5. DIASPORA

Origins and history of usage

'Diaspora' and 'diasporas', terms now used widely to refer to migrant minorities and globally dispersed identity groups, have their origins in Greek and are related to the verb, *diasporein*, meaning to scatter or disperse. The term was first used by ancient Greeks in the context of migration and colonialization, and then appeared in the Christian *New Testament* (John 7:35, James 1:1 and 1 Peter 1:1). It later became identified with exile and trauma, with reference to the expulsion of the Jews after the destruction of the temple in 586 BCE. Subsequently it referred to the enslavement and migration of Africans in association with the slave trade and, latterly, the forced displacement of Armenians and Palestinians from their homelands as a result of war and massacre (Cohen 1997; Baumann 2010).

In scholarly circles, until the late-20th century, 'diaspora' was generally reserved for discussion of the Jewish exile, identity and lived experience beyond Israel (Boyarin & Boyarin 1993). In the 1990s, the development and usage of the concept took two separate directions. The first was that of cultural theorists, such as Stuart Hall (1990), Paul Gilroy (1993) and James Clifford (1994), who challenged dominant assumptions about the centrality of nations, borders and migration, and foregrounded diasporic subjectivity, hybridity and the politics of identity. The second direction was taken by scholars of migration and ethnicity, such as Avtar Brah (1996) and Robin Cohen (1997), who explored new ways of thinking about the location and connections of migrants in relation to home and away. 'Diaspora' was used increasingly in discussions of migrant mobility, identity and belonging, across borders and in new settings. In recognition of the increasing semantic breadth of the term and its wide-ranging use for diverse minorities, the plural noun, 'diasporas', emerged as the preferred term (Tölölyan 1996; Cohen 1997). Cohen (1997), for example, developed a

typology, dividing them into victim, labour, trade, imperial and cultural diasporas in recognition of their diverse motivations and experiences.

Alongside academic debates, a further trend gathered speed: migrant and other transnational cultural minorities began to use the term themselves. It added weight to their sense of identity, their connections with 'home' and their cross-border relationships. To varying degrees, it empowered them as immigrants and settlers in dealing with local authorities, and as emigres who wished their collective voice to be heard in their countries of origin (Tölölyan 1996). From the 1990s, then, 'diaspora' was used both by cultural theorists and migration scholars as a scientific or technical concept – an *etic* term – and by minority representatives as a vernacular or *emic* term to refer to their own group and its local and transnational interests and claims.

Despite this flowering of the term, as Seán McLoughlin (2013: 125) noted, in conformity with the broadly secular character and interests of the arts and social sciences in the late-20th century, many scholars ignored the question of religion in their discussion of diaspora/s, irrespective of the enduring trope of Jewish exile from the promised land.

Religion and diaspora: contact and contest

The concept of 'diaspora' is contested within and beyond the study of religions. Potential problems arise not only in relation to the meaning and core elements of the term, but the breadth of its usage, who uses it and why. In addition, scholars of religion have asked further questions about 'religious diasporas', a term first used by Ninian Smart (1987). What, if anything, is religious about diasporas? Can 'cognate phenomena' such as universal or world religions like Christianity and Islam be said to be diasporic (Cohen 1997: 187)? Do so-called ethnic religions, which relate to a particular place or people, such as Zoroastrianism and Sikhism, become diasporas as their adherents migrate and settle in new locations**?**

Although the earliest Greek references to 'diaspora' bore no relation to religion, once the Hebrew scriptures were translated for Greek-speaking Jews in Alexandria in the third and second centuries BCE, the term became wedded to the dispersal of Jews from the sacred land of Israel-Palestine (Baumann 2000, 2010). At that time, it conveyed none of the traumatic associations of exile it later acquired. Nevertheless, it did carry a spiritual connotation. Having disobeyed and been cast out of their promised land, Jews were to see their life in Babylon as a time to prepare and repent before an eventual return and re-gathering. This soteriological understanding (soteriology is the theology of salvation) was at the heart of the Jewish sense of collective identity and purpose, and continued to be commemorated in Jewish liturgy and rituals (Baumann 2010: 21). It gave special significance to 'diaspora', to what it meant to be scattered beyond Israel, to the ordering of Jewish life according to God's commandments, and to living in the hope and expectation of return. Although no other group would mirror the Jewish experience completely, the conjoining of ideas – around exile and dispersal, being an outsider whilst belonging to one's own group, with memories of 'home' and a myth of return – drew others to apply the concept of 'diaspora' to their own circumstances.

Early Christian commentators, for example, adopted the term to signify the seeding of new Christian communities away from the heartland of Jerusalem (Baumann 2000), and this idea was repeated many centuries later in relation to the evangelical work of missionaries among expatriates living away from home. Although 'diaspora' was linked in these cases to the idea of mission rather than displacement or otherness, in other Christian contexts it was the latter that was foregrounded. In the post-Reformation period in Europe, the term was used of Protestant and Catholic minorities living in one another's jurisdictions, with the focus on being outsiders with a shared confessional identity that differed from those around them (Baumann 2010).

The notions of traumatic dispersal, sense of being other, commitment to homeland and collective consciousness all contributed to the evocation of an African diaspora rooted in the experience of slavery (Gilroy 1993). Although 'African diaspora' only began to be used – as a scholarly concept – from the mid-1950s, 'Africans abroad have long felt an affinity with the Jewish diaspora' (Cohen 1997: 31). At times, this affinity was expressed in religious terms, for example by African Christian migrants who drew on Biblical texts and hymns of the Exodus, Babylon and the promised land to express their own spiritual longing, and by Marcus Garvey and later Rastafarians who used similar tropes and symbols to evoke a new political theology of 'return to Africa' (McLoughlin 2013).

When Smart first used the concept of 'religious diasporas', he was less interested in taking this historical view than in drawing attention to new opportunities arising in the context of migration and globalization. Religious organizations and communities were now better able to sustain community bonds and links with sacred sites, and to extend their global connections, he suggested. Twin effects of this diasporic process were, first, the focus on collective self-definition, on seeing the community as distinctive and different, though comparable in kind to other religious minorities and, second, the tendency to universalize and rationalize those religious beliefs and practices that could be understood by and shared with others.

Since the 1980s, the idea of religious diasporas has been used with reference to a wide range of migrant minorities (e.g. Sikhs in Canada, Turkish Muslims in the EU, Orthodox Christians in Australia), global sectarian movements (Sufi Orders, African independent churches, the Hindu Swaminarayan movement), even entire world religions whose theology embraces a conception of global community (e.g. Islamic *umma*) or mission (e.g. evangelical Christianity). When people migrate, whether as refugees or as economic migrants, they take their religion with them. On arrival, most connect with those with a similar background and

shared language, ethnicity or religion. Religious organizations in places of settlement have often used their resources and connections to welcome and support new migrants, to help them settle and belong, and even to foster their homeland connections (McLoughlin 2013, Vásquez 2010). A key consideration has been how religious communities and organizations have continued to engage with their countries or religion of origin, by remitting funds, participating in charitable activity or political involvement. These processes have contributed to the sense that there is an intrinsic relationship between religion and diaspora.

However, as scholars are at pains to remind readers, not all religions are 'equally diasporic or diasporic in the same way' (Vásquez 2010: 129), with debates arising around whether it is so-called 'universalizing religions', like Islam and Christianity, or 'ethnic religions', like Hinduism and African-based religions like Vodou, that are best described as such (McLoughlin 2013, Vertovec 2004). Comparing world religions with various types of diaspora, Cohen (1997: 189) concluded that religions 'can provide additional cement to bind a diasporic consciousness, but they do not constitute diasporas in and of themselves'. While most scholars of religion accept this position, they are less interested in whether or not religions *are* diasporas and more interested in the 'additional cement' religions provide, whether through material support or the endorsement of their beliefs and practices.

Reversing the relationship, in his work on the African diaspora, Paul Christopher Johnson (2013: 513–5) argued that diasporas *make* religions. Living in diaspora demands the conscious selection of religious ideas, rituals and objects; it requires religious minorities to stake claims for public recognition. As they make new journeys and create new spaces, diasporas mark various sites as religious and use processions and rituals to sacralize public places. Simultaneously, they memorialize sacred places in the homeland, which may take on a renewed significance locally and globally.

Alternatives and new directions

Whether it is the 'additional cement' afforded to diasporas by religious communities and organizations or the way that diasporas make and change religions, it seems clear that there is value in exploring their interrelationship and the resulting innovations. Nevertheless, semantic precision remains important, not only for distinguishing diasporas and religions, but for understanding the processes which support them. Steve Vertovec (2004) acknowledged that religious dynamics would develop differently in accordance with their context, be that one of migration, transnationalism or diaspora, all of which he believed should be understood differently: 'Diasporas arise from some forms of migration, but not all migration involves diasporic consciousness; all transnational communities comprise diasporas, but not all diasporas develop transnationalism.' (Vertovec 2004: 282)

Recognizing the history and significance of religious travel and the portability and circulation of ritual and sacred objects, Vertovec suggested that studying contemporary diasporas was important for appreciating the transformative potential of religion. Religions encouraged people to cross borders – mentally as well as physically – and to reimagine connections with sacred places and times. They helped their adherents develop a consciousness of real and imagined geographies, and a sense of belonging to both.

Vertovec's comparison of cognate concepts introduced 'transnationalism' to the discussion of religion and diaspora, thus drawing attention to the process by which people, goods and services move back and forth across borders and the ensuing social, economic and cultural connections. The term was given its fullest treatment in relation to religion by Peggy Levitt (2007), who examined the impact of migrants on the changing face of religious diversity in the United States through a transnational lens. This 'optic' took as its starting point the idea of a borderless world which recognizes that people's loyalties, interests and

sense of belonging are not confined within national boundaries. This perspective resonates strongly with religious claims that 'God needs no passport': religion is 'the ultimate boundary crosser', with faith traditions reaching across commonplace boundaries of time and space (Levitt 2007: 12–13).

This idea was taken still further by Thomas Tweed (2006), who developed a theory of religion based on the linked concepts of 'crossing' and 'dwelling'. Taking initial inspiration from his in-depth study of the Cuban Catholic migrant minority in the United States, Tweed drew on the idea that, as people dwell simultaneously in new locations and imagined homelands, they are supported by religious traditions which enable and constrain them to make 'terrestrial, corporeal and cosmic crossings'. Religions help people to be both in place (emplaced) and on the move (displaced) by providing practical, emotional and ideological/ theological resources. Unlike secular institutions and processes, their remit goes beyond this world and extends to the cosmic, to ultimate horizons and ends.

This theory, that 'religions are flows, translocative and transtemporal crossings', which 'bring the gods to earth and transport the faithful to the heavens' (Tweed 2006: 158), brings us back to the concept of 'diaspora' in two ways. 'Religion', according to this view, and 'diaspora' are brought together through the idea of *crossing*. Diasporas connect across borders by foregrounding a consciousness of the ties that bind dispersed people with one another and with their place of origin. Moreover, religions offer the very resources – those translocative and transtemporal crossings – that transform this-worldly migrant journeys and transnational connections into a diasporic consciousness.

'Diaspora' remains a useful term for the study of religions. Through its focus on people's imagined connections to places and communities of origin, it bridges between the

academic terrains of migration and religion. It also allows scholars to highlight the role of religion and religions for people on the move.

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