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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 ingredients for religion to act as a catalyst for social mobilization: theological resources, sacred spaces, and their interaction 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

The subject of religion has recently received a renewed interest in the social sciences. The dominant analytical framework for understanding religion – secularism – has come under heavy fire. As societies modernize, religion has not disappeared from the public sphere, as secularism assumed. Religion has been, and remains, a strong force in social mobilization throughout the world, from the Iranian Islamic revolution in the late 1970s to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt today, to the Buddhist monks opposing the Burmese dictatorship recently, to the Catholic Church in communist Poland in the 1980s, to the evangelical against the slave trade, led by Wilberforce in the nineteenth century, to name a few.

Yet, while widely documented, the mechanisms through which religion leads in some cases to social mobilization, which can at times be non-violent and at times violent, have not been examined in the literature. In this paper, we propose a framework for researching and understanding the dynamics of religion within social mobilization. We hypothesise that religious social mobilization contains three core ingredients that determine its shape.

First are theological resources, by which we mean broadly the teachings, interpretation and knowledge associated with a religion which are used to inform practice. Within Christianity for example, theological resources would encompass formal sources such as the Bible and the writings of theologians, but would 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 a theology that rendered their worlds more meaningful. Linked to the issue of theology is the key question of interpretation. How are these 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 of Appleby (2000), that those who adhere to a religion and who live it radically may be tempted to resort to violence, especially as they face situations in which others do not hesitate to 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 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 ingredient of religiously motivated social mobilization that we hypothesise is that of ‘sacred spaces’. The relative insulation of religious organizations and grouping from political interference, even in many otherwise undemocratic contexts, can sometimes enable social mobilization. This has been particularly the case in authoritarian regimes where sacred 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 for trade union meetings as these were banned by the regime. This was also the case in apartheid South Africa. After the banning of the ANC, the churches became the only space where social mobilization against apartheid could happen. Similarly, to a lesser extent, the churches played a large role in the United States during the civil rights movements. The ‘sacred space’ became a political space where black people could articulate their concerns and acquire the skills for their non-violent resistance.

Finally, we hypothesise that the dynamics of religious-based social mobilization crucially depends on the interaction between theological resources and sacred spaces with other less ‘religious’ and even secular grievances and demands. That the sacred space of a church may become a source of political resistance is linked to wider context. Sacred spaces have not become sites of political resistance in communist China, but they have been so 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 not for the Catholic Church in India.

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 more 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 start by reviewing the different approaches used in the social sciences for analyzing religion, and more specifically for analyzing the role of religion in social mobilization.

Researching religion in the social sciences

In its simplest formulation in the social scientific literature, religion is treated primarily as a ‘placeholder’ – 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 in which synthetic measures of social diversity – fractionalization or polarization – are employed. It treats ‘religion’ 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 but that 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 according to which set offers them the best opportunity to engage in a ‘minimum winning coalition’.

While this 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?

Other approaches have tended to see religion as a distinctive social category that requires special treatment in the social sciences (Deneulin and Rakodi, forthcoming). Two main approaches to religion are found in the social sciences, the ‘static’ and ‘dynamic’. According to the former, religion is a set of private beliefs in the mind of the believer and which are manifested through public worship. This has been the approach taken by Weber’s study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Today, this is still the prevalent approach in the social sciences. ‘Data’ of

religion can be captured through 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.¹ Adopting this kind of approach, Feldmann's (2007) econometric study 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, 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 historical and political processes (Devine and White, forthcoming). Within this interpretation, religion is best conceived as a heterogeneous lived social phenomenon, which never ceases to be redefined according to how people interpret core religious teachings in the context 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 therefore fundamentally about understanding the inter-subjective and common meanings that people give to their (religious) actions or religious adherence.

Religion and social mobilization

It is the latter approach which is particularly helpful for understanding the role of religion in social mobilization, for it enables us to explore the reasons why people may turn to religion to mobilize around a particular cause. It also draws special attention to the wider political, social and economic context which nurtures particular interpretations of core teachings 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

¹ See Jackson and Fleischer (2007) for a review of the literature on religion and economics.

teachings.²

Other studies have been more concerned with the organizational and network features of institutionalized religions, particularly under conditions of restricted or absent democracy, and 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 played a large role in the demise of apartheid (Borer, 1996), as has 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 religion is a two-edged sword. It may provide a relatively protected mobilizational resource for grievances and protest movements whose demands are primarily non-religious, but in doing so, it also potentially shuts 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 Iran’s would-be revolutionaries, including the students, but the channelling of protest through the mosques allowed him to seize power. In less dramatic circumstances, Brown (2004) argues that the mosque and mosque networks were vital to the mobilization and 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 paradigm, attention to religion has shifted in recent years following the broader ‘cultural turn’ (Johnston and Klandermans, 1995), which recognized that the structural approach to social movement analysis prevalent in the preceding decades could not adequately capture the dynamics of collective action and contentious politics. In this context, 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 an ‘ambivalence of the sacred’ (see also Philpott, 2007) has been influential both in identifying religion as a potential source both of violence and of peace and reconciliation, and in pointing to the theological framing role of religious elites as key to determining the trajectory (Appleby, 2000). The ‘clash of civilizations’

² This is 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).

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.

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 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, 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 focuses on 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).

Why and when might religion become a mobilization force, particularly vis-à-vis other forms of identity, including ethnicity, and class? Is religion more inflammatory when its privileged normative position as a ‘sacred space’ is threatened, as is arguably the case in southern Thailand, where the dismantling of religious-based civil institutions preceded a return to violence (McCargo, 2006)? Are theological resources of a religion more likely to be deployed in an inflammatory way when its adherents form a religious minority in a country?

These are important questions that remain largely unanswered in the literature. Our concern here is to explore the ways in which these processes – the use of theological resources and sacred spaces in social mobilization – interact with each other and with ‘non-religious’ dimensions such as 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 near the bottom of the developmental ladder, 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 banned and its organizers 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.³

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 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.⁴ This religious diversity within the

³ Personal communications, December 2008.

⁴ Data here are the authors’ calculations from 2000 Census sample (MPC 2009).

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 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, however, another vein of social discontent rapidly emerged among the Indian population. Initially highly popular among most ethnic groups⁵ 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 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

⁵ 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).

‘second class’ status of their religion⁶ – 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 political unassailable leader of the MIC who has 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 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.

⁶ Personal communication, December 2008.

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. There are numerous groups whose poverty is extreme, persistent and inter-generational. One of these groups is the dalits, a term that has been recently adopted by the country's many untouchable or outcaste 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 outcaste communities but also some Muslim and Christian groups.⁷ Most of the country's dalits are therefore 'minorities 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 conditions of the dalit communities however cannot be understood without taking into account the overall context of stigma and discrimination. The term dalit encompasses a number of groups who are normally known locally by their traditional occupations such as sweepers, pig farmers, cobblers, palanquin bearers and so forth. All of these professions are considered impure and polluting⁸ and as such dalit communities tend to be kept at a distance – physically and socially. Therefore one of the key reasons why dalits have lower levels of literacy is that they are prevented from entering schools because they will defile the premises. The stigma and discrimination reproduce themselves across generations. Even if sons do not carry out the same occupation of their fathers, they will still experience the same high levels of discrimination and exclusion.

The pattern of discrimination is widespread, engrained in everyday social interactions and *de facto* sanctioned, perhaps through omission, by the state. On the one hand therefore the constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights for all its citizens, and issues such as caste discrimination barely register in the political barometer. On the other hand, Bangladesh is one of the world's largest Muslim populations and any acknowledgement of caste risks tarnishing the country's Islamic credentials. The extent of caste blindness is demonstrated in the 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

⁷ 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).

⁸ The Bengali terms used to describe these professions are almost always derogatory terms.

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 has grown by establishing links with 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. While more common terms such 'outcastes' or 'untouchables' are derogatory and externally imposed, 'dalit' invokes images of resistance, struggle, agency, self-determination and self-ascribed identity – an affirmation of humanity. In terms of mobilization, the adoption of the term dalit therefore significantly raises the political stakes. The momentum built around the 'dalit movement' 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 seeks to create stronger and larger alliances that will be more effective in bringing about positive 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 then 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,⁹ a number of community based organizations or non-governmental organizations have been established and led by young men and women from the dalit communities themselves. These initiatives have played an important role in mobilizing communities locally and lobbying to get the situation of the dalits recognized, respected and 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 dragged the issue of caste out of oblivion into an arena of contentious politics. Why has this form of mobilization evolved? And why 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.

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 in the south west. The relationship has always been complex and ambiguous (Zene, 2002). Missionaries turned their

⁹ There are at least twenty different Dalit groups in the region (Rahman, 1993).

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 to the missionaries with some expectation that they would find livelihood protection and security. Different missionary congregations came and left frustrated or disillusioned by the lack of spiritual response of the dalit communities. Targa (u.d) rightly argues that in many ways these early missionaries were equipped with a theology in that they perceived conversion as the only positive outcome of missionary activity. This changed however with the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s which revolutionised the theological underpinnings of missionary activity. Boundaries that once separated the ‘social’ from the ‘religious’, the ‘this world’ from the ‘other-worldly’ were redrawn, and new forms of missionary activities emerged which embraced a more open engagement with the social, political and economic worlds of the dalit communities.

Inspired by the new theology, missionaries initiated a number of social initiatives. These included agricultural extension initiatives, health and education programmes, social campaigns and employment skills development. A number of missionaries abandoned parish structures and lived among dalit communities opening up new opportunities for engagement. One of the consequences of this was that missionaries were involved in processes that helped the dalits reflect more on the dynamics of their discrimination. In some instances, this meant reflecting on their own lifestyles and changing those aspects (for example poisoning of cows and eating carrion) which encouraged their social marginalisation. In other instances, missionaries helped the dalits better understand their own Hindu scriptures and theology, and explore alternative theological narratives that countered the more orthodox discourses which *inter alia* legitimised their lower status. These alternative theological narratives therefore allowed dalits to reassess their position within the wider Hindu community, understand the terms of the debate underpinning their subordination, and begin to assert a new mobilizing identity (Zene, 2007). It is important not underestimate the significance of this ‘new sense of consciousness’; many dalits refused to embrace it, 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 ambitions in life, and much more aware of the many reasons that locked them into subordination. This new awareness triggered observable changes of behaviour. For example while previously many dalits changed their surnames in attempt to disguise their past and hide their identity, today most keep their caste surname and are not as ashamed of their backgrounds. As one dalit friend put it: ‘If we hide from ourselves how can we stand up to

others'.¹⁰ The significance of this should not be underestimated. A similar pattern is observed in India, which Gorringe (2005:663) describes as 'an inversion of hegemonic cultural values'.

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. First, some missionaries have become direct implementers of development related projects such as promoting small scale business enterprises or offering education and health services. Second, missionaries also used their contacts to encourage development organizations to implement their programmes among the dalit communities.¹¹ 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 working with them to mobilize the wider community.

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. As a young adolescent, he 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. In the public hearing organized to settle the dispute, Milon was found guilty of unruly behaviour and complaining, 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 the 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 to secure public recognition of the dalit struggles. On the whole these initiatives failed. Now local dalit leaders and organizations are at the forefront of the struggle and this has had a marked and positive difference in the mobilization of dalit issues in Bangladesh.

¹⁰ Personal communication, March 2009.

¹¹ 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.

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 the human rights banner. The BDERM is an obvious illustration of this. Since its establishment, BDERM has built up a profile that centres on the protection of human rights for dalit communities and this so far has been a relatively successful forum in which to raise issues around caste in Bangladesh. Recent high profile 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 reinforce the idea that BDERM is perceived as a legitimate and authoritative institution.

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. Recently a leader of a 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 don’t know our lives and we need to take our struggle forward ourselves’.¹² Hidden in this statement is a subtle question on whether universal discourses like human rights can recognise and embrace local realities and needs. Less subtle, but no less important, is the question of whether or not the NGO leader can afford to turn his back on the platform and try to ‘go it alone’. This strikes at the very heart of the quest for individual and collective recognition.

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’ from the Church of England.

¹² Personal communication, March 2009.

The Fund aimed at regenerating 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 a local, often divided, community to mobilize on common issues that these various groups face, typically targeted issues which can easily be won. This may include improved social housing, better safety in public areas, solving a local environmental problem like the closure of a polluting factory, creating recreational areas for children. Broad-based organizing is community focused, centred around local problems instead of bigger issues such as fighting climate change or reforming the social security system. This does not entail that broad-based organizing is limited to local issues alone, for issues facing local communities are often linked to wider national issues.

What is central to broad-based organizing is its financial independence from government – member organizations pay an annual fee – which allows for political independence. Another key characteristic is the focus on what unites rather than what divides. Thus, a mosque, a church and community group can mobilize together to improve safety in their neighbourhood, even if they each hold different views on, say, homosexuality or abortion. This allows broad-based organizing to draw specifically on a group's religious identity while campaigning on non-religious grounds, 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 the local problems faced by the marginalized and ethnically divided communities of East London. It later expanded to include other London communities to become London Citizens. It is now a broad-based coalition of more than 80 organizations, both religious and secular, which act together to build a better neighbourhood in London.¹³ Instead of engaging in party politics, the coalition puts pressure on existing political structures to change the states of affairs. Two of its recent campaigns are of special interest to our discussion on mobilization.

At the turn of the millennium, TELCO started to campaign to demand a living wage for low-paid workers in London to adjust the national minimum wage to the living costs of the capital. The campaign was successful and more than 5,000 cleaners in London are now paid the living wage.¹⁴ Religion acted as a strong mobilizing force (Wills and Jamoul, 2008). This is set against a background of disillusion with traditional political channels as an effective means to respond to

¹³ See www.londoncitizens.org.uk.

¹⁴ 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.

people's claims, and the steep decline in trade union membership which can be traced back to the late 1970s. Moreover, civil society spaces tend to be dominated by white middle-class people and civic engagement among low-paid workers is very low (Wills and Jamoul, 2008). This is exacerbated by the so-called 'flexibility' of labour which exacerbates workers' overall vulnerability and 'discourages' their participation in unions or other groups that might represent their interests politically. Places of worship are therefore often the only point of contact where low-paid workers can come together and find help and support. The involvement of churches, mosques and other places of religious worship was extremely important in the TELCO campaign.

Another campaign by London Citizens, entitled 'Strangers into Citizens', is currently under way.¹⁵ This campaign seeks to regularize the situation of illegal or undocumented workers who have been living and working in Britain for more than 6 years, can speak English fluently, have no criminal records, and are able to provide references. Again, like in the living wage campaign, sites of worship are important places where the immigrants can 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 event reflected the hybrid character of broad-based organizing, and its unique ability to gather 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, sacred spaces become alternative political spaces because more traditional fora spaces such as party politics or trade unions are closed. Illegal immigrants can neither vote nor join a trade union, and contract workers – often immigrants themselves—cannot join a trade union because of the contractual nature of their work. The use of churches and ethnic chaplaincies as alternative political spaces makes a lot of sense to many migrants since these are already considered a kind of 'home from home', a place for worship as well as a place to find support.

The lack of traditional political spaces is not the only reason 'sacred spaces' can become political places. In some instances, religious leaders can also assume a role of representative. As Willis (2008: 7) points out in the context of 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

¹⁵ See <http://www.strangersintocitizens.org.uk/>

shares that entitled them to participate). The group of campaigners was led by the Catholic bishop of Brentwood. When they confronted the CEO of HSBC about the low pay of cleaners, the CEO protested that HSBC was giving £2 million a year of donations to charities. 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.¹⁶ The involvement of religious leaders such as the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster in the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign helps the social movement gain credibility and respect, and makes grassroots members feel supported and encouraged.

The link between religion and social mobilization in London is not only mediated by the interaction between sacred spaces 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 puts 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’ (a Muslim cleaner quoted in Willis, 2008: 7).¹⁷ 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 this time of economic downturn the Church had a duty to protect them.¹⁸

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 transcends these specific affiliations to focus on an agreed common project such as creating a better neighbourhood or improving living conditions in London. Through this common action emerges a new identity, that of belonging to London Citizens and that of being a political campaigner, or in other words, that of being a British citizen. A person from the East London Mosque reported that: ‘I’ve become more British in a way. There was a time when I used to feel like an outsider in society, 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).

¹⁶ Austen Ivereigh, ‘Power to the People’, *The Tablet*, 25 November 2006.

¹⁷ See also Jamoul and Wills (2008) for other interviews about the faith motivations of people involved in the *Living Wage* campaign.

¹⁸ News report by the think tank Ekklesia, 5th May 2009.

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. But what is clear is that there is no immediate 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, forthcoming). There were workers who were paid below subsistence levels in thirteenth century Europe, yet believers did not campaign for justice and 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 had to respond. What followed was a series of official documents which linked the Bible with the humanization of the economic, social and political structures.¹⁹

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 be assumed independently of non-religious factors such as history, socio-economic developments and political contexts. It is precisely the context which allows for the religious-based mobilization 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 seems clear that religious language and religious concerns were used largely instrumentally by ethnic activists who saw the mobilizational possibilities of 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 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

¹⁹ 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.

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 receives 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.²⁰ 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 theological resources of the Catholic missionaries which were key to the social mobilization of Hindu dalits. Again the development of these resources was not alien from changes in the economic, social and political context – the Second Vatican Council which allowed for the social involvement of missionaries as part of their missionary activities largely responded to the changing context of the Church which called for an 'aggornamiento' of the Church.²¹ 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 develop an alternative theology that affirmed their dignity and affirmed their human rights. The dynamics of social mobilization among the dalits in Bangladesh has more recently taken a new turn with the articulation of a movement around the international discourse of human rights. This is an emerging agenda and one which at the moment at least intersects with the future many dalit activists aspire to – a future elaborated through a reinterpretation of past theologies.

While it is the context, linked to a dearth of theological resources, which prevented sacred 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, it is not the sacred space of religion as such which becomes the mobilization force, but its interaction with other variables. In London, sacred spaces have become alternative political spaces for people who cannot access party politics or trade union memberships, and for people disillusioned with the effectiveness of traditional political channels to bring about change in their lives. Similarly in Bangladesh, Catholic missionaries helped create the political space which was denied to dalits by virtue of their caste.

Conclusion

It is perhaps not surprising that as the social sciences give greater attention to the study of religion, gaps of both a conceptual and empirical nature begin to appear. This article seeks to fill a particular gap that derives from a combination of two observations. First, it is clear that religion has, and

²⁰ 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).

²¹ For the consequences of the Second Vatican Council for development, see Deneulin with Bano (2009).

continues today to play a central and sometimes primary role in social mobilization. Second however, our understanding of the role of religion is weak and insufficiently nuanced because of a bias evident in 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. 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 complicated, variable, unpredictable and perhaps contradictory.

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 mechanisms or processes that influenced the form the different mobilizations took: theological resources, sacred 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 which in many ways challenge two distinct positions which are often found in the literature. First, while our cases were linked to practical welfare-orientated concerns none, we would argue, could be simply reduced to this. The mobilizations were as much about meaning, recognition and respect as they were about material gain or political advancement. While our mobilizations were therefore not purely 'religious', there is no doubt that religion offered symbols and frames of reference that influenced the mobilization. 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 intersects with other areas such as economics, politics and society. Religion is not a static phenomenon but one that is affected by, and in turn affects, the organization of these different areas, and the relations between them. As such religion can be activated or ignored, but it 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, and understand its significance. Locating our analysis of religion in wider social contexts, not only better specifies the role of religion but also alerts us to the ongoing significance of religion in broader social change.

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