

Buildings and breaking: holiness, Methodist identity, and interfaith awareness in contemporary Southall, London

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‘No you do not understand, Reverend! We have been a beacon here, a beacon for Southall and in Pakistan as well!’

‘For me to stand up and say the church will close, it will shame me - they will not take it, they will throw shoes at me...’

‘You do not know, the Moslems they will come, they will take this so quickly, they are devils.’

- trustees and members, the King’s Hall Methodist Church
Urdu-speaking congregation

‘Christians in the world church are also critical of the secularised attitude to church buildings which has developed in the West. ...although other churches have formalised the designation of sacred places, this thinking does not usually find a ready home within Methodism. Methodism has no formal theology of sacred places. Nevertheless, Methodists hold their buildings in high regard.

- ‘The Use of Methodist Premises by other Faith Communities’, 1997.¹

‘In Southall, size matters.’ - the Anglican Team Rector and Archdeacon,
Southall

Introduction

This project seeks to open a theological conversation about the ways in which the stewardship of a particular church building has built, and broken Methodist identity in Southall, west London. What does the ‘spread of scriptural holiness’ mean in relation to this community’s experience? What role does an historic building play as part of the Methodist identity in this place, among Pakistani and Indian-British Christians alongside West African and Indian, and white British? How have models of engagement with, and awareness of, other faiths grown in relation to the building, and what is their future without it?

2013-14 has been a painful year among Southall Methodists: this paper is not an ethnographic study of Christian identity, but an attempt to recognise different theological emphases that have emerged in the fight to ‘save’ the King’s Hall building.² Protest against the decision to close the building has presented as charges of racism against the ministers, former leaders and wider church: this has bewildered and angered the black-majority English-speaking congregation. This paper will

¹ *Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order. Volume Two, 1984-2000, part two*, (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2000) para. 3.3, 4.1, p. 444.

² See for example, <http://savekingshallchurch.org/> and <http://www.change.org/en-GB/petitions/ldn-methodist-dist-chairs-rev-j-smith-of-ealing-circuit-of-methodist-stop-closing-the-building-of-king-s-hall-methodist-church-southall> (both 24 June, 2013) for a sense of the protest that has accompanied the building’s closure in January 2013 after unsafe electrical, asbestos, and structural surveys.

suggest and the congregation's attachment to the building, protest, and engagement with other local faith communities can be more usefully understood through the lens of honour and kinship obligation as these form part of Christian identity in this place.

The necessary (and healthy) limit on length has made for serious omissions in this praecie of the project, especially in evidence offered: the hope is that these omissions provoke curiosity rather than ire. Further work or discussion would usefully test different models of interfaith engagement (not least those expressed in Methodist reports and policy) against the Southall context, and might develop different accounts of mission in relation to sacred space in a more substantial way.

Better understanding of faith narratives among first and second generation Pakistani and Indian British Methodists would not fix damaged asbestos nor restore falling masonry and unsafe electrics, but might allow a unique theological community to be acknowledged in the life of British Methodism. Perhaps because its insights about defending physical presence and sacred space do not fit well with the present mood of British Methodist missiology or engagement with other faiths, these are hard narratives to hear. Hearing is crucial, however, especially at the moment that the Connexional church recasts its national strategy for interfaith relations.³

'...they will throw shoes at me': Honour, Kinship and being Methodist

Many of the older members of the Urdu-speaking congregation at the King's Hall suffered direct persecution as converts or minority members of a Christian community in Pakistan or north India. Most arrived in Britain in the late 1950s or early 1960s, and carry a sense of betrayal that the Pakistan that formed after partition did not work out to be the haven for religious minorities or lower status social groups that was promised.⁴ Many of them attached personal honour to being Methodist among the Christian churches, a honour confirmed by the presence of the first mainline Christian Urdu-speaking congregation at the King's Hall Methodist Church in 1958-59.

In those days, their church building was the largest and most prominent in the High Street of Southall. Built with ornate internal mosaic, plasterwork-domed sanctuary and gas lighting, it seated 1000 comfortably and included two flats, half a dozen large classrooms, offices, smaller chapels, and outdoor spaces. By the time its doors opened in 1916, the migrant labouring male population it was intended to serve was largely absent. In the words of one 1924 commentator, Southall '...has become in these latter days a crowded and rather grim and striving place, with great gas-works and manufactories of margarine.'⁵ In 1965 Southall was 10% non-white; today its

³ A report on the future of national approaches in interfaith relations was presented to the Methodist Council in January 2013: this will go to Conference in July 2013 for decision regarding resource, personnel, and models of interfaith working. This report and addendum added by the Methodist Council can be downloaded at <http://www.methodist.org.uk/mission/inter-faith-relations/inter-faith-consultation> (24 June 2013)

⁴ Much is written about 20th Century Christian experience in Pakistan, from scholarly, pastoral and political perspective. See for example Patrick Sookhdeo, *A People Betrayed: the Impact of Islamization of the Christian Community in Pakistan* (Fears, Scotland; Pewsey, England: Christian Focus Publications/Isaac Publishing, 2002) p. 352ff.

⁵ Charles G Harper, *Rural Nooks Round London* (1924), quoted in Kirwan, Paul. *Southall: a Brief History* (London Borough of Ealing: 1965, reprinted with index 1980) p. 47.

population of roughly 65,000 is 83% ethnic minority, with 63% Asian and 47% Indian; 31% identify as Sikh, 25% as Christian, and 16% each as Moslem and Hindu.⁶ The older group of members at the King's Hall has thus been triply-displaced: firstly within their home country as a low social status religious minority, secondly as Asian immigrants in an often hostile Borough (riots followed perceived police support for a British Nationalist Party March in 1979), thirdly as an increasingly threatened minority within London's celebrated Sikh 'little India.' It was not until 1998 that the Urdu-language congregation had full independence in the Methodist church, and a few families have dominated across the generations.

Honour ideology (izzat) and family/kinship obligations (biradheri) are both present in the Christian identity of Southall Methodists as the community describes itself. The influence of these themes in the way the community has engaged in conflict and decision-making has been misunderstood by people in the wider governing structures of the Circuit and District. Behaviour that has presented as irrational or inflexible (and in some cases extremely aggressive) may still be problematic, but becomes understandable in relation to honour and shame, and the obligation to publicly support one another in kinship networks. A fear of public dishonour has made formal mediation too costly for members to engage in, for instance. Breaking kinship network (biradheri) obligations to vote for closure even at the price of personal legal liability has also been impossible.

Honour has continued to attach to the King's Hall building, despite its increasing dereliction: the building has become central the church community's engagement with other faiths. This attachment, and conflict arising from the shame of its disrepair is predicted by commentators on Pakistani Christian identity:

'...rather than being defined conceptually and applied to a variety of situations, izzat will attach itself... to a concrete reality, to a person, eg. the head of a family, a place, eg. a house of worship, ... to dress, eg. demanding public decorum.'⁷

This describes a recognisable tension which King's Hall Urdu-speaking members have reported in personal responses to the conflict.

Izzat also sits awkwardly with western Christian emphasis on reconciliation and equality within church governance and the working of the congregational Body of Christ:

'...izzat demands overcoming opponents since the alternative is to lose izzat. All differences therefore are the occasion of competition and conflict; the very possibility of cooperating and planning jointly does not arise and as a result all lose out.'⁸

The decision to close the church building used the usual governing process of British Methodism, presuming collective responsibility for majority decisions by trustees.

⁶ http://www.visitsouthall.co.uk/Local_Info/southall_middlesex.php (25 June 2013)

⁷ John O'Brien, *The Construction of Pakistani Christian Identity* (Lahore, Pakistan: Research Society of Pakistan, University of the Punjab: 2006) p. 486.

⁸ *Ibid*, p, 490.

While it is the only recognised governance that the church offers under UK charity law, this process has silenced those for whom izzat and biradheri are imperatives as part of being saved in Christ. They have been de-voiced and shamed, forced to choose between appearing to break both honour and kinship obligation, or putting themselves outside the governance of the church.

‘We have been a beacon here...’: Mission, Interfaith Engagement, and Sacred Space

With a few exceptions like the new Methodist museum at Wesley’s Chapel, the missiological climate within British Methodism presently downplays the role of buildings as unique spaces for sacred activities. The church’s mood for engaging with other faiths and secular seekers favours hospitality and presence, ‘fresh Xpressions’ and less formal worship settings. It blurs the lines between sacred and secular activity with initiatives like ‘messy’ and ‘cafe’ church, and promotes church buildings as multi-use community centres. These trends devalue the King’s Hall theological emphasis on grandeur and defended space at the heart of Christian witness.

The King’s Hall attachment to physical place may be misread as simple idolatry in the climate of British missiology and the congregation’s dependence on the building as a prerequisite for engagement with other faiths like a lack of confidence in the Gospel. Understood through the lens of honour the attachment and way of engaging in conflict may still be criticised, but demonstrate exactly the opposite. The attachment and concurrent protest become a sacrificial witness under extreme duress. How may honour ideology and its outworking be critically engaged where necessary, but also expressed as a healthy part of Christian identity? This remains a critical question for Southall Urdu-speaking Methodists.

Presently, the congregation from the King’s Hall worships in a school room adjacent to the closed church, half a mile from the largest Gurdwara outside of India. The congregation expresses a real dilemma: how can they stay close by their own ‘beacon’ while fulfilling the need for sacred space? To leave for a more distant church would be to abandon the honour of the place, whereas to stay means worshipping in a gymnasium with plastic seats and climbing ropes. The value the community places in the building as part of its Christian mission is absolutely at odds with the dominant mood of British Methodism, which is quite happy to affirm the identity of the church in its people, not its physical structures. How can this theological emphasis be drawn out and expressed in a way that British Methodism can value? How also can it be legitimately challenged?

Conclusions

Engaging in even this limited project has exposed a lack of Asian British theological voices bridging the gap between academy and congregation in British Methodism: what scholars like Dr Anthony Reddie and Dr Robert Beckford have done for theologies of Caribbean diaspora people in Britain has not happened among Asian-British Methodists. Where their voice is heard in the connexional church, it is often in relation to interfaith engagement as opposed to offering a unique, positive Christian apologetics. Notwithstanding the work of Canon Dr Mukhti Barton of the Queens Foundation, Birmingham, and centres of excellence like the St Philip’s Centre

in Leicester (both Anglican), there is little work among Urdu-speaking Methodists in Britain using tools of congregational studies or post colonial theology.

The effort as part of the connexional 'Belonging Together' strategy to develop an Urdu-language fellowship and allow mutual support between mother-tongue congregations has begun in 2012-13. This, along with specific training in cross-cultural mediation using narrative techniques (offered at connexional resource by Dr Lia Shimada) has created space for a grass-roots theological voice to begin to be heard constructively within the governing structures of Circuits and Districts. The record of Southall Methodism shows us that an authentic Christian identity in British-Asian Methodism will speak, and with strength: whether its Circuits and Districts can provide space to draw it into conversation for building up Methodist mission, vs. breaking it down, remains to be seen.

1855 words, June 2013

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1972 use of trust premises

1972 interfaith marriages

1983 relations with people of other faiths

1985 multi faith worship

1997 use of Methodist premises by other faith communities, following 1994 report: Conference voted no imperative to undertake the legal changes in the Methodist 'Deed of Union' that would allow for other faiths' worship on Methodist premises.

2000 guidelines for interfaith marriage