

Religion, Identity and Change: Perspectives on Global Transformations,
edited by Simon Coleman and Peter Collins.
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In the past two decades, sociological theory has evolved from seeing identity as something inherited as a result of socialization, into a contested point of intersection between personal, social, and cultural constructions of selfhood. The role of religion as a key domain of identity formation has often been taken for granted in the sociology of religion, even though the general cultural shift to “high” or “late” modernity implies significant changes in the relationship between religion and identity, and their role in society and politics. Coleman and Collin’s edited volume is thus most timely, as it challenges us to look at how religious identities are constructed and negotiated in the post-modern era, in which identities are not merely inherited or transmitted through socialization, but are today “increasingly objects of desire and manufacture” (p. x).

The book is a collection of twelve essays, most of which use ethnographic methods to investigate how identities are formed and transformed in the diversity of religious communities in Great Britain, ranging from the established churches to immigrant religious groups and New Age practices. It can be read at three levels: first, as a snapshot of the religious landscape of contemporary Britain and its patterns of transformation; second, as a theoretical contribution to the concept of identity in the sociology of religion; third, as a model for the comparative study of questions of religion and identity in other parts of the world. Indeed, while *Religion, Identity and Change* deals exclusively with British cases, it seems to me that the concept of identity as it is elaborated and applied in this volume, can be fruitfully used in other national and even global contexts.

The first three cases presented deal with the crises faced by Anglican and Catholic churches in a context of increasing pluralism, in which traditional community boundaries are put into question: for Anglicans (chap. 2), peoples’ greater mobility, and the establishment of greater diversities of religious groups in a single locality, has ended the role of the parish as a source of identity based on the conjunction of residency and church membership. At the same time (chap. 4), Anglican clergy, including women and homosexuals, are increasingly unwilling to step into the ascribed identities and roles

expected of them by their congregations, but claim to redefine the meaning and function of church ministry. In the Catholic case (chap. 3), a minority church closed to the outside society and with an “ethnic” style of identity transmission has, since the 1960’s, in a context of greater tolerance, shifted to a more voluntary, self-reflective religiosity.

Another set of articles deal with regional identities. In Wales (chap. 5), where social and cultural identity was traditionally expressed through Protestant Nonconformity, the increasing heterogeneity of local communities has broken the tie between religion and regional identity, as local nonconformist churches decline and Anglicanism becomes the dominant religious presence. Similarly, in Scotland (chap. 6), political devolution has reduced the role of the Church of Scotland as one of the key guardians of Scottish identity, and opened a greater space for a pluralization of Scottish identities, which can be seen through the diversity of religious practices, from immigrant faiths to American-style firewalking workshops. In Northern Ireland (chap. 9), however, in a context of endemic violence, Protestantism continues to embody an undifferentiated ethnic-political-religious identity.

Turning to immigrant experiences, chap. 8 looks at how an American pentecostalist revival movement has become an arena for the identity construction of Caribbean migrants in London. In the case of Islam (chap. 10), the de-territorialization and de-traditionalization of the religion under conditions of modernity and exile have facilitated the emergence of multiple forms of British Muslim identity. For young Punjabis and Gujaratis (chap. 11), self-identification as a “Hindu”, as a “Sikh”, as “British” or “Indian” is an unstable product of multiple encounters with significant Others at different stages in life.

Finally, two chapters, on Mormonism (chap. 7) and New Age networks (chap. 12), look at the construction of identity in non-traditional religious movements, focusing on the ritual re-enactment of history (Mormons) and on the usually-ignored role of kinship in New Age practices typically seen as centred on the self.

Overall, *Religion, Identity and Change* opens fresh lines of inquiry into new forms of religious identity formation in contemporary society. But a few weaknesses of the volume should be pointed out. One is a tendency in some of the contributions to make trivial points informed by post-modern discourse, such as, in chap. 6 on Scotland, emphasizing the pluralism of the religious scene without offering a close analysis of the relationships between its components; another is the use of highly localized ethnographic examples which do not appear as convincing or even relevant evidence for the broader arguments being made (chap. 6, 9, and 12).