Introduction: Religious Individuals and Collective Identities

***Susie Fisher**, University of Manitoba*

This issue of *Oral History Forum d'Histoire orale* brings together a rich and diverse collection of articles that collectively engage with oral history and religion. Broadly, these articles consider the complex roles played by religion in the daily lives of individuals in a variety of global locales. More specifically, because the study of religion and religious worlds is a tradition of inquiry that engages with the corporeal and ethereal, the political and the historical – without reducing it to any one – these works also show how oral history can render the realities of religious identity in its depth and complexity. That is, oral history reveals the connections and tensions between the religious individual and their community, between religion as prescribed, and religion as practiced. This collection of articles gives credence to the multiplicity of ways oral history as tool of scholarly inquiry can open up space for consideration of the real and significant religious worlds of those who inhabit and construct them.

The first article (and its accompanying podcast) in this special edition, by Kathryn Boschmann, draws attention to the ways that individual emotional boundaries and unspoken social or political codes can undergird oral history interviews and thus obscure the very real place of faith and religion in interviewee's lives. By centering her work on two life histories of first generation Irish Canadians in Winnipeg, and by offering an interdisciplinary theoretical focus on oral history, the history of emotions, religion, Boschmann raises a number of important questions about how oral history interviews are co-composed by interviewers and interviewees by way of emotional boundaries. Boschmann suggests that questions about faith and religion can be ways of broadening the emotional boundaries of oral history interviews, thereby making more space for considering the depth and meaning of religion in people's lives. Such efforts work towards the co-creation of a new emotional community between interviewee and interviewer.

Fearghus Roulston's article similarly considers religion as an important marker of both Irish identity and the emotional boundaries of community in his study of post-conflict Northern Ireland. He argues that there are intricate ties between collective memory, power, and history in post-conflict Northern Ireland, and that oral history can be a powerful tool in challenging the hegemonic narratives of social, political, and religious experiences during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. This can only be done, however, if the practice of oral history is built upon the recognition of "multifarious interpretations of the past," and "embeds this commitment within its methodology." By analyzing the ethical and political dimensions of the newly launched Prisons Memory Archive project, which has collected oral histories from prisoners who were held at the Maze and Lon Kesh and Armagh Gaol prisons prior to the 1998 Good Friday or Belfast Agreement, Roulston considers the ways the practice of oral history – "collecting, archiving and publicizing oral histories" – in Ireland can be a political act aimed at better contextualizing stories from a diverse range of people and backgrounds. He argues that

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oral history in post-conflict states can indeed be "an historic practice" which works to produce "anti-hegemonic counter-memories" in the process of shaping a new future.

Taking up a post-conflict methodological angle similar to that proposed by Roulston, Logan Cochrane and Waleed Chellan consider the value of multiple and diverse narratives in contributing to the complex history and memory of social and religious change in the Cape Town Muslim community. Their study focuses on the oral histories of Muslim individuals who were, following the Group Areas Act of 1950 (a restrictive policy of the South African Apartheid government), forced to relocate in and around Cape Town on the basis of racial and geospatial segregation. Cochrane and Waleed argue on the one hand that the voices of community members are fundamental to understanding the complex history and effects of the Group Areas Act. They also argue, however, that though some of these voices seem to reveal contradicting truths, each voice nonetheless offer "expertise in their own respective right" on the history of socio-religious change in Cape Town. These narrative expressions of history, however conflictual, can be held in complex unison.

Paul Merchant's article wrestles with the theory of composure in the practice and analysis of oral history. Many oral historians have suggested that the oral history interview typically invites the interviewee to narrate their life in a way that reconciles conflicts, or which reconstructs their life into a coherent whole, and thus reveals a person's present and integrated sense of self. Merchant's analysis of his own life history interviews with five British men – all scientists and Christians – however, reveals that "a singular narrative need not entail a singular self." That is, for the scientist-Christian men highlighted in Merchant's article, the different or dispersed selves can exist as coherent and whole in different places or communities.

Desanka Djonin extends Merchant's discussion of dispersed selves in her study of the construction of hyphenated identities among Canadian-Serbs in Ontario. Centered on the notion of spectacle, Djonin argues that cultural religious traditions, like theatrical Serbian-Canadian folk-dance, can be vehicles for fostering a collective hyphenated identity among Canadian-Serbs. Based on a series of oral history interviews, Djonin suggests on the one hand that Serbian folk-dance, brought to Canada with post-war immigrants in 1948, inspired the expression of immigrant, Serbian identity and culture in the diaspora. On the other hand, however, over time, Serbian-Canadian dance organizations began to serve as vehicles for the integration of Serbian immigrants into Canadian society and culture, thereby facilitating a hyphenated category of identity among future generations of Canadian-Serbs.

Anindya Raychaudhuri further explores questions about the methodological boundaries of oral history and the memorialization of political events in his analysis of the 1947 India/Pakistan partition. Raychaudhuri's article examines excerpts from his own six-year oral history project, which seeks to generate a fuller picture of the legacy of partition with its emphasis on the fact that partition involved a re-working of people's physical bodies, religious identities, and nation-states. In this article, he is specifically interested in the ways this history is remembered through language about religion, violence, and the body, but is also concerned with the corporeality of oral history itself. Raychaudhuri argues that when studying partition and the ways its memories affect individual and collective religious identities, interviewers must pay attention to the embodied nature of memory, identity, and religious practice. Yet, he also argues that oral

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history itself is an embodied performance, and therefore stresses audio-visual recordings as the norm the practice of oral history. If oral history is not recognized as embodied event, for interviewee and interviewer, the complexity of individual emotional attachments, life narratives, and the intimacies, or the visceral relationship between interviewer and interviewee are not fully engaged with. Raychaudhuri suggests that an oral history of partition that is "alive to the embodied," would better demonstrate the importance of words *and* gestures in the construction of people's narratives, emotional worlds, and religious identities.

Ester Botta Somparé's article shifts the focus from oral history method and theory to a focus on oral tradition and religious identity. That is, she considers the important relationship between religion and oral tradition in shaping the collective identity of the Guinean Fulani minority. She analyzes the role of oral tradition in historicizing Fulani settlement in the Guinean coastal region. Somparé namely observes the ways that oral tradition about settlement also presents Fulani presence in the area as an Islamicizing mission, and thus contributes to shaping ethnic identity among the Fulani people. In her analysis of Fulani elders' narratives, she also argues that oral tradition and the transmission of religious identity were key features of koranic schools in the region.

With a similar focus on oral tradition and religious identity, De-Valera N. Y. M. Botchway and Yaw Sarkodie Agyemang examine role of myth among the Asante people, an Indigenous group in Ghana, West Africa. These scholars argue that Asante history, culture, and national identity are intimately connected to oral traditions about the mystery of life and death. In this engaging study of Asante myth, these writers also demonstrate, that Indigenous oral traditions and can contribute to larger discourses on humankind's grappling with existential concepts such as the inevitability of death.

This special issue concludes with Peter Epp's review of *Horse and Buggy Genius: Listening to Mennonites Contest the Modern World*, by Royden Loewen. This new book, based on 250 oral history interviews with Old Order and Old Colony Mennonites across the Americas, offers an engaging perspective the benefits of oral history in exploring religious identity and belief.

The articles and review collected in this special issue draw new attention to the potential of oral history to illuminate the complexity of religious identities and worlds. Together, the articles in this issue offer theoretical methodological insight into how oral history can disclose tensions between religious self-understanding and community narratives, but also how religion and religious worlds are means of acting, thinking, and being, which ought to be taken seriously in the analysis of people's stories.

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