

Conclusion: The Changing Shape of Religious Diversity



Lori G. Beaman

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Diversity is a key buzzword in the lexicon of academics, governments and publics. It seeks to capture the range of human possibilities, but is also subject to regulation and management. This edited collection has captured a wide range of the key discussion points in conversations that have taken place within the Religion and Diversity Project, which I directed for 7 years (2010–2017) and with which many of the authors in this volume were involved.

Now in its final stages, the Religion and Diversity Project involved 37 researchers at 24 universities in five countries (Canada, France, Australia, England and the United States). Situated at the intersection of sociology, political science, religious studies, and law, this programme of research addressed the following central question: *What are the contours of religious diversity in Canada and how can we best respond to the opportunities and challenges presented by religious diversity in ways that promote a just and peaceful society?* Our approach combined multiple methods, reflecting the many disciplines we represented as a team. We used surveys, qualitative methods, video narratives, and discourse analysis, and we disseminated our results in many ways, including on our website <www.religionanddiversity.ca>.

L. G. Beaman (✉)

Department of Classics and Religious Studies, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada

e-mail: lbeaman@uottawa.ca

The Religion and Diversity Project was organized around four thematic strands: 1. religious identity; 2. defining and delimiting religion in law; 3. gender and sexuality as flashpoint issues; and 4. alternative strategies in the management of religious diversity. The discursive and practical uses that are made of ideas of “religious diversity” were at the centre of this research. Its two main aims were (a) to understand how these ideas are constructed, deployed and criticized in private and public contexts that include social scientific data and research, political and legal debates, and policy making, and (b) to consider how best to respond to the opportunities and challenges presented by the variety of meanings attributed to religious diversity in ways that promote a just and peaceful society. The project’s main contribution was to identify in detail the contours of religious diversity in Canada and the potential benefits of approaches to diversity that promote deep equality and move beyond tolerance and accommodation. This comparative research thus placed Canada in the context of other western democracies and explored global patterns in responses to religious diversity. The project provided new data and theoretical articulations concerning religious diversity, which it framed as a resource, and proposed strategies for equality that advance knowledge and enhance public policy decision-making.

One of the key questions of the project related to the so-called management of diversity. From a critical scholarship perspective, management is very often equated with control and perhaps all too often associated with the preservation of existing power relations.

Approaching diversity as something to be managed also implies that it is a problem to be dealt with. We tried to modestly reshape the language around this by suggesting, for example, that increased religious diversity presents both challenges and opportunities.

It was impossible to anticipate all of the issues that would emerge in such a large project at the design phase, and one of our goals was to remain flexible in order to respond to issues as they emerged. For instance, 8 years ago we could not have foreseen that an important emerging area within the study of religious diversity is actually nonreligion and its impact on the broader project of living well together. This, together with increased immigration and the magnification of diversity, makes for a dynamic and exciting field of study. As Cathy Holtmann mentions in Chap. 1, technology, globalization, uncertainty, and inequality are all part of this picture.

Although we divided our work as a research team into 4 thematic strands, these areas clearly relate to each other and thus are not completely separable. In fact, our goal as the project progressed was to weave the strands together such that we might be able to tell a coherent story about religion and diversity in Canada. All of the chapters in this volume consider more than one of the core themes we identified as we mapped the direction for our project. Our themes, however, provide a salient beginning point from which to think about the myriad issues that circulate within the framework of the broader project.

The identity theme focused on the social and cultural context in which people, institutions, and narratives conceptualize and construct religious identities. It critically assessed how religion is understood, shaped, and deployed as a category of identity within various contexts such as the media, education, scientific research

environments, and religious groups themselves. Simply put, we considered how people engage with religion in everyday life, and also how their experiences are shaped by social institutions such as the media and law. In turn, we also thought about religious identities' impact on social institutions. In Chap. 7, Steve McMullin considers both directions of this relationship in his discussion of church use of digital media, which is prompted by social pressures to be 'relevant', but in turn shapes the media. As McMullin points out, religion's place in society is changing, but so too is the way people practice their religion. This of course means that those who study religion need to revise their tools too.

Religious institutions themselves impact on religious expression, a fact that is poignantly illustrated by Nancy Nason-Clark's portrayal in Chap. 3 of an abused Christian woman who seeks help within her church. As Nason-Clark's discussion makes clear, religious institutions have the potential to effectively address serious social problems like violence against women, though they do not always competently marshal that potential.

Identity diversity within religious groups and organizations also played a role in our project. For example, Paul Gareau's research in Chap. 8 highlights the various ways Catholic youth construct their identities within the context of the new evangelism and, specifically, the impact of *Journey to the Father*. As Gareau observes, one of the biggest surprises for him in conducting this research was the complexity of youth identities: where he expected conservative, hardline approaches, he found an amalgam of commitment to religion and to secular values with no apparent dissonance for his participants. His research found a wide range of interpretations of Catholicism within that broader identity descriptor.

Further, lived religion asks us to consider the variable ways that people practice their religion, but also the contexts within which they do so. In Chap. 10, Jennifer Selby makes this point vividly through the voice of Dina, one of her interviewees in her research in Newfoundland. Selby's discussion reminds us that histories, current events, and day to day interactions shape our ability to be who we are religiously. Selby also reminds us that race is frequently an intersectional companion to religion, complicating singular identity labels and our own identity constructions. A number of chapters in this book press us to ask what are the social consequences and implications when one cannot fully express one's identity—whether religious or nonreligious. However, at the same time, we are also reminded that as carriers of multiple identities it is important not to essentialize people through one identity. Finally, identities are dynamic: people change throughout the life course and, thus, their own self-descriptors do too.

Although identity is important, as Heather Shipley makes clear in Chap. 4, a singular focus on one identity can occlude others which are equally as, and indeed perhaps more, important in everyday life. Moreover, the intersection of identities, like religion and sexuality, have a profound impact on the daily organization of life. The Religion, Gender, Sexuality and Youth project, the results of which Shipley reports, brings alive the complexity of studying identity, which is fluid and multifaceted. It also addresses what we called important flashpoints for issues of religious diversity in Canada. In this thematic area (gender and sexuality) we were

especially interested in the ways in which gender and religion intersect in a manner that attracts public, legal and policy attention. Drawing on interviews done under the RGSY initiative, Shipley reveals the complexity of sexuality as it is expressed by religious, spiritual but not religious and nonreligious youth. Shipley also found that both religious and secular spaces can be unwelcoming spaces for youth when it comes to sexuality.

Gender also continues to be an important site of study within religious diversity and within religion itself. McMullin's discussion in Chap. 7 of female clergy and the continuing discrimination they face illustrates the salience of gender in discussions of religion and diversity. Though religion is often singled out as being especially patriarchal, one need only look to the boardrooms of corporations or our government to see that women are still, even in 2018, in the minority. From this vantage point patriarchy clearly knows no bounds.

In Chap. 2, Cathy Holtmann also emphasizes the importance of gender, but from a different angle: the way that Muslim women practice their religion is different from that of men. Once again, we also see the importance of intersectionality in Holtmann's discussion: the experience of being an immigrant adds another dimension to a religious identity. Holtmann uses the term ethno-religious diversity to capture some of the complexity of the intersections she observed in her research. Holtmann's chapter prompts another important question about internal diversity, especially given the influx of Syrian refugees, some of whom are observant Muslim, some Orthodox Christian, but many who do not have a religious identity at all. This is part of the new diversity that Canada is experiencing and that requires a response that respects religious identities without assuming them.

Another major theme in the Religion and Diversity Project considered the ways that religion is defined and delimited in the context of law and public policy. Our aim was to trace the relation between the ideals associated with freedom of religion and state neutrality and the practical expression of these ideals in social, political and legal practices. Though this theme has a heavy emphasis on law, Leo Van Arragon's research, in Chap. 5, illustrates the ways in which religion is regulated, often through law, within education. Again, we see the importance of social institutions in thinking about religious diversity. Van Arragon's chapter also illustrates the links between ideas about good citizenship and appropriate religious expression. Religious minorities have been especially burdened with breaking down narrow conceptualizations of citizenship—the fight for Sikhs to wear their turbans as members of the RCMP and, more recently, Zunera Ishaq's fight to wear a niqab while swearing her oath of Canadian citizenship are two examples. As Van Arragon points out, education is a key site for the propagation of 'Canadian values' which may or may not regulate or control particular religious groups. Moreover, it is important to be aware of historical patterns related to religion's place in the education system: the historical conceptualization of Canada as a Christian country has present day implications.

In Chap. 6, Lisa Smith considers the role of religion in healthcare, noting the historical role religious groups played in establishing and maintaining the healthcare system in Canada and the pertinence of life and death to both healthcare and

religion. Occasionally religious commitment and healthcare collide, sometimes in ways that are difficult to resolve. One such conflict is whether physicians have a duty to inform their female patients of reproductive health options such as abortion and birth control. Assisted death is also currently a topic of great interest within the religion-healthcare dynamic, with some religious groups supporting Canada's move toward the possibility of physician assisted death and others opposed—both on religious grounds. These issues raise the challenges of living in a country with diverse groups and diversity within groups.

The idea of moving beyond tolerance and accommodation as strategies for the 'management' of diversity has informed our conversation and has proven to be an intriguing point of difference with some of our European counterparts. Our fourth theme considers the ways social, political and legal discourse have tended to rely on the maintenance of an "other" and explores how it might be possible to move to models based on inclusion. As Amélie Barras notes in Chap. 9, reasonable accommodation has shifted from being a rather tightly bound legal concept to one which has much broader application. One criticism of accommodation is that it reifies majorities and minorities such that minorities become the "other". Barras' innovative work on this identifies a major problem with the process involved: minorities are therefore always positioned as "requesting" accommodation. In her words: "Managers, on the one hand, come out as thoughtful actors capable of flexibility and innovation. Requesters, on the other hand, appear as quite passive and inflexible in this framework." Hierarchies are thus reproduced rather than broken down. In my own work, I have proposed the use of a robust, grounded conceptualization of equality to frame the negotiation of difference, a process and concept I've named *deep equality*. In this research, together with Jennifer Selby, we've explored the ways in which Muslims navigate and negotiate everyday life, focusing on dialogue and respect between actors. Though institutional protections such as those offered by law are important, often overlooked are these everyday interactions that can offer insight into modes of difference negotiation that displace rather than reinforce hierarchies of difference.

A key component of our project was that of changing landscapes, by which we meant both geographic and less spatially confined areas, such as shifts in technology within organized religion and its place in the larger society, the Syrian refugee crisis, and the religious dimensions of populism to name just a few changes. The researchers whose work is included in this volume each must contend with these continuously shifting grounds in their own research. As I write this we are conducting a project in Montreal that maps geographic sites of change—former churches that have become condominiums or community facilities that are not religious; two different religious groups sharing common worship space; a business location that is now a mosque, and so on. We also have developed a survey on religious identity that is attempting to capture the dimensions of nonreligion and to meet the challenge of asking people what nonreligion or being not religious looks like in day to day life. Both of these projects respond to the rapidly shifting ground of religious diversity.

As our Religion and Diversity Project comes to an end we find ourselves on yet another edge of diversity: when we began the project we were primarily interested in religious diversity and its management. However, as we worked through a wide range of issues, some of which are included in this volume, the next major issue on the horizon, in addition to continuing to consider the contours of religious diversity and its impact on society, is the significant portion of people in many countries who describe themselves as nonreligious. Steven Tomlins documents the rather broad parameters of this group in Chap. 11, where he explores atheism in Canada. This emerging category has unclear boundaries and issues of identity, practice and beliefs are as yet still understudied by scholars. But, despite this growth in nones and the non-affiliated, religion is highly unlikely to disappear. Rather, this unfolding chapter in diversity highlights a new challenge—how do those who are religiously committed live well with those who have no religious affiliation, including atheists, agnostics, humanists, or the indifferent? The challenges associated with studying the nonreligious make this a particularly daunting task. However, by focusing on areas of shared interest, rather than religion or nonreligion per se, it is possible to uncover some of the complexities of this new diversity. In my own research with volunteers who work on sea turtle conservation I have discovered that such world repairing work is an important site of collaboration both for people who self-describe as religious and those who identify as nonreligious. A shared focus on the well-being of sea turtles becomes the defining point of similarity across difference for the volunteers (see Beaman 2017). Nason-Clark, in Chap. 3, offers a further example of what is at stake: violence against women and intimate partner violence cannot be adequately addressed without cooperation and collaboration from service providers across all sectors. This is the case for any number of pressing social issues, from poverty to climate change. Thus, while studying religious diversity remains important, the focus on diversity must be expanded to meet this new social reality.

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Reference

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