

Institution: The Open University

Unit of Assessment: D33 Theology and Religious Studies

Title of case study: Applied religious history: understanding the past to inform the future

1. Summary of the impact

This case study assesses the impact of a series of knowledge exchange and public engagement projects undertaken in London and Northern Ireland between 2009 and 2013. These projects have made innovative applied use of a substantial body of research into modern British and Irish religious history conducted in the Unit.

This activity has:

- achieved greater historical literacy among religious practitioners
- raised awareness of the importance of religious archives
- informed the Church of England’s policy and strategic thinking for the future
- provided substantial online resources for local research and ‘history audits’ and supported their use
- enhanced understanding among practitioners in Northern Ireland of the historical and religious dimensions of conflict in the province.

2. Underpinning research

British religious history since c.1800 has long been a key focus of research in the Unit. In the mid-1990s, work by Beckerlegge, Wolffe, Gerald Parsons (senior lecturer until 2012) and Terence Thomas (senior lecturer until 1996) pioneered the documentation and analysis of the growth of religious diversity in Britain after the Second World War, setting recent trends in the longer-term historical perspective of developments since the Victorian era. Subsequent important contributions were made by Susan Mumm (lecturer/senior lecturer 1996-2006), with her work on Anglican sisterhoods, and David Herbert (lecturer/senior lecturer 1996-2009), with his research on secularisation theory and on media representations of the Northern Ireland conflict. Wolffe has been particularly active in this field. He published substantial monographs on aspects of British and Irish religious identities in 1994 and 2000, and edited texts and analysis of the 1851 Census of Religious Worship between 2000 and 2005. There is also extensive British and Irish material in his 2006 and 2012 books on international evangelicalism. Maiden, who joined the department as a research associate in 2009, has published a monograph on the 1927/28 prayer book crisis, and has since developed these research themes in work on evangelicalism and anti-Catholicism in the 1960s and 1970s.

During recent years, Wolffe has focused his attention on London and to Northern Ireland. His work on London includes a substantial contribution to the prize-winning 1400th anniversary history of St Paul’s Cathedral (2004), a co-authored analysis of the resurgence of the Church of England in the capital since 1980 (2012), and a case study of the relationship between the building of physical churches and the development of congregations in Victorian Finchley (2013). He has approached Northern Ireland through the comparative historical framework suggested by his earlier work on British and American anti-Catholicism, resulting in an edited book with a substantial sole-authored introduction and conclusion (2013) that explores long-term trajectories since the Reformation. In collaboration with the Belfast-based Institute for Conflict Research (ICR), he has been investigating recent and present-day attitudes in Northern Ireland, exploring how these are illuminated by an historical perspective and seeking to identify potential strategies to assist in conflict resolution, both in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. Initial outcomes from this work are reported in John Bell, *For God, Ulster and Ireland? Religion Identity and Security in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: ICR, 2013.

The key insights from this body of work are

- Critical revision, on both theoretical and empirical grounds, of a conventional narrative of inexorable secularisation. In particular, it has pointed to the contingent and specific nature of factors producing decline, and suggested that religious change and resurgence were

Impact case study (REF3b)

also important features of historical experience.

- Enhanced awareness of the long history of religious diversity in Britain, across major religious traditions, gender and class, and of the complex interactions between religion and national identity in the four nations of the United Kingdom.
- Increased understanding of long-term patterns of religious conflict, of the contingent events that stimulated them, and the role of historical mythologies in perpetuating them.
- Emphasis on the importance of locality and personalities in shaping community experience of religion.
- Methodological innovation in bringing together historical research and work on contemporary religion to achieve further illumination and perspective for both.

3. References to the research Outputs

Maiden, J. (2009) *National Religion and the Prayer Book Controversy, 1927–1928*, Woodbridge: Boydell. Listed in REF2.

Parsons, G., ed. (1993, 1994) *The Growth of Religious Diversity: Britain from 1945*, 2 vols, London: Routledge. [Includes studies of Christianity (Parsons), Islam (Wolffe), Hindus and Sikhs in Britain (Thomas), popular/vernacular religion (Wolffe). See review by Grace Davie, University of Exeter, in *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 96:1 (1996), 118–19.]

Wolffe, J. (1994) *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland 1843–1945*, London: Routledge. [See review by Brian Clarke, University of Toronto, in *Church History* 66:4 (1997), 860–62.]

Wolffe, J. (2006) 'National occasions at Paul's since 1800', in A. Burns, D. Keene and A. Saint, *St Paul's: The Cathedral Church of London 604–2004*, New Haven: Yale University Press, pp.380–91, 485 (footnotes). [Book awarded William M.B. Berger Prize for British Art History 2004.]

Wolffe, J., ed. (2013) *Protestant–Catholic Conflict from the Reformation to the Twenty-First Century*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Listed in REF2.

Wolffe, J. (2013) 'The chicken or the egg? Building Anglican churches and building congregations in a Victorian London suburb', *Material Religion* 9:1, 36–60. Listed in REF2.

Grants

Nov 2008–Oct 2011: £233,547 awarded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to John Wolffe, for a project entitled 'Modern Religious History and the Contemporary Church'.

Oct 2009–March 2013: £349,000, awarded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to John Wolffe, for a project entitled 'Protestant–Catholic Conflict: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Realities'.

Feb 2012–Jan 2013: £95,071 awarded by the AHRC to John Wolffe, for a project entitled 'Building on History: Religion in London'.

4. Details of the impact

Central to maximising impact has been Wolffe's AHRC Knowledge Transfer Fellowship, '**Modern Religious History and the Contemporary Church**' (working title, '**Building on History**'), in partnership with Kings College London, the Church of England Diocese of London and Lambeth Palace Library.

The primary initial aim was to work alongside the main stakeholder, the Diocese of London, to:

- promote learning amongst churchgoers, clergy and others, informing them about the modern history of the Church of England in ways that enhance the self-understanding of the diocese and its parishes
- shape contemporary ministry and engagement through increased historical awareness.

The 'Building on History' project engaged with its stakeholders and the wider user community in a variety of ways.

- There was a comprehensive programme of seminars and workshops, summarising recent research in modern religious history, and suggesting applications to the work of the present-day church. These were attended by over 450 lay leaders, clergy and ordinands in London between 2009 and 2011. In 2011, three regional events for leaders from other Church of England dioceses attracted a further 100 or so participants from as far afield as Cornwall. Feedback suggests significant impacts on thinking and practice: for example in embedding new and more practical approaches to the use of history in clergy training, and in inspiring the restoration in 2012 of the important Victorian decoration at St Mary Magdalene, Enfield.
- The project has aimed to inform strategy and policy through applying historical insight to contemporary problems. Events were held in 2010 for the staff of St Paul's Cathedral and archdeacons and area deans, and reports and recommendations submitted to the Bishop of London and to his senior staff. The project has informed development of the diocese's future strategy, 'Capital Vision 2020', launched in June 2013. The Bishop of London writes (printed project report p.3): 'This project has been a powerful contribution to enhancing the character of the Church in the Diocese as a learning organism.'
- In June 2010, the project launched an innovative online resource toolkit which provides expert advice on how to find out about the history of local congregations, churches and communities. This online resource is a significant legacy of the project, facilitating new 'grassroots' historical research in the coming years. Dr Clive Field OBE (formerly Head of Research and Collections at the British Library) regards the project as an 'exemplar for developing an appreciation of the relevance of the past, and the importance of historical records, among contemporary faith communities' (printed project report, p.22).
- The project has developed the concept of a 'history audit', which individual churches can undertake in order to contextualise their current activity and planning for the future. This approach was outlined in a published pamphlet: John Maiden and Neil Evans, *What Can Churches Learn from their Past? The Parish History Audit* (Cambridge: Grove Booklets, 2012). The pamphlet is now embedded in the diocese's strategy and included in its Mission Action Planning guidelines. The Bishop of Willesden describes this development as one of 'real importance'.

The success of the project partnership with the Diocese of London formed the basis for wider engagement with other faith constituencies in London. This engagement developed in a subsequent Open University- and AHRC-funded follow-on project, '**Building on History: Religion in London**', in collaboration with Royal Holloway University of London and a range of practitioner stakeholders. A series of ten events involving Baptists, Black Majority Churches, Jews, Methodists, Muslims and Roman Catholics was held in late 2012 and early 2013. Attendance averaged approximately 40, with at least 200 individuals attending on at least one occasion. Accompanying resources were provided on the website.

Very positive feedback was received. For example, Dr Jamil Sherif (Muslim Council of Britain) judges that the project 'really brought people together', raised the profile of history and has stimulated a more positive attitude to record-keeping among Muslims in London. Dr Tim Powell (National Archives) regards this project as 'a very important strand in the delivery of the religious archives support plan'. There was also significant engagement with schools: Mr Marlon Chetty (The Urswick School, Hackney) considers the impact on his students (from two workshops in the autumn term 2012) to have been 'really profound'. Examples of pilot teaching material have been made publicly available on the website.

The programme for Wolfe's '**Protestant-Catholic Conflict**' project included, in 2012, a series of seminars with users and stakeholders in Belfast, Birmingham, Liverpool, London and Milton Keynes. The final project conference in Belfast attracted numerous non-academic delegates. Participants at the seminars and conference included religious leaders, senior civil servants, police officers and key representatives of non-governmental organisations and voluntary organisations. There was enthusiastic affirmation of the value of the research, especially in adding to

understanding of the religious dimensions of societal division in Northern Ireland, and the long-term context of politico-religious tensions in Britain through informed comparison between historic anti-Catholicism and contemporary Islamophobia.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- Project websites:

Building on History: The Church in London (www.open.ac.uk/buildingonhistory)

Building on History: Religion in London (www.open.ac.uk/arts/religion-in-london)

Protestant–Catholic Conflict: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Realities (www.open.ac.uk/arts/protestant-catholic-conflict).

- Research Outcomes UK data for three grants listed in Section 3.
- Printed project report on the 'Building on History: The Church in London' project (downloadable from www.open.ac.uk/buildingonhistory).
- Diocese of London Mission Action Planning guidelines (www.london.anglican.org/MAP).
- Feature article in *The Church of England Newspaper*, first published, 1 October 2010 (www.churchnewspaper.com/?p=9672).
- Statements by users held by the higher education institution, including emailed feedback from users and transcript of meeting to review impact and further developments, 1 July 2013. These substantiate the quotations included above.
- Individual users/beneficiaries who could be contacted:

Church of England (Central Administration): Director of Libraries and Archives

Church of England (Diocese of London): Bishop of Willesden

London Boroughs Faith Network: Convenor

Presbyterian Church in Ireland: Co-Convenor (Northern Ireland), Church and Society Committee

Wandsworth Community Empowerment Network: Director