Creating Local Spaces for Global Faiths

International Research Project studies the Religious Lives of Migrant Minorities
Researchers met at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Göttingen – During the last decade, the role of religion and the importance of religious identities in migration studies has become increasingly obvious. But how do religious activities and migration interact with one another, and how do they influence social and cultural diversity in different contexts? In order to clarify these issues, an international research project, which started almost nine years ago, has been studying the religious lives of migrant minorities in Britain, South Africa and Malaysia. The participating researchers met at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen to discuss their preliminary findings and analyse them comparatively.

According to Professor Josh DeWind, organizer of the research project and Director of the Migration program of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in New York, the project explores both the role of religion in immigrant life, and the effect of migration on religious institutions and practices. In order to de-center migration research from the prevailing Western context, the studies focus on Muslim, Hindu and Pentecostal Christian migrant groups within the three environments of London, Johannesburg and Kuala Lumpur.

“These sites share a long history of migration and of interethnic and interreligious encounter”, explained Sociology Professor Jose Casanova from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., one of the project coordinators. On the other hand, they have contrasting views on secularism as well as different governmental attitudes towards diversity.

In each of the three settings, the researchers comparatively analysed the individual biographies of migrants as well as their religious engagements at the community, national, and transnational level. According to DeWind, the comparative approach was chosen in order to clarify, “whether the similarities in religious backgrounds influence the way in which migrants adapt or not, or whether it’s more the differences in their contexts that influence the adaptations. The comparison is an attempt to identify the similarities and to highlight the differences.” In order to get a comprehensive interdisciplinary picture, the project is being coordinated by scholars with expertise ranging from a sociological, a migration studies, as well as a religious studies point of view.

The meeting in Göttingen was the first time, the investigators convened after the end of the research phase, to compare and discuss their findings in regard to Pentecostal Christian minorities. At the public event Professor John Eade, from Roehampton University, Dr. Caroline Jeannerat, from the University of the Witwatersrand, and Professor Diana Wong, from the National University of Malaysia, presented preliminary results from their studies in London, Johannesburg and Kuala Lumpur, respectively, with particular regard to the ways, in which Christian migrants establish religious spaces in these different societies.
The relevance of space making is particularly obvious in London, where – as Eade pointed out – some ambitious construction projects, planned by religious minorities, were recently stirring controversial debate. The Kingsway International Christian Center (KICC) wants to build an 8,000-seat Pentecostal church, and plans by the Muslim group Tablighi Jamaat, to construct a huge mosque complex near the site of the 2012 Olympic games, were discussed nationwide.

Jeannerat, who studied three Christian immigrant churches from central Africa in Johannesburg, emphasized how two Nigerian Pentecostal churches, on the one hand, and the Kimbanguist Church from Congo on the other, influence the communal lives and social spaces of their members in contrasting ways.

By analysing Easter rites from two Chinese Pentecostal churches in Kuala Lumpur, Wong illustrated how one group accepts Christian rituals like an Easter march, while the other is fostering ancient Chinese traditions. These minorities, Wong concludes, maintain their identities by distancing themselves not only from the Malaysian host society but also explicitly from one another.

“Migrants are producing landscapes through their activities”, commented religious studies expert Professor Manuel Vazquez from the University of Florida in Gainesville. These activities are most visible in global cities, which tend to become contested spaces. Vazquez interprets the discussion about the mega projects in London as a sign of the growing tendency to re-negotiate the private-public-sphere.

In a concluding response to the panel discussion, anthropologist Professor Peter van der Veer, from the Max Planck Institute, stressed the importance of viewing religion as “a lens to understand the flow of social life”. He added: “The world is urbanizing, and religion goes to town.”

The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) is preparing a publication for each of the three countries, and a fourth volume, which will comparatively examine the most significant common themes. The involvement of the Max Planck Institute with the meeting is based upon close contacts between its directors, Professor Steven Vertovec and van der Veer, and various project members. “We are intellectual partners, and we have similar interests in the field”, says DeWind. “I hope this will lead to further cooperation between members of our project and the institute.”

Walter Willems, March 2009