

# The Future of Public Religious Ritual in an Urban Context

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## 1. Introduction

Over the years the streets of the city of Birmingham have witnessed many different forms of public religious ritual. From the church, guild and market based rituals of the small medieval town around St Martin's church through to the walks of witness, May processions and Corpus Christi walks of the ever expanding nineteenth century city. Riots took place in Highgate just south of the new city center in the late nineteenth century because Anglo-Catholic clergy chose to take to the streets with banners, bands, vestments and statues to proclaim their faith within the slums of the city.<sup>1</sup> Sunday schools held walks and many different churches took their faith out into the city streets in the early years of the twentieth century. As the city appeared to die, however, with the closing factories and slump years of the 1970s and 80s so the public religious rituals also appeared to die. At much the same time, however, new communities came into the city from the Indian sub-continent and the Caribbean and new rituals began to be seen on the streets, often amidst considerable protest from the older inhabitants of the city. Towards the end of the twentieth century city-sponsored rituals for the celebration of St Patrick's day, the Chinese New Year, Vaisakhi, Eid, Carnival and we might even want to include Gay Pride, came to represent the public face of the city as a culturally diverse and inclusive city. Into the twenty-first century many more nationalities, religions, ethnicities and language groups came to the city and competed for space and recognition. It is this latest, superdiverse, context for the performance of public ritual that I wish to explore and analyze within this paper.

By public religious ritual, or 'public ritual' in this context, what I am referring to are those rituals that a specific religious, or other, community chooses to perform in public, that is beyond the confines of their own building or compound, and more specifically to perform with the specific intention of attracting an audience beyond their own particular community. These are rituals that are designed to be performed in public and to the public. The most common form of such rituals are processions or walks of one form or another, but public rituals do take many different forms from static and silent acts of witness or remembrance, through to public performances or other activities that come to resemble large, communal parties such as carnivals or markets. There is a significant literature on such public rituals, although much of it focuses on one or

<sup>1</sup> J.S. POLLOCK: *Vaughton's hole. Twenty five years in it* (Oxford 1890).

more specific example of such ritual, whether processions, carnival or public performance. I want to bring all these together within a single category, however, as I think this allows us to ask interesting questions about meaning, identity and power that are common to, or at least contested between, many different forms of public ritual.

In the literature there are three main theoretical ideas that are drawn out in the analysis of such public rituals. The first is 'identity', whether this is seen in the way the public ritual creates, reinforces or announces the identity of the group undertaking the ritual, or whether such public ritual is seen as engaging in some way with the wider identity of the society, the public, among whom the ritual is being performed. Handelman, for example, talks about different forms of public ritual and the way in which they provide mirrors, models of, or models for society.<sup>2</sup> Mirrors tend to reflect the current order, as in many medieval or renaissance processions where each group from within the city had their rightful place in the hierarchical ordering of the procession, and of the city. Models tend, in different ways, to challenge the existing order, either in the contemporary space – models of – or present a clear, and often utopian, alternative – models for.

The second theme that comes from the literature is the relationship between such public rituals and 'space'. There is a suggestion that the particular community is, in some way, claiming or defining space through the use of processions or walking. The medieval ritual of beating the bounds, and modern Scottish versions of the same practice, where members of the community walk around the boundaries of a community and perform a series of rituals at significant points, clearly defines a specific space as belonging to specific people.<sup>3</sup> Baldovin claims that many of the processions and the 'stational liturgies' of cities such as Byzantium and Rome in the later Roman period were part of a process whereby the Christian Church redefined the sacred geography of the city, suppressing the pagan past, and so claiming the city for Christ, or at least for the Emperor.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, there is the idea of 'witness'. This derives from those Christian processions in the nineteenth century whereby a particular community witnessed to their faith, explicitly and publically, by going out on to the streets, singing Christian songs and, at suitable points along the way proclaiming the Gospel to the people of the city. While the studies of identity or space did not necessarily distinguish between those who took part in the ritual and those who came to watch, or were casual bystanders, those analyses that emphasise witness imply

<sup>2</sup> D. HANDELMAN: *Models and mirrors. Towards an anthropology of public events* (Oxford 1998).

<sup>3</sup> S. SMITH: 'Where to draw the line. A geography of popular festivity', in A. ROGERS & S. VERTOVEC (eds.): *The urban context. Ethnicity, social network and situational analysis* (Oxford 1995) 141-164.

<sup>4</sup> J. BALDOVIN: 'The city as church, the church as city', in IDEM: *Worship. City, church and renewal* (Washington 1991) 3-11.

that the community involved in the ritual is different from, and is communicating to, those who stand and watch. Public protests, walks of witness such as Gay Pride, and many other activities also come within the wider frame of 'witness' as the message does not necessarily have to be religious. The use of music in a Christian procession in Toronto, as outlined by Ingalls, however, provides an interesting contemporary expression of the theme of witness.<sup>5</sup> The music was at one and the same time saying something about the identity of the multi-ethnic Christian communities who organized and performed within the walk, but it also acted as witness to those who simply stood and watched the procession go past. Ingalls makes clear, however, that the regulations, and concerns of the participants, meant that the volume and form of the music had to be constrained so as not to offend any possible onlookers, and here witness is compromised by other needs, either of the city council or the organisers of the event. It is clear, therefore, that such public rituals are complex, multi-valent and often creative activities that cannot be easily pigeonholed or analysed through a series of relatively simple themes.

## 2. Superdiversity

Having looked at the idea of the public ritual I now need to explore the contemporary urban context of superdiversity and to ask why this situation may provide a very particular context in which a study of public ritual might be significant. The term 'superdiversity' was popularized by Steven Vertovec in a paper in 2007.<sup>6</sup> Vertovec has been interested in migration for many years and in his 2007 paper he describes what he argues is a very new situation, a new phase of migration that was particularly prevalent in the UK but that was rapidly becoming a defining feature of many different cities across Europe and probably in the rest of the world. The first phase of migration in Europe, during the middle years of the twentieth century, had consisted largely of single populations moving, in relatively large numbers, to specific European countries. In the UK this was primarily a migration from the Indian sub-continent and the Caribbean. In France the migrants came primarily from Algeria and elsewhere in North Africa, in Germany they came from Turkey and so on across Europe. The change that Vertovec identified began, he suggests, at around the time of Balkan wars in the 1990s. Following on from these wars, through subsequent conflicts, through economic migration with the expansion of the European Union, and then with considerable movement of people from across the globe

<sup>5</sup> M. INGALLS: 'Singing praise in the streets. Performing Canadian Christianity through public worship in Toronto's Jesus in the city parade', in *Culture and religion* 13 (2012) 337-359.

<sup>6</sup> S. VERTOVEC: 'Super-diversity and its implications', in *Ethnic and racial studies* 30/6 (2007) 1024-1054.

into Europe, often in very limited numbers from each point of origin, the kind of migration that came to dominate the period from the mid-1990s through to the present day has consisted of many different people, from many different points of origin to many different destinations across the continent.

Vertovec is particularly interested in the UK in his paper and one of the points he makes is that the impact of this migration is felt not just in London, or even in the major cities, but because of particular policies within the British government and also because of the demand for cheap labor within the rural economy, the migrants were distributed throughout the country, often to rural towns as well as to the cities. There were, however, certain neighborhoods that had a history of migration and which had seen many different migrants over the years from Jews and Eastern Europeans in the early years of the twentieth century, through the influx of South Asians and Caribbean populations in the mid-twentieth century, to a much more diverse range of ethnic and national groups towards the end of the century and into the twenty-first century. One such neighborhood is Handsworth, just north of the city center in Birmingham, where I undertook some of my own research on religious diversity.<sup>7</sup> Here scholars from the University undertook a survey of six medical practices that served the neighborhood and found over 150 different nationalities registered at these centers. This is what Vertovec means by 'superdiversity'.

Vertovec, in his 2007 paper, goes beyond a simple description of neighborhoods such as Handsworth, or even of whole populations. Vertovec makes the point that when there are so many different people moving into a country or a neighborhood from so many different points of origin then nationality is not the only possible measure of diversity. There will, inevitably, be many different ethnicities represented in such an area, and old categories of 'South Asian' or 'Black' no longer cover so many people within the community. There will also be many different languages spoken, a factor that becomes very clear in local schools and to those delivering health and welfare services in such a neighborhood. There will also be many different forms of legal identity, from asylum seekers, through economic migrants to illegal immigrants. And, with particular reference for this paper, many different religions represented, and what is more, many different forms of even the larger world religions: Nigerian, Yemeni and Malaysian Muslims; Buddhists from Thailand, Tibet and Japan; Catholics from Poland, the Philippines and parts of Africa; Pentecostals from many different nations; Hindus; different groups of Sikhs; as well as those who do not fit neatly within such categories such as the Radivassi community, and others who follow minority religions even in their own country of origin such as the Yezidis and many more who have no religion or whose families come from different religious traditions and who have developed a syncretic identity.

<sup>7</sup> M.D. STRINGER: *Discourses on religious diversity. Explorations in an urban ecology* (Farnham 2013).

It is in this context that I have been studying discourses around religion and specifically religious diversity, both in less diverse areas of the city dominated by Muslim, Sikh or Hindu populations, or populations who are predominantly poor white and expressing no religious commitment, as well as in more diverse, even superdiverse neighborhoods such as Handsworth, with two large Gurdwaras, three different Buddhist temples, four or five churches (some of the smaller house churches open and close at a surprising rate), a Rastafarian café and many other shops and centers that cater for very different populations who live within the area.<sup>8</sup> If public ritual, as I have already described it, is primarily about identity, the claiming of space, and witness then the presence of public ritual, from whichever religious community (or from communities such as those of Caribbean origin, the Irish or the Gay community who do not explicitly emphasize religion within their public rituals) in a city that is identified as superdiverse is inevitably going to be interesting, complex and worth exploring further.

### 3. A memorial in Winson Green

During the riots that swept across a number of English cities in August 2011 three young Muslim men were mown down by a car while trying to protect their property in the Winson Green area of Birmingham. The measured, and yet still very emotive, speech from the father of one of these young men on the media later in the evening was one of the events that was credited with bringing the riots to an end. Many people, both in Birmingham and beyond, responded to this situation and a series of more or less spontaneous events took place in Winson Green Park in the weeks following the riots. The first of these was a spontaneous rally of support drawing people from many different religious and ethnic groups from across the city. The second was the funeral for the young men. So many people wished to attend that this was also held in the Park. It was clearly a Muslim funeral and yet it was also, very clearly, a public ritual. Not only was this held in a public space, and open to all members of the public, whether Muslim or not, but it was filmed and parts of it were broadcast throughout the world as part of news coverage for that day. The speeches were an obvious part of this public focus, but equally important within the news reports were pictures of rows of Muslim worshippers, interspersed with others who were clearly not Muslim, but present, and participating in their own way as an act of solidarity. It was a very powerful image in the light of the chaos and violence that had been so much part of the images of the riots themselves.

I included this example in my recent book.<sup>9</sup> In that context I used it as an illustration of the power of the media to report and, to some extent, to manage discourses of religious diversity within the city. In the same book, however, I

<sup>8</sup> STRINGER: *Discourses on religious diversity*.

<sup>9</sup> STRINGER: *Discourses on religious diversity* 144-146.

also tracked the history of public celebrations of different religious and cultural groups within the city from the 1970s to the present day.<sup>10</sup> These events, usually some kind of street procession followed by a fair or party of some kind within a park or other public space, began primarily in a spirit of protest in the 1970s and 80s with Gay Pride, Carnival and other similar events that asserted the presence, and identity of an otherwise marginalized group. In the 1990s the focus shifted towards more cultural events, celebrating rather than protesting, and represented by the Vaisakhi celebrations among the Sikh community, the St Patrick's Day parade, celebrating Irish culture, and the Chinese New Year. In each case these events had formal or informal support from the city authorities and were proclaimed on city council websites as the 'largest' or 'most important' such celebrations outside of the Punjab, Dublin or the Far East, whichever was most relevant. By the early years of the twenty-first century, however, many of the big religious celebrations were being moved off the streets into other kinds of spaces, more or less public, and I will come back to these later in the paper.

What interests me at this point is the kind of celebration, or public ritual, that dominated the second phase; those that had the explicit support of the city council. There is no question that these were 'public rituals' in the way that I have defined that term above, and it is easy to demonstrate how they expressed questions of identity, the claiming of space, and even witness that I have already explored in relation to such rituals. There are, however, two other aspects that come from my analysis of these rituals within my book. The first of these came from asking more significant questions about the audience. What, to turn the question around, do we mean by the 'public' in the context of public rituals? A simplistic answer to that might be, as I have assumed in the analysis so far, those who turn up to watch and, perhaps, to participate within the ritual; those that are actually present on the day. This, however, is only one of the publics that might be involved, and, in terms of identity, space and witness, may not, in fact, be the most important public. These events are all surrounded by widespread publicity and more or less skilled use of the media to expand the 'public' beyond those who actually attend on the day to a 'public' that in theory includes the whole city and probably many other people beyond the city depending on how widespread the media coverage reaches. The event is often designed specifically to appeal to the media and to express something of the culture or religion involved in the event to the 'city' as a whole.

This raises the second aspect of my analysis, the idea of 'discourse'. There are many discourses surrounding any one public ritual, as there are many different publics. Those involved in the organization and presentation of the ritual may have a very restricted discourse that is focused on the religious context from which the ritual emerges. Others who take part may have other discourses about the event. I refer in the book to a procession for the Chinese New Year

<sup>10</sup> STRINGER: *Discourses on religious diversity* 78-89.

in London that was dominated, not by the Chinese community, but by martial arts groups from London and Kent.<sup>11</sup> These 'participants' would have had a very different discourse about the event and its meaning from those who organized it, or perhaps from the sponsor of the event, the National Bank of China. Observers, passersby, readers of news reports and so on all have very different discourses about the event again, depending on their cultural context and previous knowledge, and this is something that I draw particular attention to within the book.

One element of 'publics' and 'discourse', however, that can be seen in the street processions in Birmingham, and also in the funeral in Winson Green, relates specifically to the Gerd Baumann's idea of a 'dominant discourse'.<sup>12</sup> In a study of Southall in the 1990s Baumann distinguishes between dominant discourses on culture and community, those that are held by the city authorities, and demotic discourses, those that are used by the people on the ground. The dominant discourse on public rituals is that which is managed, more or less successfully, by the relevant authorities. In the case of processions within the city of Birmingham this is the local City Council. The Council has considerable control over these events as they can give permission, or withhold it, each year as the event comes around. The City, however, also wishes to use these events to underpin its own 'dominant discourse' as a multi-cultural city. The range of events supported by the Council clearly plays into this discourse, but it is also interesting to see how the Council has used its authority to enforce a level of 'inclusion' within each event that means that these public rituals are no longer the sole preserve of a specific community. The St Patrick's Day parade in 2012, for example, proclaimed its inclusivity in all its publicity, showing how the procession included Caribbean steel bands, South Asian Bangra groups, dance troupes from a number of different communities as well as the traditional Irish marching bands and the figure of St Patrick towards the end of the procession. As the media reporting around the event announced 'We are all Irish for the day'.

The Muslim funeral in Winson Green also played into the same dominant discourse. This was not because the event was organized by the City Council, it was not. In fact the Council was probably deliberately excluded from the organization of the event. It was the family, along with a small group of representatives from local Mosques and interfaith groups, who had most say in the organization of the event. It was therefore, probably not even a conscious decision to link into this 'dominant discourse'. It was simply the nature of the event, and, I would argue, the desire to reach out to as wide a public as possible, that led the over-riding images of the event to stress the 'inclusivity' of the ritual with non-Muslims standing alongside rows of praying Muslims as the picture was broad-

<sup>11</sup> STRINGER: *Discourses on religious diversity* 97-98.

<sup>12</sup> G. BAUMANN: *Contesting culture. Discourses of identity in multi-ethnic London* (Cambridge 1996).

cast across the world. Practically all the reporting also picked up on this aspect; the ability of the public ritual to bring together, not only all members of the local community, but in principle the whole city, and perhaps even the nation.

#### 4. Hindus in the park

There are a number of neighborhoods surrounding Birmingham that, like similar neighborhoods in all major global cities, have seen a series of different migrant communities calling them home. Rex and Moore talk of Sparkbrook in the 1960s when it had already seen Irish, Caribbean and South Asian communities dominating the local population.<sup>13</sup> In one such area of Birmingham an Indian, Hindu community had grown in the 1970s and 80s and, as part of their annual round of festivals, they had held a particular ritual within the local park, the only open area within the neighborhood. Over time the Indian community had moved out to more expensive neighborhoods and a primarily Pakistani and Bangladeshi community had taken their place. The Hindu community, however, continued to hold their annual festival in the same park until well into the new millennium despite the fact that no Hindus continued to live in the immediate vicinity. From around 2010 a number of local Muslim youths began, for whatever reason, to gather around the Hindu community as they celebrated their ritual. They began simply by exchanging abusive comments and were seen as no more than a menacing presence. Over a couple of years the numbers grew and stones were thrown while the Hindus were performing their ritual. The Hindu community, therefore, turned to the police and, quite understandably, asked for protection.

This Hindu festival did not, perhaps, meet all the criteria I have already laid out for a 'public' ritual. The ritual was clearly held in public. The park had been chosen not just because it was one of the few local spaces at the time that would hold the relevant numbers, but because it was a space where the ritual could be held in the open air, among nature. However, it is also clear that this was not a ritual to which the 'public', that is non-Hindus, would normally be invited. It was not an act of witness, nor was it really a case of the Hindu community claiming rights on the space, although that was the way it was interpreted by some among the Muslim community when the Hindus had already moved out of the neighborhood. The choice of space was fortuitous, historical and we might say 'traditional', at least by the 2010s. There was, however, something akin to an assertion of identity, which was felt to be important to the Hindu community in Birmingham, associated with this ritual in this particular park.

What shocked the Hindu community, however, when they called on the police for protection, was the response that they received. After some investiga-

<sup>13</sup> J. REX & R. MOORE: *Race, community and conflict. A study of Sparkbrook* (Oxford 1967).



tion, the response from the police, and through them the wider city authorities, was to advise the Hindu community to hold their ritual in another park. They claimed that providing protection was possible, but costly, and that, given the lack of local Hindu residents, it would be better for the Hindu community to move. The City Council offered another, 'safe', space within one of the largest parks in the city and felt that this was an entirely appropriate response to the situation that was faced by the Hindu worshippers. Some among the Hindu community accused the city authorities of not being prepared to stand up to the intimidation of a specifically Muslim group, and suggested that the Council was showing favoritism. Others saw it as part of the continuing marginalization of the Hindu community in a city where they are one of the smaller religious minorities. Nothing, it appeared, would be done that might upset the much larger, and more politically sensitive, Muslim community, despite the fact that the culprits were only a small number of Muslim youths and there is no evidence to suggest that, if approached, the local Muslim community would not have dealt with the intimidation from within their own ranks.

This situation raises a number of other issues around 'public' rituals that goes beyond the relatively positive images presented in the previous section. Here the question of 'power' becomes significant and the question of who the 'public' of the public ritual might consist of comes to the fore. More significant is the assumption, on the part of the city authorities, that once a ritual becomes 'public' then they have a right to interfere, manage or control the event, or at least set limits on the people who are organizing it. This leads to the wider question of the management of such public rituals, or even the management of religion and religious diversity within the public sphere.

The City Council has always had the right to restrict those events that occur in public spaces, be that parks (which are generally owned by the Council) or the streets of the city. Whether this is undertaken in the name of health and safety or more clearly in support of some groups and against others, ultimately the city can decide whether certain streets are closed for a procession or whether a certain community can hold a public gathering within one of the city's parks. Many smaller events, such as witness marches from some of the evangelical churches, or processions related to Sufi and Shia communities, are often prohibited because of the disruption they might cause to traffic, or because of assumed breaches of the peace. The most clear example of this occurred only a couple of years ago when the City Council, who had sponsored a family event for Eid in the same large open park that they had encouraged the Hindu community to use, suggested that this should be rescheduled and held a month or so later because of the double booking of the park. Without any obvious concern for the religious calendar, and the devotional needs of the people concerned, a public ritual was seen to be the kind of event that the Council felt it could reschedule to fit in with its own practical needs.

There is, of course, no such thing as truly 'public' space within any city. That space which is considered 'public' is almost entirely under the control, whether

literally or through other legislation, of the City Council. Other spaces are also 'semi-public'; assumed to be public by many of those that use the space, but clearly controlled by others, whether the owners of shopping centers, the management committees of 'community centers' or trustees of other kinds of space. The third phase of 'public rituals' within Birmingham, which I mentioned briefly above, has seen a move into such 'semi-public' spaces. Diwali is celebrated within a private conference facility that is hired by the local Hindu community. Eid is celebrated in a Council owned park. This move into semi-public spaces sets limits on the 'public' nature of the ritual as many of the 'public' may be excluded from the space. This move also gives the owners of the space, whether the city or a private corporation, much more control over the numbers and activities that are 'allowed' within the space. The public nature of the ritual, therefore, is inevitably restricted.

## 5. A Sikh stake out

Not all public rituals are positive or have the support of the general public. By some definitions of 'ritual', riots could be defined as public rituals. They often take place in order to assert identity, they are certainly about the control of public space and they all have some element of witness. Protests of other kinds can also be seen as public rituals and many of these have very recognizable ritual elements. At a recent interfaith event in Birmingham I was informed about an event that had occurred at one of the Sikh Gudwaras in the city some weeks previously. A wedding was due to take place at the Gudwara. However, shortly before the event was due to start a coach load of Sikhs from a different Gudwara turned up in full religious dress and encircled the building holding drawn swords and preventing any of the guests from entering the building. The wedding that was due to take place was between a Sikh and a non-Sikh and it was this that had led to the protest. This protest, however, took a distinctly ritual form, emphasizing important symbols from within the Sikh tradition. It was also decidedly 'public' and so must be included in the general category of 'public rituals'.

This event raises a number of different elements. The first is the fact that in a context of superdiversity we cannot assume the coherence of any one religious community. Each of the major world religions, and many other faith groups, will be represented within any particular city by a number of different communities, who may or may not be antagonistic towards one another. What became clear in interfaith conversations within the city is that many of the conflicts and disputes that have occurred over many centuries between different faith communities, or different branches of the same faith community, can be enhanced when these communities find themselves in much closer proximity within a global city than they would be in their home countries. The rise of conservative, traditionalist, fundamentalist, or extremist (it is difficult to find the right words)

forms within most religious traditions also means that within a global city different branches of the same religion may hold very different ideologies, some wishing to accommodate to the wider secular context while others oppose all attempts to do so and would be willing to use rituals of violence to impose their views. This is the situation that occurred within the Sikh context outlined above.

The second question concerns the nature of the 'public' in such a ritual. I have already suggested that a public ritual must be both performed in a public space and have the intention of engaging with a wider public beyond those involved in the ritual itself. In this case the public nature of the space is clear, the protesting Sikh surrounded a Gudwara in a very public way. Who, however, were the wider public among whom, or for whom, the ritual was performed? At one level the protest was aimed primarily at those Sikhs who were about to perform a wedding within the Gudwara. The aim was to prevent that wedding taking place. The ritual nature of the protest, however, the dramatic element of the religious dress and drawn swords was, I would suggest, aimed at a much larger public. This aimed to say something significant about the nature of the Sikh religion (as understood by the protestors, not those about to conduct the wedding). This was far from the inclusivist dominant discourse of the City Council. It was an assertion of a very particular exclusivist Sikh identity, but an assertion or 'witness' that was aimed beyond the immediate Sikh community at a much wider British public.

This links into my third response which comes from thinking about this situation within the context of the questions of power that were raised in the previous section. The city authorities could not, of course, condone ritual action of this kind, nor did they really know what they should do to oppose it. Nobody within this context was strictly breaking the law, but there was a breach of the peace. The fact that all those involved were of Sikh heritage made it very difficult for the authorities to know who to turn to in order to try and calm the situation down. Intra-religious violence is felt to be particularly difficult to deal with and when it takes the form of a clearly 'religious' event, or at least of a ritual where religious symbols are mobilized. In this context the secular authorities are often left feeling helpless to intervene. A strong police presence, careful negotiations and time eventually brought this situation to a close, but I was never informed whether the marriage at the heart of the ritual ever went ahead.

What was interesting in this situation, however, were the very significant moves that were made to make sure that this incident was not reported in the media, so cutting off one element of the wider public that the protesting Sikhs were aiming to reach. In the case of the Muslim funeral in Winson Green everything was done in order to accommodate the media. The media in that case was seen as one of the means by which the ritual could be relayed to the wider 'public', that public which was not able to attend the ritual itself. In the case of the Sikh protest, however, one thing that the city authorities could do, along with the police and with the co-operation of the media itself, was to deny those

protesting their access to this wider public. This raises a very interesting question in a media age. Where for medieval rituals, or any of those up to the end of the nineteenth century, the 'public' for any ritual had to be those who were actually present (although word of mouth, and the work of artists for really grand rituals, did expand the public a little beyond the immediate context), in today's media saturated world the public could be as wide as the global community. It is also becoming increasingly difficult for authorities to control even this media outlet as social media bypasses all official channels and can create a public for any ritual within a matter of seconds. What we think of, and how communities and individuals use, public rituals, therefore, must be changing in this rapidly changing environment.

## 6. Soho Road coda

Before drawing some conclusions from this review of public rituals within the superdiverse city of Birmingham I want to mention one final form of public religious ritual. All those rituals that I have mentioned so far have been collective acts and my initial definition, or criteria, tends to assume that a public ritual is always a collective act. Wandering down the Soho Road, however, within the neighborhood of Handsworth (arguably the most superdiverse within the city as a whole) I was struck by a whole series of individual acts that could themselves be defined as 'public rituals'. Sikhs, before entering the gates of the Gudwara bow and remove their shoes. Catholics as they pass the Catholic church cross themselves, especially those of Polish and other East European origin. Muslims, at the back of their shops, or in other more public spaces, find a quiet spot to lay out their mat and pray at the appropriate times. Buddhists, passing the statue of the Buddha outside the temple, may stop and lay flowers or other offerings before the statue. Each of these is an individual act, but each is also a public act in that it is performed in a public space. Whether, in these cases, there is an assumption of a public audience is perhaps more in doubt than in most of the collective rituals I have discussed above. However, the issues of identity, the defining or claiming of space and even of witness are as much a part of these individual rituals as they are of the collective acts I have been analyzing.

These individual acts also raise interesting questions in relation to the ideas of power and discourse that have been threaded throughout this paper. Do any of those performing their individual rituals need permission, whether from the city authorities or from the wider public among whom the ritual is performed? I would suggest not, but it does take a certain kind of neighborhood, one that I have defined as superdiverse, where an element of tolerance and an inherent celebration of diversity is present, for all these rituals to be seen so clearly in a 'public' space. Each could, in a less welcoming environment, be performed behind closed doors, once the Gudwara has been entered, within the Mosque

or a private room, within the temple compound or church, whatever might be appropriate. The overtly public nature of these individual rituals, therefore, is, I would argue, a product of the kind of neighborhood in which they occur.

These individual rituals also have an interesting relationship with what I have called, following Baumann, the dominant discourse of the city, that of inclusivity. In and of themselves such rituals are, perhaps, expressions of what Baumann would call a demotic discourse, the expression of individual communities, or even of individual people.<sup>14</sup> These are acts in public, but often part of a very private language of devotion; an individual's own engagement with their God or the divine. The way each individual performs the act, and the meaning they give to it, will be very individual, and hence hardly to be considered as part of a dominant discourse in any way. However, once again, the fact that these individuals feel able to perform such rituals in public, in the presence of and with little concern for, a very wide diversity of people, does reinforce the dominant discourse of the city, which as I have suggested above is one of inclusivity. This must be the ideal that the city is looking for; a safe space (albeit a very public space on the main shopping street through the neighborhood) where each individual feels free to express their own personal faith within the ritual language that is appropriate to them.

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper I have offered a range of different examples of what I have called 'public rituals' and have tried to demonstrate the coherence of a set of criteria that might define them. The important elements of such rituals are, primarily, that they are performed in public and, in most cases, for the public (that is a public beyond the religious or other community involved). This is implicit in the three criteria that I have identified for such public rituals. They are about identity; in some way setting the community, or individual, performing the ritual apart from the wider society and asserting what is distinctive about them. More than that such rituals are often about expressing that identity to a public that does not always want to recognize such an identity and offering a defiant celebration of identity over and against the wider society. Second, public rituals are about claiming or defining space. The claim may be simply one of being seen within the public square, having a presence. It may be a temporary or permanent redefining of that space within the ritual or symbolic language of the community concerned. Or it may be a very explicit claiming of space, almost removing such space from the public arena and claiming it as their own, at least for the time of the ritual. Finally, and implicit in each of the other two criteria, is the idea of witness. There is often a message proclaimed within the ritual, not always that of the ritual itself, but about the community performing the ritual

<sup>14</sup> BAUMANN: *Contesting culture*.

over and against the wider society. It is the fact that 'public' rituals imply a public (i.e. not of the community) audience that makes the act of witness almost inevitable. How that message is controlled, however, and who controls it, leads me from the criteria for the definition of public rituals to the wider questions of power and discourse.

In the examples I have presented within this paper we can see a number of ways in which conflict and power are central to an understanding of public ritual. By choosing to perform the ritual in public, within an arena that is not controlled by the community performing the ritual and in front of an audience who may not understand what is going on in the same way as the community itself, there are questions of power and control that are inevitably part of the activity. The first level is straightforward. In most of our global cities the public space is not a neutral space or an entirely free space. It is controlled by the city authorities in some shape or form. Permission, therefore, is almost always required in order to perform a public ritual, or, to turn this around, not acquiring permission can lead to conflict with the authorities. To that extent a City Council can control, with considerable deliberateness, the range of rituals performed, where they are performed and, in some cases, the form in which they will take.

The question of power and control, however, does not end with the permission of the city authorities to hold the ritual. There are two other levels of control that I think are interesting and important, and it is not always clear who holds most power in each of these situations. The first is the control over the 'image' of the ritual. If a ritual is performed in public for a public audience, who controls the way in which that public sees and interprets the ritual they are watching? To some extent this is controlled by the community performing the ritual, it is part of the witness that I have talked about above. But there are always complications to such a simple sounding concept as 'witness'. There may, for example, be more than one 'public' involved. The Sikh protestors at the wedding saw their primary audience as other Sikhs and presented their ritual message, their 'witness' towards this audience. The fact that other elements of the public would read the ritual in very different terms was secondary within that particular context. The control of the message may also not be entirely within the hands of the community concerned. The city's insistence on messages of 'inclusivity' within public rituals such as the St Patrick's Day parade or Gay Pride have, to a greater or lesser extent, diluted these events as celebrations of a specifically Irish or Gay identity. Finally, as with a number of the rituals I have mentioned, the inclusion of the media, or even social media, as part one of the channels through which the message is conveyed to a far wider public gives those who control the media a significant amount of authority over the form that the final message takes.

Finally, therefore, and to raise a question that has been implicit in much of what I have been discussed, but which I have not addressed directly, there is the idea of 'discourse'. I began my studies in Birmingham by asking about the 'public discourse' on religion and religious diversity within a superdiverse city. I

was interested in the way individuals talked about religious diversity and the values they placed on it within the public sphere. It was as part of this discussion that I raised the question of public rituals within my book. This was one of the contexts within which a wider discourse of religious diversity emerged. However, this also raises the question about the nature of the discourses within the city about the public rituals themselves. What does the public take away? How do those who attend and observe the ritual go on to talk about such rituals, and the communities who perform them, to friends and family in the days, weeks and months following the ritual? Is there a wider discourse within the city about the use of public spaces for ritual events, the claiming of spaces, even temporarily, by specific religious and other communities? I have not researched this in detail but I find it a fascinating question and, in the light of the City Council's attempt to impose a 'dominant discourse' on the use of such public rituals in order to foster inclusivity, then I might also want to ask, finally, who is it that controls the wider public discourse on the city's public rituals?

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