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To cite this article: Claire Dwyer (2016) Why does religion matter for cultural geographers?, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 17:6, 758-762, DOI: [10.1080/14649365.2016.1163728](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2016.1163728)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2016.1163728>



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Published online: 30 Mar 2016.



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Why does religion matter for cultural geographers?

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ARTICLE HISTORY Received 30 April 2015; Accepted 19 February 2016

Re-reading Jackson's (1989) *Maps of Meaning* prior to the OU symposium, I was struck by the absence of religion. For cultural geographers writing in the late 1980s religion was studiously avoided, belonging to the traditions of earlier cultural geographies and absent too in the cultural studies of race from which Jackson's new cultural geographies drew inspiration.¹ Yet attention to some of the book's illustrations which include Pugin's *A Catholic Town in 1840*; Breughel's *The Battle of Carnival and Lent*; Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* and Booth's *In Darkest England* suggest a cultural religious presence destabilizing straightforwardly secular geographies. For contemporary cultural geographers, the complex and contested contours of religion are much more evident preoccupations. Processes of globalization and geopolitics have shifted critical attention to religious narratives and networks (Agnew, 2010; Dittmer & Sturm, 2010; Ingram & Dodds, 2012; Megoran, 2010) while globalized immigration flows have given religious identifications greater visibility through their materialization in urban space (Becker, Klingan, Lanz, & Wildner, 2013; Garnett & Harris, 2013). Alongside other social sciences, there is renewed interest in the salience of religion in public life in relation to welfare, public space and social identity (Beaumont & Baker, 2011; Cloke & Beaumont, 2012; Hopkins, Kong, & Olson, 2013). As Laurie (2010) suggests, it is no longer taboo for critical cultural geographers to assert that religious identifications or sensibilities matter and that their capacity for shaping cultural geographies needs to be included in analysis. If religion is suddenly 'everywhere' in geography (a phrase I've heard recently at annual conferences), it is time to ask if religion is a new provocation for critical cultural geography. What does the study of religion offer cultural geography? And what might cultural geography bring to wider debates about the salience of religion within social sciences?

I want to begin by challenging a framing of the resurgence of geographies of religion as marking a critical juncture in the emergence of the newly 'post-secular' (see also Cloke & Beaumont, 2013; Tse, 2014). Jackson's illustrations offer an effective reminder of the intertwining of the sacred and the secular in geographical narratives and histories; geography's secularity is neither complete nor uncontested. Postcolonial geographies reiterate that uni-linear narratives of modernity fail to suppress the disruptive and unpredictable salience of the spiritual. Gelder and Jacobs's (1998) analysis of the agency of the aboriginal sacred in the context of Australian land rights resonates with recent studies of the occult and the uncanny (Holloway, 2006; Pile, 2006), 'everyday spiritualities' (MacKian, 2012) or the agency of ghosts (Lipman, 2014; McEwan, 2007). Renewed geographical interest in the religious marks a shift from a modernist academic gaze, which ignored or suppressed the agency and

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salience of the sacred, in favour of approaches which include the religious and the spiritual in frameworks of analysis and explanation. It is also a rejoinder to approach more critically the unstable categories of ‘the secular’ and the ‘sacred’ and their geographies (Kong, 2001; Tse, 2014; Wilford, 2010). Recent work on the geographies of secularism which emphasizes how secularity is spatially defined and constituted, policed and contested (Gökariskel, 2009; Howe, 2009; Jazeel, 2013) is an important intervention by cultural geographers to the ‘spatial turn’ within religious studies (Knott, 2005; Tweed, 2006).

The addition of religion as a category of identity in the study of social identities has produced richer accounts of the intersectionalities of social formations, power and resistance. It has complicated the ways in which identity politics are theorized, through more nuanced accounts of everyday lives, for example in the work of Valentine and Waite (2012) on sexual orientation, religion and belief or in the articulation of faith-based identities in social justice movements (Jamoul & Wills, 2008; Middleton & Yarwood, 2015; Williams, Cloke, & Thomas, 2012). At the same time, it is important not to reify the significance of religious faith and subject it to the same critical scrutiny as other social formations. Writing about how forms of ethnic, racialized or religious identity are made or become ‘visible’ in multicultural cities, Keith (2013, p. 43) warns that ‘scholarly language should recognise the empirical realisation of religious faith without invariably imputing to it *a priori* causal powers or association efficacy amongst migrant minorities’. If previous critical cultural geography has ignored, dismissed or denigrated religious faith, taking faith identities seriously also means taking on board the valorization of particular moral values or interests which geographers may struggle to accommodate. Including faith identities complicate or unsettle existing frameworks for analysing social differences or social change, requiring analysis of unexpected juxtapositions and alliances (Phillips, 2009) and engagement with assumed incommensurable differences in ontological starting points (Cloke, 2011; Megoran, 2013). Yet the contemporary resonance and visibility of religious narratives requires scholars to be open to the recognition of faith as a legitimate social identity and to thinking flexibly about how to incorporate religious identities into existing frameworks for analysing social inequalities and power relations.

This incorporation also requires grappling with the affective and emotional dimensions of religious belief and the ways in which it shapes the practices, beliefs and narratives of the faithful. Julian Holloway argues that attending to religion, faith and spirituality requires geographers to engage more thoroughly and creatively with religion itself, rather than reducing it to a social category or another social identity. While acknowledging the value of geographical approaches to religion which have prioritized the construction and contestation of religious boundaries or spaces, Holloway (2011, p. 31) argues that geographies of religion have primarily taken a Durkheim-inspired situational approach such that the ‘theological ontologies and sensibilities of the religious and spiritual have been too often side lined or ignored’. Drawing on approaches to cultural geography which prioritize the affective registers and the possibilities of the emergent (Anderson, 2006; Dewsbury & Cloke, 2009; Thrift, 2007), Holloway (2013, p. 204) argue for analytical space ‘to those extraordinary forces that the faithful will *always* say move them to action’. This resonates with the exhortations of postcolonial theorist Chakrabarty’s (1997, p. 35) to engage ‘the agency of gods’. Holloway urges embracing the ‘potentialities’ in theoretical encounters with the theological despite the challenges this may present in terms of intelligibility or certainty. Holloway’s engagement with the affective registers of experience beyond the rational or intelligible, what he terms ‘performative hesitancy’ (Holloway, 2011, p. 37), opens space for cultural

geographers to explore the ways in which the divine is presenced or the sacred made. This is a call for attention to the affectual registers of time and space and 'different assemblages of movement, materialities, sounds and bodies' (*ibid.*). Recent work in religious studies is marked by a shift towards the study of material religion (Vásquez, 2011) and understanding everyday, 'lived' religion, (Ammerman, 2007; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 1997) a focus also echoed in cultural geographies which explore material and embodied, everyday practices and performances of faith or religious practice (Dwyer, 2015; Hill, 2011; Maddrell & della Dora, 2013; McGregor, 2012). As contemporary cultural geography prioritizes understanding of 'ordinary affects' (Stewart, 2007), cultural geographies which unite the mundane and the everyday with the extraordinary, the enchanted and the incarnational offer exciting avenues for critical engagement.

Note

1. David Ley (2011, p. xiii) reflects that he wrote little about the role of faith in his ethnography of inner-city Philadelphia in 1970, despite the obvious presence and significance of two Pentecostal churches because 'my intellectual gaze was elsewhere'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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