

Places of Feeling: Photographs, People and Things on Soho Road

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Belief happens in what people say, but also what they do. It is embodied in various practices and actions, in the stories and testaments people tell, in their usage of buildings, pictures, in the taste of their food and the smell of fragrances...¹

It is impossible to escape faith on the Soho Road: it is in every shop in the items they sell, or the image of Meeca or Haille Selassie in the hairdressers.²

'Under Gods' is a photographic contemplation of the everyday religious experience of the complex and multifaceted communities that live around Soho Road in Birmingham. Initially the road appears an unremarkable space, on the outer edges of the inner city - some two miles from the city centre. It is a palimpsest of building styles with the villas, terraces and public buildings of the late nineteenth century constantly reworked, a mixture of social uses, too often a site of poverty, a place of aesthetic indifference.

It is a place, like many others, marked by the topographies of intentionally public and visible religion- the church spires and mosque minarets (7). However beneath the surface is a richer topography of religious space: temples in small terraced houses, churches in school gym halls, monasteries in suburban villas, and prayer meetings in living rooms, all of them, in their turn, the result the spatial stories of migration and settlement. Soho Road demonstrates how places are seldom homogeneous, seldom what they seem, but made up of many spaces which "structure entire scenarios of place."³

'Under Gods' explores how belief transforms spaces from the ordinary to non-ordinary, as spaces, people and objects come together - 'belief happens in and through things and what people do with them.'⁴ Places themselves become 'cultural objects' in that they are constantly produced and transformed through the values which they themselves mediate,

¹ David Morgan *The Sacred Gaze: religious visual culture in theory and practice* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2005) p. 8

² Liz Hingley; "Photographer as Researcher: Notes from Experience" Unpublished Conference paper, 2010.

³ Edward Casey *Getting Back into Place*, Bloomington. Indiana University Press 1993, p. 48. There is a massive literature on the social construction of space and place, including the classic Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Oxford Blackwell, 1991

⁴ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 8.

places socialize those within them, make knowledge, and reproduce values. For while of course people shape their material world, it can be argued that objects too have an impact on the relationships between people, both as individuals and in the collective social domain. Encounters with certain objects demand certain demeanors as they mediate between worlds, a process particularly marked in the production of religious space.

The relationship between people, space and objects forms a cohering thread through all the photographs. The daily practices of belief are experienced not just as isolated meditation or the engagement with scripts, but through collective interactions of peoples and things. Consequently Hingley's gentle and affectionate photographs do not merely map surfaces, or superficial equivalences between entities, but produce "a path traced through the terrain of lived experience" mediated through the placing, touching, and feeling of objects, as in the case of the Polish Carol singers (14) or Mrs Little's home communion (8).⁵

While many of the photographs address specific acts and performances of religious faith, such as meditation, baptism and worship, either explicitly or implicitly such as the photographs of a disabled Hare Krishna chanting (24) or the Cannon St Baptist's baptism (12), others stress the quiet individual experience of religious feeling in the everyday. Michael Billig famously coined the phrase 'banal nationalism' to account for the everyday material and emotional manifestations of nation and belonging.⁶ In many ways Hingley's photographs articulate a form of 'banal religion', banal not because it is insignificant or even 'ordinary', but because it permeates the spaces of the everyday, both consciously and unconsciously, framing people's being. Thus just as Billig's 'banal nationalism' is constituted by the flag hanging limp on a building, rather than waved self-consciously in procession, 'banal religion' is constituted through everyday presence, and habitual actions, the unnoticed crucifix on a school wall as at St Francis Catholic School, the statue of Shiva amongst the foil food containers of the Soho Sweet Centre, a Christmas crib on a café shelf. Belief is also performed through specifically focused forms of everyday life, such as dressing and eating. These experiences too are focused through material objects, the best hat, suitable for church (17), the appropriate dress for

⁵ Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*, (Routledge 2007), 90.

⁶ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London Sage, 1995.

Mosque on a Friday (15). Crucial yet undemonstrative, such objects point to the quiet, unremarked, yet foundational, quality of religion across a wide range of communities.

Objects are also used to demarcate space in certain ways: they make it socially meaningful. Through objects, the symbolic and the spiritual are inscribed onto the physical world, but at the same time the engagement with these objects, their absorption into demarcated social spaces, becomes a further space for symbolic construction. Throughout the everyday practices of 'belief' are more extensive, and penetrating than the formal practices of religion.⁷ For instance the daily juxtapositions such as the audio bible given pride of place in a living room (23). These photographs show the fluid boundaries not only of these multiple aspects of religion itself, but the daily interactions and exchanges between them, for example chatting to a Jehovah's witness after mosque school (18).

The photographs suggest how, through the presence of objects, both people and space are transformed through a continual flow of significance between the banal – for instance the tangle of electronics, and the sacred - the prayer mats of the Minba Chair Pakistani mosque (**). Thus living rooms can share in the same patterns of significance as temples, as space, people and objects come together in socially salient relations. What photographs do is intensify this sense, drawing our attention to it. Photography is essentially a performative and theatrical form. It is also, with its random inclusivity, a medium of detail. It focuses attention, elevates, intensifies through the management of attention. In Soho Road the photographs embrace this randomness of photography in order to open up different spaces and communicate experience, as the objects arranged in space are brought to the surface to create a density of experience. The processes of the sacred is constantly interrupted, with punctal force, by the banal – the lustre wallpaper, family photographs and wire coathangers of Mrs Little's space of holy communion (8) - at the same time, spaces and things are reordered and transformed, as they cease to dominate in the face of religious feeling.

⁷ Morgan *The Sacred Gaze*, 8.

Much has been written of the disembodied gaze of photography. However, 'Under Gods' is not a visualisation of the 'flâneur', moving disconnectedly through the spaces, gazing voyeuristically, without focus, upon the fragmented spectacle of an exotic *melée*. Nor is it simply an opening up of the space to the viewer's gaze. Instead, suggestive of the way in which Michel de Certeau separated out the experience of the walker, as the site of an emergent visibility, from the mere experience of the voyeur,⁸ Hingley's way of working suggests the complex triangulations of making of photographs, between camera, the spatial experience of the subject, that of Hingley herself.

For, like her subjects, she walks the Soho Road, up and down, criss-crossing it, talking to people, entering their lives. The "movement between places involves their sequential experience, in their description of the production of a narrative, linking the body to place and events in place."⁹ Thus discourses of locality are performed through the body of the photographer, carrying her camera equipment - walking moving through the space, feet on the ground, legs moving, eyes seeing, and ears hearing, moving through the experienced topography of Soho Road. Consequently, the stillness of photographs is deceptive. They emerge instead from the rhythm of moments of movement and moments of stillness, which continue, dynamically beyond the frame.

In the way in which the photographs engage with multi-perspectival points of view, the complexity of local space, the dynamism of the material world and embodied experience of it, 'Under Gods' constitutes an 'anthropological turn'. It is coloured by an engagement with both photography and anthropology, an absorptive and representational practice that face both ways – inwards and outwards. What unites these photographs is a deep sense of human experience as the subjects and photographer work within the camera space. But above all is the sense of the material expression of that experience, as things mediate and transform the spaces of the banal into the places of feeling.

⁸ M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley University of California Press, 1984), 93.

⁹ Tilley, *The Materiality of Stone* (Oxford Berg 2004), 26