ramanathan, of the University of California, made an unprecedented plea to religious leaders to help in the battle against climate change. Part of their argument was that religions have the organization and are structured in such a way that makes them effective in tackling global issues such as climate change. In this case, religious space embraces institutional structure and organization

Finally, we hypothesise that the dynamics of religious-based social mobilization crucially depends on the interaction between theological resources and religious spaces with other less 'religious' and even secular grievances and demands. That the site of a church, mosque or temple can become a place of political resistance is ultimately explained by wider socio-political considerations and contexts. Religious sites have not become sites of political resistance in communist China, but they have been in communist Poland, apartheid South Africa or in the Brazilian military regime. Similarly for theological resources, the documents of Vatican II became a source of social mobilization for the Catholic Church in Latin America, but perhaps less so or less visibly so for Catholic Churches in other parts of the world.

We examine these three hypothesis using three disparate case studies of largely non-violent social mobilization that had an apparently ‘religious’ dimension: the Hindu Rights Action Front in Malaysia; Dalit political mobilization in Bangladesh; and a broad-based coalition in London. On the basis of these, we suggest that to better understand the role of religion in social mobilization it is important that we adopt and develop approaches that are sensitive to context and history. This stands in contrast to the more abstract and essentialised treatments of religion that dominate the academic and indeed policy literature. Before proceeding to these case studies and the testing of our hypotheses, we return to review the literature on different approaches for analyzing religion, and more specifically for analyzing the role of religion in social mobilization.

### **Challenges of Researching Religion**

Earlier we alluded to Kettel’s (2012) review which found an alarming lack of attention to religion in core political science journals. Although sociology makes more references, it still falls short of the attention paid by anthropology. We traced these observations to the ongoing significance of secularism in the main intellectual frameworks guiding some of the major social sciences literature. In much of this literature, religion is treated primarily as a ‘place-holder’ – in some cases simply as a categorical variable into which individuals fall but that has no significance beyond this categorical division of the population. This approach is dominant in quantitative analyses found in political science, sociology and economics in which synthetic measures of social diversity – fractionalization or polarization – are employed. In this approach, ‘religion’ is treated as an alternative but theoretically identical means of estimating social diversity as ‘ethnicity’. Examples of such studies include Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2005) who, employing aggregate data on ethno-linguistic and religious diversity in a cross-country panel analysis, find that religious polarization increases the risk of civil conflict whilst ethno-linguistic polarization does not. Similarly, but in a less quantitative vein, Posner (2005) uses ‘religion’ as a ‘category set’ to divide the population alongside race, tribe, language, region or nationality, and the dynamics of identity politics becomes primarily a numbers game. Political entrepreneurs call upon these identity sets to the extent that they offer them the best opportunity to engage in a ‘minimum winning coalition’.

While this kind of approach allows for large scale, cross-sectional studies, it also has obvious shortcomings, not least of which that it largely ignores the qualitative ‘content’ of religion – something that becomes evident as soon as one begins to probe the ‘categories’ of religion more carefully. Is ‘Islam’ a single category, for instance, or should it be sub-divided into ‘Sunni Islam’ and ‘Shi’a Islam’, which in turn can be subdivided between the Ismaili and other Shia groups? De Juan’s recent (2014) analysis of differences within (as opposed to between) religious traditions in

Thailand, Iran and the Philippines is a stark reminder of the need to look carefully at how religious communities are organised internally in order to better understand how they act externally.

Other approaches have tended to see religion as a distinctive social category that requires special treatment (Deneulin and Rakodi, 2011). Here two main approaches to religion can be found: the ‘static’ and ‘dynamic’. According to the former, religion is a set of private beliefs in the mind of the believer, which are then manifested through public worship. This approach has its roots in the influential work of Max Weber, has been influential in much of the research suggesting a demise of religion at least in the public sphere (see above on Berger, 1969), and is still prominent in a significant amount of research into religion today. In this kind of research, ‘religious data’ is often captured through and read off attendance to religious ceremonies or performances of religious rituals. Norris and Inglehart (2004) for example use the World Values Survey data on religious worship attendance to establish a correlation between a country’s levels of income and inequality and its religiosity. They conclude that the poorer and insecure the conditions of life, the greater the attendance to religious worship. The key variable of concern here is *religiosity* rather than religion per se. In the discipline of economics, religion is also predominantly treated in the static mode.<sup>2</sup> Adopting this kind of approach, Feldmann’s (2007) econometric study for example finds that countries in which a large proportion of the population attends Protestant religious worship have substantially higher labour participation rates, a finding that is especially true among women. In a very similar vein, the literature on social capital finds a negative correlation between ‘hierarchical religions’ and social trust and economic growth (La Porta et al., 1997; O’Rourke, 2007).

Another interpretation of religion, i.e. the dynamic one, emphasises the historical and political construction of the very idea of ‘religion’. Thomas (2005) for example argues that it was the ‘wars of religion’ in sixteenth century Europe, which created the idea of ‘religion’ as a belief system, a set of propositional truths that one could ascend to, separate from history and politics. Religion is therefore not a set of static beliefs but something that is always deeply intertwined with dynamic historical and political processes (Devine and White, 2013). Within this interpretation, religion is best conceived as a heterogeneous lived social phenomenon, which never ceases to be redefined because people continue to re-interpret core religious teachings within the contexts in which they live (Deneulin with Bano, 2009). This approach rests clearly on an interpretivist methodology which recognises the importance of practices and institutions in the constitution and reproduction of social reality and meaning. Research on religion is, we would contend, therefore fundamentally about understanding the inter-subjective and common meanings that people give to their (religious) actions or religious adherence.

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<sup>2</sup> See Jackson and Fleischer (2007) for a review of the literature on religion and economics.

## Religion and social mobilization

It is the latter (i.e. dynamic) approach which is particularly helpful for understanding the role of religion in social mobilization because it enables us to explore the reasons why people may turn to religion to mobilize around particular causes or issues. This approach also gives special attention to the wider political, social and economic context which nurtures particular interpretations of religion in a way that leads to social mobilization. Among the reasons for religiously motivated social mobilization that are found in the existing literature, there are the perceived broad differences in world outlook between religions, and the extent to which these differences are perceived as a threat to a religion, its practices and teachings.<sup>3</sup> De Juan's incisive study (2014) reminds us that the same differences can be as pertinent and powerful *within* particular religious traditions living in the same socio-economic and political contexts.

Other studies have been more concerned with the organizational and network features of institutionalized religions, particularly under conditions of restricted or absent democracy. This literature is largely linked to 'political opportunity' models of social mobilization (Tarrow, 1996). In many non-democratic contexts, religious institutions have been relatively protected from political oppression and have hence provided a venue for social mobilization and contestation. The churches in South Africa for example played a large role in the demise of the apartheid regime (Borer, 1996), as did Catholic opposition to Martial Law in the Philippines (Moreno, 2007) or to the dictatorships of Central and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s (de Gruchy, 1995). Similarly, but in a very different context, Parsa (2000) has argued that the rise and ultimate victory of the Khomeini faction during the Iranian revolution was due in large part to the fact that under the Shah, 'all options for mobilization were blocked, except the mosque' (Parsa, 2000: 290).

The organizational and political space afforded to religion is a two-edged sword. While it may provide a relatively protected mobilizational resource for grievances and protest movements that are primarily non-religious, the same space can also close down other opportunities, particularly in divided societies. Thus, for instance, Parsa's study of the Iranian revolution suggests that the Islamic fundamentalism of the Khomeini faction was by no means supported by the majority of Iran's would-be revolutionaries, including students, but the channelling of protest through the mosques ultimately allowed Khomeini to seize power. In less dramatic circumstances, Brown (2004) argues that the mosque and mosque networks were vital to the mobilization and

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<sup>3</sup> This refers to the 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis (Huntington, 1993), which was primarily concerned with international conflicts, but has subsequently been widely applied to exploring the dynamics of intra-state conflict. See for example Ellingsen (2005); Fox (2001) and Pearce (2005).

spread of the pro-democracy *reformasi* movement in Malaysia, but that this also had the effect of alienating non-Muslim support for the movement.

Within the social movements literature, attention to religion has shifted in recent years following a broader intellectual ‘cultural turn’ (Johnston and Klandermans, 1995), which recognizes that the structural approach to social movement analysis prevalent in the preceding decades was not able to adequately capture the dynamics of collective action and contentious politics. In more recent social movements literature therefore, religion is often seen as representing ‘a valuable resource for the task of collective identity construction and mobilization’ (Smith, 1996: 17-20).

Within this interpretative context, Appleby’s identification of the ‘ambivalence of the sacred’ (see also Philpott, 2007) has been influential in identifying religion as a potential source both of violence and of peace and reconciliation, as well as in pointing to the theological framing role of religious elites as key to determining the trajectory of mobilization (Appleby, 2000; see also de Juan, 2014). The ‘clash of civilizations’ predicted by Huntington is recast as a ‘clash within’ (Nussbaum, 2007), in which religious violence emerges not out of a contestation between religious groups but out of a contestation over toleration and democratic ideals *within* religious groups (de Juan, 2014).

While the literature that speaks directly or indirectly to this ‘ambivalence of the sacred’ has generated a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of the dynamics of religion and violence, it has tended to contribute to a somewhat reified polarization of grassroots-versus-elites, whereby explanations of the violent potential of the ‘sacred’ revolve around the entrepreneurial and manipulative programmes of religious elites, while the non-violent is largely associated with ‘grassroots’ movements and networks. In the context of India for example, Brass (1997, 2003) and Wilkinson (2004) have sought to explain the incidence and location of communal conflict by exploring the extent to which such violence benefits particular political elites, and have analysed the ‘institutionalized riot systems’ through which such elites are seen to manufacture violence for their own benefit. On the other hand, Varshney’s (2002) research highlights the extent to which dense inter-community grassroots networks have played a role in keeping some Indian cities peaceful, even while nearby and otherwise similarly constituted cities that lack such networks have experienced endemic religious rioting. In Southern Thailand, religious mobilization by Islamic elites has been blamed for the rise of secessionism (Chalk, 2001), while popular grassroots observation of ‘cosmological commonalities’ between Islam and Buddhism has been invoked to explain why such violence was not more historically prevalent (Horstmann, 2004).

Our concern in this article is to explore the ways in which the use of theological resources and religious spaces in social mobilization interact with each other and with ‘non-religious’ processes found in the wider social and political context. We do so through three case studies of

largely non-violent social movements, all having a religious basis, in three very different contexts. One is drawn from a quintessentially plural middle income country, Malaysia; one is drawn from a primarily homogenous country officially classified as a low income country, Bangladesh; and, the final case is drawn from a developed country with a moderate degree of ethnic and religious diversity, the UK. The cases were purposively selected, however, for what they share in common: while religion appears to have played a role in their social mobilization, they have not been primarily ‘religious’ movements. By exploring these cases comparatively, we draw attention to the ways in which ‘religion’ as a mobilizing force is complex, contested and contingent on many other factors besides ‘religion’.

### **Three cases**

#### *The HINDRAF movement in Malaysia*

A paradigmatic case for the study of *ethnic* politics (Horowitz, 1985; Lijphart, 1977), comparative political scientists rarely afford much attention to the dynamics of religious mobilization in Malaysia, although Malaysianists – both local and international – have paid considerable attention to Islamic revivalism as a growing political phenomenon (Brown, 2009; Hussin Mutalib, 1991; Nagata, 1997). Over the past decade, they also started noting and attempting to explain the relative quiescence of the Indian community in responding to the increasing marginalization of sections of the population (Loh, 2003).

Since 2007, however, quiescence is no longer an issue. In November 2007, a massive rally of Indians was organized under the banner of the newly formed Hindu Rights Action Front (HINDRAF), following a series of smaller demonstrations. The protest was violently repressed, HINDRAF was banned and its organizers were detained without trial. The protests nonetheless continued and the Indian vote deserted the ruling *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition in March 2008 with, according to some analyses, an 80% swing in Indian votes from the BN to the opposition. The protests had also an instrumental role in the fall of four state governments to the opposition parties (Brown, 2008). Yet while religious markers were evident both in the events leading up to the main rally – particularly the destruction of Hindu temples – and evident in the name of the organization itself, the HINDRAF movement rapidly disassociated itself from a *religious* Hindu agenda and focused on *ethnic* Indian claims, such that both critics and supporters of HINDRAF now explicit deny that the movement has any religious connotations.<sup>4</sup>

To understand the role of ethnic and religious dimensions of HINDRAF, it is necessary to take a look at the diversity of the Indian population within Malaysia. Mostly migrating to colonial

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<sup>4</sup> First expressed through personal communications in December 2008.

Malaya as indentured labour for the plantation industry and to staff the colonial bureaucracy, the Indian community is probably the most socially and religiously heterogeneous of the 'races' that make up Malaysia's multiethnic plurality. According to the 2000 census, around 85 per cent of Indian Malaysians are Hindu, 7.4 per cent Christian, and 3.9 per cent Muslim; the remainder fall into much smaller categories such as Buddhist and Confucian.<sup>5</sup> This religious diversity within the Indian community largely coincided with class divisions – the Indian brought to staff the civil services were largely Christianized, while the indentured labourers were overwhelmingly Hindu. These religious class division have largely remain intact over the post-colonial era, such that in 2000, Christian Indians were the most highly educated major ethno-religious group in the country with over 25 per cent of 18-35 years old with university education in 2000; Hindu Indians were among the least well educated, with an equivalent figure of around 11 per cent.

This division is largely representative of the original colonial migration policy, reinforced by the greater availability of education to Christian families through mission-backed schools. While for many decades after independence, less educated Hindu Indians were concentrated in the rubber-tapping plantation industry, the collapse of rubber prices in the mid-1980s and the concomitant shift toward less labour intensive palm oil has seen a substantial proportion of the Indian workers move to the city in search of employment, where they have come in some areas to constitute an urban underclass (Loh, 2003; Wilford, 2006).

Social discontent among urban Indians was for many exacerbated by their inability to access anti-poverty programmes under the pro-Malay affirmative action policies that the BN regime has implemented since the early 1970s. This resulted in a growing perception among Indians – rich and poor alike – that Malay poverty was not tolerated by the government, but that Indian poverty was a matter of little concern. Such has been the clear pressure from below on this that leaders of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the senior Indian party within the BN coalition, have on occasion criticized government policy and called for remedial pro-Indian policies.

After the change of administration from Mahathir Mohamad to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in 2003, however, another vein of social discontent rapidly emerged among the Indian population. Initially highly popular among most ethnic groups<sup>6</sup> the premiership of Abdullah rapidly lost support among non-Muslim communities as he began pushing a more stridently pro-Islamic agenda than his largely secular predecessor, Mahathir. Among the Indian community, as well as sympathetic members of other communities, particular alarm was raised by a series of demolitions of Hindu

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<sup>5</sup> Data here are the authors' calculations from 2000 Census sample (MPC 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Abdullah led the BN to its largest ever electoral victory in 2004, garnering around 61 per cent of the vote including an estimated 73 per cent of Indian votes (Brown, 2008).

temples that stood in the way of large development projects. Most, if not all, of these temples were built on ‘squatter’ land – land for which titles had never been issued and which was technically illegally occupied, albeit for more than fifty years of independence – and government figures claimed that the temple committees had been offered relocation compensation, which had been refused. This was nonetheless taken by many within and beyond the Indian community as clear indication of the ‘second class’ status of their religion<sup>7</sup> – it was seen as utterly inconceivable that similar actions would have been taken against a mosque.

As the number of demolitions increased and news of these gained coverage, particularly on the Internet, the organization HINDRAF was formed. Led by three Hindu lawyers, P. Waytha Moorthy, P. Uthayamoorthy, and M. Manohan, the organization issued a ‘petition’ of demands to address the marginalization and exclusion of the Indian community. Most of the HINDRAF demands related to socio-economic grievances, although there was also reference to the perceived persecution of non-Muslim faiths. Waytha Moorthy simultaneously launched two high profile legal actions. In the Malaysian courts, he sought to obtain a ruling to strike out Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution which allows the ‘Special Rights’ of indigenous groups; in the British courts, he issued a £4 trillion class action law suit claiming compensation for Indians brought to Malaya as indentured labour, similar to the slavery compensation class actions in the USA. At the same time, Uthayamoorthy and other HINDRAF coordinators became regular participants in demonstrations around temple destructions, seeking to prevent police entry and being arrested on numerous occasions. Videos of the increasingly violent confrontations rapidly circulated, and participation grew.

In November 2007, HINDRAF organized a demonstration in central Kuala Lumpur to push its claims. Attended by at least 20,000 people of all ethnic groups, the demonstration was the largest protest in the country since the *Reformasi* protests in 1998. The protest was broken up by riot police with tear gas; several hundred arrests were made and seven protestors even charged with the attempted murder of a policeman. HINDRAF was declared illegal, and Uthayamoorthy and Manohan were detained without trial; Waytha Moorthy fled the country and remained in self-imposed exile, primarily in London.

A few months later came the shock collapse of the BN vote in the March 2008 election, in which the BN lost its constitution-amending two-thirds majority for the first time. Manohan and Uthayamoorthy both ran as candidates from prison and won; Sami Vellu, the previous unassailable leader of the MIC who had controlled the party since 1978, lost his seat. The results signalled the beginning of the end for Abdullah’s administration, and he handed over to his deputy, Najib bin

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<sup>7</sup> Personal communication, December 2008.

Razak, in April 2009. Temple demolitions stopped and the government began actively courting Indian grievances. At the same time, HINDRAF supporters and activists clearly began to steer clear of religious discourse, returning to the theme of ethnic marginalization.

### *Dalit activism in Bangladesh*

Bangladesh has a population of around 140 million people and despite some recent remarkable signs of development success, it remains one of the world's poorest countries. Poverty and indeed extreme poverty are concentrated in particular geographical areas of the country, and there are certain groups residing in the country whose poverty has proved to be extreme, persistent and inter-generational (Devine and Wood 2009). One of these groups is the dalits, a term that has been recently adopted by some of the country's Hindu untouchable groups. Although no precise figures exist, it is estimated that there are between five and six million dalits living in Bangladesh and these consist mostly of Hindu untouchable communities but also some Muslim and Christian groups.<sup>8</sup> Most of the country's dalits can therefore be described as a 'minority within a minority', i.e., members of a religious minority in a predominantly Muslim country and then having the lowest status within the minority.

Even a cursory glance at a range of basic human development indicators demonstrates clearly that members of dalit communities suffer higher levels of poverty and lower levels of access to key public services. Thus dalits tend to have lower access to capital assets, lower wages, lower literacy rates, poorer housing conditions and poorer health (IIDS, 2008). The present condition of the dalit communities however cannot be understood without taking into account the powerful dynamics of stigma and discrimination, which across South Asia are intimately tied to notions of purity and pollution (Iversen and Raghavendra, 2006). The term 'dalit' encompasses a number of groups who are normally more locally known by their traditional occupations such as sweepers, pig farmers, cobblers, palanquin bearers and so forth. All of these professions are considered impure and polluting<sup>9</sup> and as such dalit communities tend to be kept at a physical as well as social distance from other communities. Therefore one of the key reasons why dalits have lower levels of literacy is that they are often prevented from entering schools because it is believed that their presence will defile the premises. The same reason is often used to prevent them from accessing key health care services. On the other hand, their subordinate status means that dalits are dependent on higher castes and dominant non Hindu elites for employment opportunities and access to other basic livelihood goods and services. Needless to say the terms of such dependent relations never favour

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<sup>8</sup> Caste systems are normally associated with Hinduism but in Bangladesh, practices of caste discrimination can be found also among Muslim and Christian communities (IDSN, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> The Bengali terms used to describe these professions are almost always derogatory terms.

the dalits. Moreover these forms of caste discrimination and subordination reproduce themselves across generations. Thus even if sons do not carry out the same occupation as their fathers or convert away from the religion of their fathers, or leave their father's house and emigrate elsewhere, more often than not, they end up experiencing similar levels of discrimination and exclusion. Caste, it seems, is embedded in the DNA<sup>10</sup>.

The pattern of discrimination is widespread, engrained in everyday social interactions and *de facto* sanctioned, perhaps through omission, by the state. The constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights for all its citizens, and issues such as caste discrimination barely register on the political barometer. The extent of 'caste blindness' is demonstrated clearly in the country's 2005 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper where it is acknowledged that

[i]n Bangladesh there are some small groups of extremely disadvantaged poor people with very distinct characteristics. They belong to some specific occupation, and are a community isolated and disconnected from the mainstream population. *Although in Bangladesh there is not caste system per se, these groups are treated the way lower castes are treated as untouchables in a caste system* (PRSP 5.420, italics added)

In 2002, the Bangladesh Dalits' Human Rights (BDHR) was established by a group of activists committed to overturning the discrimination suffered by the country's dalit communities. Initially focusing on securing jobs for dalits as professional sweepers in the capital city of Dhaka, BDHR grew by establishing links with a number of national and international organizations working with dalit communities. The explicit adoption of the name 'dalit' was significant. Dalit is a Marathi word meaning 'oppressed', 'broken' or 'crushed'. As Zene (2007) rightly reports, it is a provocative and intensely political term. In Bangladesh, dalits are more commonly referred to as 'untouchables', a derogatory and externally imposed term. 'Dalit' on the other hand invokes images of resistance, struggle, agency, self-determination and self-ascribed identity – an affirmation of dalits' humanity (Zene, 2007). In terms of mobilization and social action therefore, the adoption of the term dalit significantly raises the political stakes. In the case of BDHR, it signalled a more deliberate move to

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<sup>10</sup> In India of course the question of the social mobility of dalits has received far more attention from researchers, politicians, activists and policy makers. Perhaps not surprisingly, the evidence about mobility points in equal measure to reversals and triumphs, change and continuity. Thus we have cases demonstrating the declining significance of caste in rituals and food habits (Kapur *et al*, 2010); the dilution of the link between caste and occupation (Madsen and Gardella, 2009); the increased significance of migration (Iversen and Raghavendra, 2006), education (Jeffrey *et al*, 2004), and the securing of non traditional occupations (Iversen and Raghavendra, 2006) for social mobility; and the greater exercise of agency and political activism by lower castes themselves (Khare, 1991). All of these contribute to processes, which seem to improve in some cases the relative position of dalits. However even in cases of apparent mobility, it seems that the influence of caste identity and politics continues to have profound and negative impacts in India, especially on those at the lower end of the hierarchical ladder (Desai and Dubey, 2012).

articulate a moral, social and political critique of those elites whose actions and behaviour 'oppressed' the dalit (Khare, 1991). The momentum built around this new form of dalit activism took a further step forward in April 2008 when a new platform called the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) was created. This platform evolved from the early work of BDHR and sought to create stronger and larger alliances that would be more effective in bringing about changes for dalit communities and other excluded groups.

The emergence of BDHR and then BDERM signals an important development in dalit identity politics in Bangladesh, and offers a direct challenge to those denying first the existence and second the discrimination suffered by dalits. These national initiatives have been accompanied by no less significant developments at local levels. For example over the past decade in the south west of Bangladesh, the region with the highest concentration of dalit communities,<sup>11</sup> a number of community based organizations and non-governmental organizations have been established and led by young men and women from the dalit communities themselves (see Mosse, 1999 for similar observations in Tamil Nadu). These initiatives have played an important role in mobilizing communities locally, and lobbying to ensure the situation of the dalits are recognized and respected, and their oppressive conditions properly addressed. These local initiatives in particular are peppered with stories of struggle, protest, social activism and sometimes, violent confrontations.

The mobilization of dalit communities at national and local levels has to some extent dragged the issue of caste out of political oblivion. This raises a number of key questions including: why has this particular form of mobilization evolved? why has it occurred at this particular time? In answering these questions, we draw on insights especially from the experience of dalit communities in the south west of Bangladesh.

When looking at the issue of dalit mobilization in the south west, one of the most important factors to be considered is the relationship that can be traced back to at least the 1850s between Catholic missionaries and dalit communities. Although the relationship has always been complex and ambiguous (Zene, 2002), it is not surprising to see that dalits chose to build connections with foreign missionaries. As Mosse has argued in the context of Tamil Nadu, emancipatory movements of dalits tend to coalesce around new relations and not normally around existing relations with higher castes or elites who have oppressed the dalits (Mosse, 1999). Missionaries working in the region turned their attention to the dalit communities after realising that they were not welcome among the Muslims and higher caste Hindu communities. Dalit communities on the other hand responded more positively to the missionaries because they offered the prospect of greater livelihood protection and security. However different missionary congregations came and then left

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<sup>11</sup> There are at least twenty different Dalit groups in the region (Rahman, 1993).

the South West region, frustrated or disillusioned by the apparent lack of a ‘spiritual response’ of the dalit communities. Targa (u.d) rightly argues that in many ways these early missionaries were equipped with a theology that considered conversion as the only positive outcome of missionary activity. Within this, early missionaries also perceived the ‘untouchability question’ as a primarily *religious* issue, which could and should be resolved via conversion. This framework changed however with the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s which revolutionised the theological underpinnings of missionary activity. One of the key changes of the Second Vatican Council was a repositioning of the relation between Church and the world, and the legitimate acceptance of a theology that was less focused on the discipline of religious adherence and practise and more on questions of social justice and political participation. As such, boundaries that once separated the ‘social’ from the ‘religious’, the ‘this world’ from the ‘other-world’ were redrawn; and new forms of missionary activity emerged which engaged more explicitly with the social, political and economic worlds of groups like the dalits.

Inspired by the new theology, some missionaries in the South West region of Bangladesh abandoned the traditional parish structures and began living among dalit communities. Discussions around conversion were also abandoned or at least suspended as missionaries began to encourage and support the dalits to reflect more on the dynamics of their discrimination; to find new articulations of identity not in the bible but in their own Hindu scriptures and traditions; and to begin the task of imagining a future in which they could live with greater autonomy, dignity and agency - an approach which contrasted sharply with the pervious theology of conversion. In some instances, this meant the dalits had to reflect on their own lifestyles and change those aspects (for example poisoning of cows and eating carrion) which encouraged their social marginalisation. In other instances, missionaries were active in promoting socio-economic development initiatives among dalits such as agricultural extension activities, health and education programmes and employment skills development projects. Perhaps more creatively, they also found ways to help the dalits better understand their own scriptures and theology, and to explore alternative theological narratives that countered the more orthodox discourses which *inter alia* legitimised their oppressed status. These alternative theological narratives allowed dalits to reassess their position within the wider Hindu community, understand better the social and theological ‘justifications’ of their subordination, and begin to construct an alternative politics of agency and autonomy. Zene (2007) argues that the idiom of religion and myth became for these ‘ex untouchable’ communities a point of resistance which enabled them to think of an alternative life in which their dignity and rights were respected. This was captured in the phrase *amrao je manush* (we are also people) which became a motif of mobilization for a number of dalits. It is important not to underestimate the significance of this new sense of consciousness because many dalits refused to embrace it, and

many non-dalits mocked it and tried to derail it with threats and sanctions being handed out to those questioning the *status quo*. Very slowly and notwithstanding the many challenges, a new generation of dalits emerged who were more vocal about their rights and much more aware of the many reasons that kept them subordinate. Importantly in embracing a new awareness of their situation, they had to reconstruct a new and alternative theological discourse in which dalits had dignity and rights. The new awareness triggered observable changes of behaviour. For example while previously many dalits changed their surnames in an attempt to disguise their past and hide their identity, today many keep their caste surnames and are not as ashamed of their backgrounds. This may appear a small and perhaps insignificant change. It is not. As one dalit friend put it: ‘If we hide from ourselves how can we stand up to others’.<sup>12</sup> Gorringer observed similar patterns in India, describing them as ‘an inversion of hegemonic cultural values’ (Gorringer 2005:663). As we will see below, for the dalits in the south west of Bangladesh the articulation of a new identity became the necessary platform for a new project articulated human rights and entitlements.

Although dalit communities are among the poorest and most excluded in Bangladesh, it is evident that those with longer association with the missionary groups have made important advances in terms of socio-economic development. There are a number of reasons for this. First, some missionaries became direct implementers of development related projects such as promoting small scale business enterprises or supporting the provision of education and health services. These were set up purposively to help dalit communities. Second, missionaries also used their authority and influence to encourage external development organizations to implement programmes among the dalit communities.<sup>13</sup> Recently this has moved in a new direction. New NGOs have emerged and these have been established and managed by dalits themselves. Missionaries have actively supported these developments primarily by identifying new educated leaders from among the dalit communities and then finding funds to support the development of the new organisations. Mosse (1999) found similar patterns and developments among untouchable communities in Tamil Nadu, arguing that for the untouchables the links to missionaries represented a move away from traditional dominating elites, and the establishment of locally run NGOs was important because it represented a move away from their identification with low status serving roles.

Milon Das, a dalit and the executive director of an NGO from the south west region, was among the first cohort of his community to complete, with the help of local missionaries, his formal primary education in the early 1990s. He was also among those who were supported by

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<sup>12</sup> Personal communication, March 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Although Bangladesh has one of the largest NGO sectors in the world, most of the organizations are not interested in working with dalits (IDSN, 2008). The main exceptions are those NGOs with links to missionaries working in the area.

missionaries to reflect more on the dynamics of caste discrimination and encouraged to think of alternative theologies and identities. As a young adolescent, Milon was involved in a local dispute following an altercation with a local restaurant owner. At the restaurant Milon's food was served on a piece of paper rather than a plate and the owner refused to serve him a glass of water for fear that if he served the 'son of a dalit', his business would be in ruins (see Iversen and Raghavendra, 2006 and Madsen and Gardella, 2009 for detailed analysis of the politics of commensality as a key feature of caste relations and evidence of a degree of secularization or democratization of food preparing and serving in India). In the public hearing organized to settle the dispute, Milon was found guilty of unruly behaviour and of making wrong complaints against the restaurant owner, and was warned that he would be excommunicated from the community if anything similar happened in the future. This experience was an important formative moment in Milon's life.

In 1993, Milon and a few of his dalit classmates set up a Students Organization and gave it the name '*Parittran*' which in Bengali means 'liberation'. The organization was run by the dalit students and supported by local catholic missionaries. The organization gradually expanded and soon became an important focal point for local struggles involving dalits. The emergence of new leaders and new organizations like *Parittran* has had an impact on both the dynamics of the relationship between missionaries and dalit communities, and the success of mobilization efforts. For years, before the emergence of groups like *Parittran*, missionaries tended to take the initiative and use their influence to advance the 'dalit agenda'. On the whole these initiatives had limited success partly because they relied on individual missionaries. Now instead local dalit leaders and organizations are at the forefront of the dalit struggle and this has had a marked and positive difference in the mobilization of dalit issues in Bangladesh.

In his discussion of the dilemmas and challenges facing dalit mobilization in India, Gorringe (2005) argues that the internationalisation of the human rights discourse has opened up new and important possibilities. First of all it offers a legitimate authoritative space in which dalit concerns can be placed firmly or more centrally on the agenda. Importantly, as Gorringe notes, this space is of a higher authority than even the State. Secondly, the human right discourse enables caste mobilization to break out of the narrow confines of casteism and align with other important struggles. A similar 'breaking out' is evident in Bangladesh as different dalit organizations come together and establish alliances with like minded activists under a broader human rights banner. The BDERM is an obvious illustration of this. Since its establishment, BDERM has built up a profile as an organization focusing on the human rights of dalit communities and so far has had some success as a forum which raises issues around caste in Bangladesh. Initiatives such as the publication of a manifesto that was delivered to the main political parties contesting the parliamentary elections of December 2008, and a submission to the UN fourth Universal Periodic Review for Bangladesh held

in February 2009 indicate that BDERM's legitimacy and authority as an organisation leading the dalit struggle in Bangladesh, are growing.

Although the BDERM has taken the issue of caste discrimination in Bangladesh to new heights and arguably increased the visibility and impact of dalit mobilization, it is not a platform without its controversy. One of the key tensions concerns the extent to which dalits are in control of their mobilization and struggles. A leader of a local dalit organization asked one of the authors for advice on whether or not he should join the BDERM. His main concern was that the platform was a coalition led by mostly urban-based, middle-class non-dalits: 'The platform may be useful but it is run by people who are not dalits. They see us as victims like many others in Bangladesh. We see ourselves as dalits. We have a new identity and we are respected more. It has taken us years to get to this point. Of course we need to talk about dalit rights and now is the time to do so. But we need to take our struggle forward ourselves, and not be led by others. On the other hand, if we don't join with others, we will always remain isolated'.<sup>14</sup> The argument is complex. On the one hand, there seems to be some recognition that the articulation of a new sense of alternative identity is a necessary but not sufficient step in promoting a new politics of caste. Second, it is not clear whether universal discourses like human rights are able to recognise and embrace local realities and needs. Indeed there is a strong suggestion that universal human rights discourses may actually dilute the focus on caste – hence the statement that 'they see us as victims'. Finally, there remains the question of whether the NGO leader can afford to turn his back on the platform and try to 'go it alone'. These concerns remain unanswered to date and yet remain at the heart of the politics of dalit mobilization in Bangladesh today. It seems that the future success of dalit mobilisation will in part depend on striking the right balance between 'local' and more 'global' articulations of identity and aspiration.

#### *Broad-based organizing in London*

In the 1980s, against a background of Thatcherism and social dislocation, the Citizens Organizing Foundation (COF) was set up in the United Kingdom, inspired by the model of broad-based organizing pioneered by Saul Alinsky in the slums of Chicago in the 1930s (Alinsky, 1971). The creation of COF was largely facilitated by the 'Church Urban Fund' of the Church of England. The Fund aimed to regenerate British inner cities, whose dismal conditions were documented in the Church Report '*Faith in the City*' published in 1985 (Wills and Jamoul, 2008). Broad-based organizing is a type of social mobilization which seeks to create alliances between various groups in local, often divided, communities to mobilize on common issues that the groups face. Typically the

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<sup>14</sup> Personal communication, March 2009.

groups will target issues which they consider to be winnable. These may include improved social housing, better safety in public areas, solving local environmental problems like the closure of a polluting factory or the creation of recreational areas for children. Broad-based organizing is community focused, centred around local problems rather than broader issues such as fighting climate change or reforming the social security system. This does not mean however that broad-based organizing is only limited to local issues because many of the local issues facing communities are often linked to wider national and even international issues.

What is central to broad-based organizing is its financial independence from government. Member organizations pay an annual fee and this enables them to retain political autonomy and independence. Another key characteristic of broad-based organizing is that groups focus on what unites the members rather than on issues which might divide them. Thus for example members of a mosque, a church and community groups can mobilize together to improve safety in their neighbourhoods even if on other matters such as homosexuality or abortion they may hold different, even polar views. This allows broad-based organizing for example to draw specifically on a group's religious identity while campaigning around non-religious issues, as the story of the London branch of the Citizens Organizing Foundation, London Citizens, illustrates.

In the mid 1990s, the East London Citizens Organization (TELCO) emerged as a broad-based organizing initiative around local problems faced by the marginalized and ethnically divided communities of East London. It later expanded to include other London communities and became known as 'London Citizens'. It is now a broad-based coalition of more than 80 organizations, both religious and secular, which act together to build better neighbourhoods in London.<sup>15</sup> Instead of engaging directly in party politics, the coalition puts pressure on existing political structures to make sure the desired changes are introduced. Two of its recent campaigns are of special interest to our discussion on mobilization.

At the turn of the millennium, TELCO initiated a campaign to introduce a living wage<sup>16</sup> for low-paid workers in London which would adjust the national minimum wage to the living costs of the capital. The campaign was successful and more than 5,000 cleaners in London were awarded an increased remuneration in line with the living wage.<sup>17</sup> Religion acted as a strong mobilizing force in

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<sup>15</sup> See [www.londoncitizens.org.uk](http://www.londoncitizens.org.uk).

<sup>16</sup> The living wage is based on the amount an individual needs to earn to cover the basic costs of living. Since living costs vary in different parts of the country, there is a different rate for London and the rest of the UK. Debates over the living wage are currently high on the political agenda in the UK.

<sup>17</sup> See the ESRC research project led by Prof Jane Wills at Queen Mary University of London at <http://www.geog.qmul.ac.uk/livingwage>. The project focused on the 'Living Wage campaign' as a new form of political and social mobilization outside the traditional political channels of political parties and electoral politics.

the campaign (Wills and Jamoul, 2008). The success of the campaign contrasted with the general sense of disillusionment felt towards traditional political channels; the de facto steep decline in trade union membership which can be traced back to the late 1970s; and many other civil society initiatives which tended to be dominated by white middle-class people and had very low civic engagement of low-paid workers (Wills and Jamoul, 2008). The latter is exacerbated by the so-called ‘flexibility’ of labour which adds to workers’ overall vulnerability and discourages their participation in unions or other groups that might represent their interests politically. In the TELCO campaign, places of worship were often the only point of contact where low-paid workers could come together and find help and support. The involvement of churches, mosques and other places of religious worship was central to the success of the TELCO campaign.

Another campaign supported by London Citizens was called ‘Strangers into Citizens’.<sup>18</sup> It ran from 2007 till 2010. This campaign sought to regularize the situation of illegal or undocumented workers who had been living and working in Britain for more than 6 years, could speak English fluently, had no criminal records, and were able to provide references. As in the case of the living wage campaign, sites of worship were important places where the immigrants could organize themselves. In May 2009, the campaign organized a number of events which were held around the Parliament building including a Mass for Catholic immigrants in which no less than 50 ethnic Catholic chaplaincies were represented; a service of public worship in the Central Methodist Hall; a communion service at the Anglican St Margaret’s Church behind Westminster Abbey; and a political rally in front of the House of Commons. This campaign reflected the hybrid character of broad-based organizing, and its unique ability to mobilize secular and religious organizations around a common cause – in this case, to demand better treatment of illegal immigrants in London.

In both the *Living Wage* and *Strangers into Citizens* campaigns, religious locations turned into spaces where it was possible to mobilise and articulate alternative political agendas. This was necessary because more traditional spaces such as those associated with party politics or trade unions were not available to the immigrants. Since the immigrants were illegal, they could neither vote nor join a trade union and so they were forced to find alternative channels to advance their claims. Here the churches and ethnic chaplaincies took on a key role and offered the migrants not only a place to worship but also a place to organise themselves and articulate their demands for recognition and respect.

The lack of traditional political channels is not the only reason religious locations or spaces can become sites to mobilize around alternative political agendas. In some instances, religious leaders can also take on important leadership roles. As Willis (2008: 7) points out in the context of

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<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.strangersintocitizens.org.uk/>

the living wage campaign: “[w]hereas employers tend to resist trade union organizers, they were often more open to developing a dialogue with faith and community leaders from the campaign.” One of the actions of the *Living Wage* campaign was to attend the General Assembly of the shareholders of HSBC (London Citizens had bought a few shares that entitled them to participate in the Assembly). The campaigners were led by the Catholic bishop of Brentwood. When they confronted the CEO of HSBC about the low pay of cleaners, the CEO protested arguing that HSBC was giving £2 million of donations to charities every year. The bishop replied ‘That is all very well but what is called for here is not charity but justice’. HSBC consequently agreed to pay its cleaners according to the living wage.<sup>19</sup> In a similar way, the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster played a leading role in the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign, and this helped the social movement gain credibility and respect, and also made grassroots members feel supported and encouraged.

The link between religion and social mobilization in London is not only mediated by the interaction between religious locations and their political environment, it also rests on theological resources which enable believers to engage in social action from their faith’s perspective. As a Muslim campaigner put it: ‘The Prophet says whomsoever amongst you sees an evil act, let him stop it with his hand. If he is unable to do that, let him stop it with his tongue. If I don’t say nothing then that’s the sin on me’ (quoted in Willis, 2008: 7).<sup>20</sup> At the gathering Mass for migrant workers, the auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Southwark preached that ‘we as the church will do all we can not to allow migrant workers to become scapegoats and targets of peoples’ frustration with the economy’. He referred to the long tradition of the Church to stand alongside the poor and the oppressed, and argued that at a time of economic downturn, the Church had a duty to protect migrants.<sup>21</sup>

People join these campaigns because they are associated with specific member organizations of London Citizens, i.e. as members of for example a specific church, mosque, faith centre, religious community and so forth. However, the campaigns transcend these specific affiliations to focus on an agreed project such as creating a better neighbourhood or improving living conditions in London. Through this common action, a new identity emerges, i.e. that of belonging to London Citizens or that of being a political campaigner or that of being a British citizen. This new sense of identity is captured nicely in the following quote from a member of the East London Mosque: ‘I’ve become more British in a way. There was a time when I used to feel like an outsider in society,

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<sup>19</sup> Austen Ivereigh, ‘Power to the People’, *The Tablet*, 25 November 2006.

<sup>20</sup> See also Jamoul and Wills (2008) for more interviews focusing on the faith motivations of people involved in the *Living Wage* campaign.

<sup>21</sup> News report by the think tank Ekklesia, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2009.

where I was not interacting with any non-Muslims or people from other communities. So now, I communicate with anyone' (quoted in Wills and Jamoul, 2008).

### **Contesting the religious boundaries in social mobilization**

A key theme that emerges from the three case studies is the way in which 'religious' mobilization is linked to rather more earthly issues of class, socio-economic inequality and injustice, and marginalization. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give an historical account of the involvement of religious groups in politics and their social mobilization potential. However what is clear is that there is no immediate or obvious link between believing in God and reading the Bible or the Qur'an on the one hand and social mobilization on the other. This has to be mediated by social, political and theological contexts, which are deeply connected and intertwined (Devine and White, 2013). There were workers who were paid below subsistence levels in thirteenth century Europe, yet believers did not campaign then for justice and for a just wage. It is only in the nineteenth century that the pursuit of justice became the concern of some believers in Europe, and this was prompted by a major external factor: the industrialisation of Europe and the rise of communism. The churches began to lose their members because socialist organizations were better able to respond to workers' concerns. Given communist pressure, the Church was forced to respond. What followed was a series of official documents which linked the Bible with the humanization of economic, social and political structures.<sup>22</sup>

There is therefore no such thing as pure 'religious-based social mobilization'. Religion is not an abstract motivation, it is always contextualised. The role of religion in social mobilization cannot therefore be assumed independently of non-religious factors such as history, socio-economic developments and political contexts. It is precisely the context which allows for religious-based mobilization – even of non-religious issues - and determines their chance of success or failure.

Our three case studies illustrate this, with very different dynamics. In the case of the HINDRAF movement in Malaysia, it is clear that religious language and religious concerns were used instrumentally by ethnic activists who were able to see the potential to mobilize others following the temple demolitions. Beyond the name Hindu Rights Action Front, there was little religious content to the movement at all. It lacked religious leadership and, most importantly, it did not draw on theological resources. But what the movement did exploit with devastating

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<sup>22</sup> The first publication was in 1891 with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* which constitutes the starting point of what is known as 'Catholic Social Thought', a body of documents which discusses the links between faith and involvement in justice, peace and integrity of creation (Hornsby-Smith, 2006). The last such document is *Caritas in Veritate* published by Benedict XVI in July 2009, which calls for 'integral human development' to guide economic, social, political, cultural and technological processes.

effectiveness was the dimension of religion as a sacred space and, in particular, the *violation* of that space by government policy. It is worth reminding ourselves here of the particular overlap between class and religion within the Indian Malaysian community and the relatively unusual position of the three HINDRAF leaders as highly paid Hindu professionals. Far more than the socio-economic grievances that have been growing among the Hindu population for more than two decades, it was the novel and emotive message of, for want of a less emotive word, desecration that galvanized the Indian community and brought sympathetic responses from other groups, particularly other non-Muslim organizations that felt equally threatened by Abdullah's Islamization policies.

Why, then, did the religious dimension of the HINDRAF movement not 'take on a life of its own', in the way that Parsa (2000), for instance, noted for Islamic radicalism in the Shah's Iran? One possible explanation may lie in the non-hierarchical and decentralized nature of Hinduism. There are two arguments that question this hypothesis. First, the *hindutva* movement in India flourished. Second, in many ways Islam, like Hinduism, lacks extensive hierarchical structures. Another possible explanation points to the high capacity of the Malaysian state for civil (as opposed to military) repression and the non-secular nature of the Malaysian regime. Islam is the official religion of the country, *shari'a* law has been implemented for Muslims since independence, proselytization of other faiths among Muslims is forbidden, and apostasy comes with a heavy legal price including whipping, fines, and potentially limitless detention. Malays, who are all Muslim by constitutional definition, are effectively prevented from officially converting away from Islam. Perceived challenges to the dominance of Islam have met with furious responses from Malay and Muslim organizations. In such a context, a political calculus would caution against making strong religious claims.

A final important point to make is the *conservativeness* of the HINDRAF agenda. It did nothing to challenge the ethnic basis of politics in Malaysia, indeed it was premised upon such ethnic stratification. It did not even challenge the legitimacy of ethnic affirmative action as a principle; it simply sought the extension of these privileges to other groups. The only radical element of the programme – the calls for secularism and religious status equality – were rapidly dropped in the face of repression and resistance. Religion is thus not a mobilizing factor on its own. Images of desecration and violation of the 'sacred space' were invoked with enormous effect, but were equally quickly and effectively silenced.

In contrast to the Malaysian case, religious leadership and theological resources did play a key role in the mobilization processes in Bangladesh and London. Without the support of religious leadership, the *Living Wage* mobilization would not have been as successful in achieving its aims. Similarly, the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign received the strong backing of the Head of the Catholic Church of England and Wales – and one could even add that there would be no broad-

based organizing in the UK had the Church of England not initiated it in the 1980s. The pivotal role of religious leadership lies also at the more grassroots level. When a new priest who is not sympathetic to a theology of social action (for example sceptical of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council) arrives in a parish, the congregation is in many ways powerless.<sup>23</sup> Also, not all places of worship in inner-city London are members of London Citizens, even if they have large congregations of low-paid workers and migrants. Some local church leaders remain opposed to a more social action interpretation of the Gospel or the Qur'an, and if this is the case, they are unlikely to join initiatives such as London Citizens. This decision in effect means that the congregation is also unlikely to participate.

In Bangladesh, it was the reworking and reinterpreting of theological resources, facilitated by the Catholic missionaries, which became a pre-condition to the social mobilization of dalit communities. Again the development of these resources was not alien from changes in the wider economic, social and political context. The Second Vatican Council's decision to encourage greater social involvement of missionaries was part of the response of the Church which wanted to 'be in the world' in a different way.<sup>24</sup> What is striking in the case of Bangladesh is the inter-faith nature in which theological resources were developed for social mobilization. Catholic missionaries helped Hindu dalits reinterpret their own traditions and supported a process in which the dalits developed an alternative theology that affirmed their dignity. The dynamics of social mobilization among the dalits in Bangladesh has more recently taken a new turn with greater emphasis being placed on the international discourse of human rights. As indicated earlier, the initial work around building a new awareness of dalits' humanity and dignity can be seen as a precondition for their more active engagement in the human rights discourse. Mobilisation around human rights is an emerging agenda for the dalits in Bangladesh and it is not possible to predict how it will evolve. However what seems clear is that the future many dalit activists aspire to is now more clearly linked with and fashioned by a reinterpretation of past theologies.

While it is the context, linked to a dearth of theological resources, which prevented religious spaces to become a source of social mobilization in Malaysia, it is a combination of these same elements, context and theological resources, which enabled social mobilization in Bangladesh and London. In both cases however, it is not religion as such which becomes the mobilization force, but its interaction with other variables. In London, religion has helped open up alternative political spaces for some who cannot access party politics or trade union activism, and for others who are simply disillusioned with the effectiveness of traditional political channels to bring about change in

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<sup>23</sup> A Catholic church left London Citizens after the arrival of a new priest. Members of the congregation who wished to remain involved had to change parish (personal communication).

<sup>24</sup> For the consequences of the Second Vatican Council for development, see Deneulin with Bano (2009).

their lives. Similarly in Bangladesh, Catholic missionaries helped dalits identify and then mobilise around political spaces and opportunities which had been denied to them because of their caste position.

## **Conclusion**

This article seeks to fill a particular gap that derives from a combination of two observations. First, it is clear that religion has, and continues today to play a central and sometimes primary role in social mobilization. Second however, our understanding of the role of religion in social mobilization is weak and insufficiently nuanced. In our view, this second observation is the result of a bias evident in much of the literature to treat religion as an independent and analytically separate domain, and to equate it too readily with abstract beliefs, doctrines and practices. This produces a narrow and ultimately reductionist analysis of religion. Instead we argue for a more dynamic approach to understanding the role of religion in social mobilization. In this approach, religion is enmeshed in everyday social and political contexts and the potential for mobilization lies in how these different contexts interact and evolve in specific places and times. The premise of our argument is therefore that the role of religion in social mobilization is inherently contextual and such it is inevitably variable, unpredictable and contested.

We chose to look at three case studies of social mobilization that were familiar to us, have been relatively successful in their objectives, and have been characterized, to some extent, as 'religious'. Our analysis identified three key factors that influenced the shape the different mobilizations took: theological resources, religious spaces and their interaction with the wider context. In each of the cases, the different mechanisms combined and evolved in distinctive ways and so doing, opened up new opportunities for mobilization. Our analysis leads us to two overriding conclusions. First, while our cases were linked to practical welfare-orientated concerns none, we would argue, could be simply reduced to this. The mobilizations were about meaning, identity, recognition and respect as well as about material gain or political advancement. While our cases cannot be described as *religious* mobilizations, there is no doubt that religion played a significant role in giving shape to the mobilizations. Second, the role of religion in all the cases evolved as the mobilizations advanced. In some instances, it was prominent; in others, almost absent. This is consistent with our argument that religion is an area of life that is intimately connected with other areas such as economics, politics and society. Religion is neither a static nor abstract aspect of life but one that is affected by, and in turn affects, the organization of different aspects of life, and the relations between them. As such religion is always being worked upon and transformed. It is in these iterations, as opposed to a narrow focus on religion in the abstract, where we are likely to identify what if any role religion plays in social mobilization, and understand its significance.

Locating our analysis of religion in wider social contexts not only better specifies the role of religion but will also help us better understand the ongoing significance of religion in broader social change.

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