

'Religion, Mobility and Business: Exploring the Connections between Faith, Work and Entrepreneurialism in the UK and beyond'

8th May 2019, Queen Mary University London

Event report

This workshop marked the culmination of the [British Academy/Leverhulme](#) funded project *'Religion, migration and entrepreneurship: The impact of transnational Pentecostalism in migrant entrepreneurship in the UK'*. The event brought together scholars to explore key themes that have emerged throughout the project and to explore further the connections between religion, mobility, work and entrepreneurship from a range of epistemological and empirical perspectives.

Whilst there is a burgeoning literature on ethnic minority entrepreneurship and growing acknowledgement of the importance of migrants' religious practices in shaping contemporary cities there is notable lack of work that explores the interconnections between the two. Moreover, work that explores the growing rapprochement between religious and secular practices and values in 'postsecular' contexts has thus far tended to focus on welfare provision and rights, with less focus on the ways in which faith shapes and is shaped by entrepreneurship and work practices. The workshop aimed to draw out some of these connections through examples from the Global North and South, and from a range of disciplinary perspectives spanning theology, sociology, geography, management studies, entrepreneurship and cultural studies.

The workshop was held at Queen Mary University of London, and brought together

academics, business support practitioners, members from faith based organisations and churches (42 participants registered).



Andrew Davies presenting his research on the relationship between the church, citizenship and society

The event kicked off with a presentation by [Dr Andrew Davies](#) (*Edward Cadbury Centre for the Public Understanding of Religion, University of Birmingham*) whose paper explored the social innovations of Pentecostal churches to unpack 'what Pentecostals are doing to make the world a better place'. His presentation shed light on the engagement strategies of Pentecostal megachurches worldwide, particularly in relation to poverty relief, reflecting upon the practical challenges they face, and the management of the systems, structures and processes, which shape their intervention. Yet he also reminded us that Pentecostalism itself refers to a diverse array of values, practices and organisational structures both locally and globally, and that it is important to acknowledge this internal heterogeneity in our analyses.

This presentation was followed by [Dr Scott Taylor](#)'s (*Department of Management, University of Birmingham*) reflections on the contemporary entanglements of metaphysics and work by focusing on spiritualized personal development programmes. His analysis showed that the formation of belief and work can be understood as a postsecular attempt to address modernist workplace discontents. Relevant methodological and epistemological reflections were brought to the workshop for further discussion, particularly in relation to the advantages and limitations of 'methodological agnosticism' to research spiritual practices. Taylor took the opportunity to share the exciting forthcoming publication of the collection *Spiritualities, Organizations & Neoliberalism: Understanding Contemporary Subjectivities*, edited by him together with Emma Bell (Open University, UK), Sorin Gog, Anca Simionca (both Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania). This book brings together theoretical and empirical accounts of subjectivities promoted within this form of the 'new spirit of capitalism', in Europe, North America, and Africa.



Scott Taylor exploring here his research on spiritualised personal development at the workplace.

From management studies, the event moved to the field of sociology and migration studies with [Dr Bindi Shah's](#) (*Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, University of Southampton*) presentation which drew on the concepts of 'groupness' (Brubaker 2004) and a 'transnational optic' (Levitt 2007) to understand the cultural meanings of the transnational circulation of religious actors, ideas and practices amongst the Jain diaspora.

Shah's findings highlight the importance of local contexts for Jain social actors, despite the transnational nature of this religious engagement.



Bindi Shah shared her work on the meanings of transnational religious circulation amongst the Jain diaspora.

Research on entrepreneurship among migrant and ethnic minority groups has been blossoming in the last years. [Dr Natalia Vershinina](#) (*Department of Management, University of Birmingham*) underlined how the UK is an important context for such work, given that over the past decade increasing numbers of 'new' migrants have arrived in the UK and set up a wide range of businesses.



Natalia Vershinina introducing her forthcoming Special Issue on 'Migration, Enterprise and Society'.

Her paper suggests that there are currently empirical and theoretical divisions between work on the structural factors affecting entrepreneurial practices and the agency of entrepreneurs, and that there is scope for more work that engages with the 'everyday' nature of many entrepreneurial practices. Some of these debates are included in a [special issue](#) she is co-editing on the

interdependency of modes of organising on diversity, and the racialisation of work.

The event shifted its attention to the role of space and place within religion and work with [Dr Annabelle Wilkins](#) (*School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, University of Manchester*) presentation on the spiritual and religious practices of the Vietnamese diaspora in London in relation to their work and business spaces. Her findings show how workers and business owners seek the guidance of religious figures, ancestors and deities to manage the everyday challenges of work and to ensure success in their business or future career. The role of place is at the core of this research which demonstrates the multiple scales at which spiritual practices take place, including through the material culture of religion in the workplace, but also through transnationally connected prayers and other practices.



Annabelle Wilkins presenting her research on the spiritual practices in the world of work among Vietnamese communities

Similarly, [Dr William Monteith](#) (School of Geography, QMUL) examined the spaces of religious practices beyond the church by looking at the influence of Pentecostal Christianity on entrepreneurial life in Kampala, Uganda. His presentation took us through the records of *House of Faith*, a moneylending business located in the central marketplace. Will's paper argued that although *House of Faith* exhibits many of the norms and values associated with neoliberal capitalism, these norms and values are situated within a religious landscape that places limits on what can be exchanged and

with whom. These findings demonstrate how 'neoliberal' ideals often sit alongside alternative principles derived from local religious practices and values.



Wil Monteith presenting his research on the role of House of Faith in Kampala.

The final presentation of the day by [Dr Maria Villares-Varela](#) (*Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology*), and [Dr Olivia Sheringham](#) (*School of Geography, Queen Mary University London*), brought the [preliminary results](#) of their British Academy project by highlighting that more attention needs to be paid to faith and churches as generators of particular norms and values about entrepreneurship, and the wider entrepreneurial aspirations of believers. Their findings suggest that the influence of Pentecostalism is fundamental to understanding the positionality of these migrants, not just in terms of their entrepreneurial behaviour but also in terms of their experiences and practices within wider socio-economic contexts. The narratives analysed suggest that financial concerns and other business challenges are navigated through their faith, and by what the church gives them in their working lives given the generalised disconnection from business support agencies. Churches emerged here as important networks providing access to resources (e.g. knowledge exchange networks, capital, mentoring), and inciting resilience when confronting business and life challenges, which take place within a particular context of dismantling of mainstream business support services and

narratives of a hostile environment towards migrants in the UK in the last years.

To draw the event to a close, [Olivia Sheringham](#) (QMUL) provided a summary of the day's discussions and highlighted three overarching and connected themes that had emerged throughout the day.

- 1) The first is the notion of **heterogeneity** in terms of religious *and* entrepreneurial practices. The workshop's papers and general discussion invited us to interrogate what counts as entrepreneurialism and where does it begin? And, relatedly, what counts as religion? Drawing out the inherent heterogeneity of religion and entrepreneurship allows us to move beyond binary distinctions between e.g. religious/secular, entrepreneurial/spiritual.
- 2) Relatedly, the second overarching theme of the workshop relates to **space and scales**: where is religion and entrepreneurialism practised and experienced? We discussed institutional spaces such as megachurches, mosques, and temples yet also homes, cities, markets, workplaces and bodies. We also explored the ways in which religious practice creates and enables connections between discursive and embodied terrains, and across transnational space.
- 3) Finally, the workshop highlighted some of the **methodological challenges and possibilities** for researchers - both believers and non-believers –researching religion and enterprise. How can we take religion seriously within a social scientific framework?



Closing remarks by Olivia Sheringham and Maria Villares-Varela at the end of the event.

Next steps

- Completion and dissemination of the **project report** amongst participants.
- Generation of **policy briefs** to facilitate the transfer of the project results to practitioners in the areas of business support and migrant/ethnic minority entrepreneurship.
- Coordination of a **stream on religion, mobility and workplace** in a larger interdisciplinary conference.

More information

This event was funded by the British Academy/Leverhulme Small Grant '[Religion, migration and entrepreneurship: The impact of transnational Pentecostalism in migrant entrepreneurship in the UK](#)', SG160477

Download our working paper with the project preliminary results [here](#).

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