'A hidden cultural sector: political theologies and urban cultures'
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For the Creative City Limits: AHRC Workshop 2, held at the University of Plymouth, 30th March 2011. Workshop title: 'Creative Majority: beyond the downtown cultural quarter'.

Note: This paper is a workshop presentation, written along with a visual slide show, which cannot be reproduced here.

My subject is the role of faith communities in urban transformation. I take this subject as a theoretical issue, not simply an empirical fact, and while I will be discussing a few empirical examples, most of my paper is a discussion of the concepts and theoretical frames that are appropriate for research questions in this area. This paper is an initial and tentative statement emerging from six months of 'informal' research – travelling around the UK, locating and observing faith communities and faith groups, particularly taking note of those 'communities' that (i) maintain an explicit or implicit vision for a 'transformed' urban environment, and (ii) engage in religious or faith-generated practices to that end. In the case of the latter, I am not interested so much in the way faith communities populate committees for urban change (such as local consultation committees for public projects); and theoretically, my investigation is not framed by the old 'church versus state' or 'religion and civil society' debates. I am interested in the question of faith as creative cultural production, as a discourse that has the facility to engage with the discourse of urban transformation (in whatever form that may take). I use the term 'urban transformation' rather than 'urban regeneration', as it is the case – and this workshop is a case in point – that large-scale State-sponsored regeneration has not only *not* made good its claims for full regional urban revitalization, but post facto the economic crisis, has somewhat stalled. Whatever transpires in the next five years, it seems that a consensus among researchers is emerging that finds more small-scale, local and 'bottom up' initiatives if some kind of progress is to continue.

Who are the 'faith communities'? Listed by the Derby University's Multi-Faith Centre and the (national) Inter-Faith Network – two of the main authoritative sources of data and information – the major faith groups in this country are (predictably perhaps) Christianity (and related sects), Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Jain, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism. There are of course many other notable groups (Baha'a, Rastafarian, Christian Scientist, and so on) but these are demonstrably less present as an active cultural force in the urban environment. There are around 53,000 faith centres (including church buildings) in the UK at present – not including religious schools, care homes, counseling centres, and the chaplaincies and prayer rooms that feature in many public institutions. We are, of course, living in a country that is still geographically sectionalized according to a system of religious oversight and pastoral responsibility (parishes). Constitutionally, this country's state religion is still intrinsic to public life, constitution and government, and it must be said, most citizens seem quite oblivious to the extent to which bishops and cathedrals – as just one example – play a role in both national public life and international 'cultural diplomacy' (to use a fashionable term for what church leaders have done for a very long time).

Speaking to the Workshop's advertised research questions, in faith communities are characterized by the following:

1: '**non-economic and non-productive values**': this is obvious perhaps, but faith practice usually finds its fullest expression in a conception of the 'worship' of God. Worship as 'service', ritual or event is often a profound aesthetic practice, sometimes centred on individual contemplation (like prayer) but also defined as part of a 'way of life', a spiritually-centred life that ranges from music and liturgy to the production and interpretation of scripture, to architecture, and so on.

2: '**contesting the privileging of large metropolitan centres and downtown quarters as sites of cultural production'**: while historic civic Christian architecture still characterizes most city centres in the UK and these are often the choice locations of metropolitan districts, there are also a significant number of faith community buildings in addition to Christian denominational meeting halls distributed throughout lower social regions and deprived areas. Many of the 1,000 or so mosques that have been built in the UK in the last 10 years are located in areas of lower social standing and property value.

3: '**variety and abundance of everyday urban spaces in which creativity occurs, emerges and mutates'**: faith centres are growing and changing fast – some forming mini-creative quarters or hubs that combine social outreach and cultural production. Many of these are unsurprisingly the proselytizing or evangelistic-oriented faith groups. Aggressive evangelism is actually uncommon in contemporary Britain (except perhaps in semi-concealed environments, like prisons). Socially, proselytizing is more often than not communicated via community or urban activity, aiming at communication, interaction and discussion rather than indoctrination.

Many faith communities coalesce around a religious meeting location, each often holding a sacred text(s), a series of incontestable beliefs or principles (or dogma), and each often branded by an ancient symbol. A visual overview of religious symbols is itself instructive – reminding us of the fact that religions are rich visual cultures, articulated by theology-embedded visual languages, carefully choreographed in their ritual and ceremony, dress, cuisine, spatial design and architecture.

To my first point: I call 'faith communities' a 'hidden cultural sector' simply as they are excluded from current definitions and public policy demarcations of both cultural sector and creative industries. Yet in some ways they span both, and in ways admittedly obvious. Take Sara Selwood's seminal edited study *The UK Cultural Sector* (London: PSI Press) – a book that in 2001 consolidated the policy idea of culture as a 'sector' (i.e. delimited segment of the economy). Everything one can say about this sector one can say about faith communities: we find creative production – the creation of distinctive and imaginative products and activities; a distinctive institutionalized skills set; specific facilities equipped for its constituency; the committed constituencies themselves. They involve a spectrum of employees as well as a large volunteer population. As a sector, faith communities are growing in their impact on policy-making, but they can also have a strong commercial dimension. Despite their business acumen, most faith organizations are 'non-profit' – most major religious organizations in the UK are registered charities or equivalent.
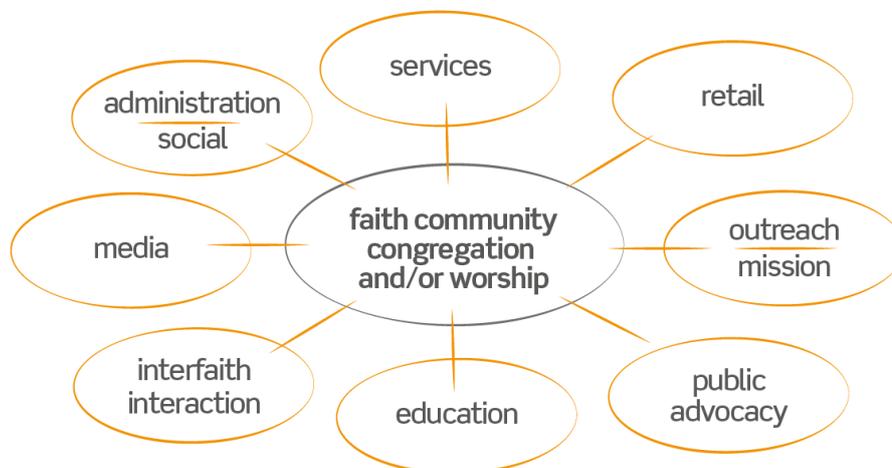

Fig. 1. Dimensions of activity in large enterprising evangelical churches, sometimes referred to as 'megachurches' (after model organizations in the USA).

This diagram above was constructed after a modern evangelical church in Bradford. As a simple organizational structure, it dispels the common conception of a faith community as a small club-membership orientated around a single assembly facility (or model is probably the traditional Anglican parish church). The Bradford church has three central locations and meeting places of congregation, and their meeting places are just a fulcrum for what is a large and internationally-oriented network of semi-autonomous enterprises (semi-autonomous in the sense that what looked like 'departments' of the church may be registered as independent businesses, not-for-profit organizations or charities in their own right). They are heavily branded, use contemporary multi-media marketing strategies, and are enterprising in their 'experience design' and responsiveness to their users. They are, what Antonio Strati would call, 'aesthetic organizations' (Strati, 1999): one of the reasons their success is difficult to define sociologically, is that their main product is 'experience'. This is particularly true in terms of their relation to doctrine, and the relation between doctrine and dogma (a shifting one; there is little visible organizational emphasis on theological interpretation or argument or the contestation of beliefs between Christian denominations).

Since David Blunkett's attempt to insert religion into public policy in and around New Labour public policy initiatives of 2004 – insert religion, that is, in a way that had nothing to do with the constitutional role of the C. of E. – the term 'faith sector' has entered policy parlance, and in some ways sealing its categorical distinction from other sectors (like the cultural sector). Sometimes on account of its own eccentricity – faith has become one of the 'excluded others' in the discourse of the Creative City (whose latest incarnation is 'the Creative Class' concept of Richard Florida). 'Sectorization' – if we can call the use of the term sector – is of course a symptom of the continual industrialization of non-industrial or commercial segments of society. Perhaps religion is succumbing to the forces of capital that Adorno had identified back in the 1940s when he co-coined the term 'the culture industry': the term 'faith industry' sounds more compelling when applied to the evangelical culture of the USA, but less so to Europe. In the UK and Europe, faith is less commercial than – I would argue – political in complexion.

The term 'sector' has henceforth been appropriated by the Government as part of a public policy agenda – it allows Government bodies a mode of address, a means of avoiding the patronage of any one religion, a means of 'relativising' Christianity as the historically exclusive religion for the British public and political spheres. And lastly, it allows 'faith' to displace 'religion', shifting the axis of appropriate terminology from history, organizations, priests and dogma, to communities, individuals, and contemporary expressions of belief in a diversified national culture. Religion to a large extent entails uncompromising historical institutions – and their representatives, whose role is often so invested in the authority of tradition they are political inflexible. 'Faith', however, is contemporary and fluid. Government agencies can by-pass the Priest and deal with the 'community leader'. Lastly, there is no one centralized authority over faith and its meaning. In October 2004 at the Devonport Naval Base (here) in Plymouth, The Royal Navy announced that it would be recognizing Satanism as a valid 'registered' religious belief, subsequently authorising its first practicing Satanist henceforth to carry out Satanic rituals on board ship.

I arrive somewhat belatedly at the term 'political theology', although it is something of an established academic discipline (a notable contributor to which is the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams). The term is applied to a wide range of studies, from Hegelian philosophy to the role of Catholic liberation theology in the rise of the rebel 'Sandinistas' in Nicaragua in the 1970s. It is a term used in the last fifty years to denote theology and doctrine that has *normative* implications for social or cultural life, in term generating a political relevance or function of some kind. Using the term 'political' in its broad sense, most theologies set down some fundamental beliefs that maintain a direct ethical and cultural impact on social behaviour – and thus any influence that have on public policy or their urban environments. In his 2007 lecture 'Religion and the Public Sphere' Habermas used the term 'the *political* revitalization of religion' not just 'revitalization of religion' in contemporary Europe.

As the key players in the 'secularization debates' (and the growing debate on 'post-secularism') – Peter Berger, José Casanova and Effie Fokas, and so on – point out, faith communities are growing all around the world. They are growing in strength and presence in their urban environments; and as faith is a 'way of life', it will always have a profound political dimension. As a social reality this has emerged in Europe not through religious revival but successive waves of immigration, relating to continuing global demographic shifts, and through subsequent indigenous cultural demands for new spaces of mediation and means of articulating serious social anxieties (where it must be said, traditional political mechanisms have failed). Faith communities are places where the morality, justice, authority and government are 'reconstructed' in a delimited space (like church or mosque) where they have a tangible dimension; and where the fate of community, children and the elderly, for example, can be addressed and subject to ethical imperatives long since abandoned by 'the world outside'.

On this last point, David Voas and Steve Bruce observed that where in the 2001 Census a massive 72% of Britons identified themselves as Christian, this did not correlate with church attendance or active religious involvement. It did however correspond with other indicators of anxiety over national identity (Voas and Bruce, 2006). Even so, there is a distinct lack of attention to 'faith' as a subject both for contemporary arts, humanities and social science research (apart, of course, from the spheres of 'religious studies' or sociology of religion). In popular books like Amin and Thrift's *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* (2002), we find the whole panoply of urban forces animating a wide typology of cities from 'the city of passions' to the 'democratic city' – but no 'city of faith', or spiritual city, in fact not even a reference.

More interest is emerging however: Nezar AlSayyad and Mejgan Massoumi make two relevant points in their new book, *The Fundamentalist City: Religiosity and the Remaking of Urban Space* (Routledge, 2011): (i) how faith communities are growing throughout the world and 'territorializing' their faith: (in some parts of the world they identify a new phenomena of 'medieval modernity' and a 'feudal' ordering space); (ii) that faith remains a significant question in thinking about urban transformation – in the context of both the continued trends in State devolution of public services, and in the light of profound social changes in Western cultures. Questions of faith often evoke the most prescient issues in cultural, social and urban research – from multi-cultural identities, diasporas, migrations, community cohesion, ghettos, gentrification and ethnic segregation, to, diversity, gender, sexuality, rights and liberties. Matters of faith are often test cases for new 'rights' legislation in national contexts – often in a way, we may observe, that reveals a lurking fear of actual 'pluralism' in national democratic politics.

We are still holding the question of the fundamental distinctiveness of faith communities and 'faith' from any other category of culture. My main point in this paper is that faith is intrinsically 'political' (historically, of course, in the formation of the nation state of Great Britain is *explicitly* political), which is why it is not readily accepted as part of the 'cultural sector'. Following from this, I will argue that faith communities *could* make a great impact on urban life, but this impact will be radical, and the current framing of democratic society by contemporary political discourse in the UK would not allow the conditions of 'faith friendly' radical pluralism to emerge: the current diversity of faith communities in the UK mean that faith could only corporately play a major role in urban development if a genuinely 'pluralist' democratic culture was to emerge.

The 'political' character of faith is internal to the philosophical import of 'theology'. Not all faith will have a codified theology accepted by consensus as such, but the major faiths do. As the influential philosopher Carl Schmitt argued in his classic 1922 essay 'Political Theology' that the central concepts of modern politics are secularized versions of older theological concepts. Whether notions about the state, sovereignty, citizenship, and so on, our central political concepts are historically attenuated versions of what was revealed for humankind by divine fiat. While this historicisation of political concepts can hardly be said to be a live issue in faith communities today, there is a prevailing sense that 'secularization' has not only failed but has imposed on society a distorted understanding of the nature of human coexistence. Faith communities can be defined, therefore, as a living critique of modernity (as well as, of course,

popular postmodern positions that promote ethical relativism and skepticism of absolutes or of 'transcendence'). A second implication follows a belief in a fundamental spiritual realm shared by the major faith communities – whether the mysterious world of Buddhism, hedonic afterlife of Islam, or the more regimented heavenly realm of Christianity. For faith communities, the locus of truth, authority and power is not 'earthly' government. Actual political power is an epiphenomenon of human hubris, and thus the subject to a chronic political skepticism, which, fully blown, would conceivably dispense with 'human' politics altogether.

These implications are expressed at generalizations of course, but what defines faith communities is 'faith', which is not just a *lebensphilosophie* or ethical framework but an acknowledgement of spiritual revelation whose import arrives at the level of ontology. The unavoidable ontology of faith with its emphatic concept of spiritual reality, challenges our approach to the urban in two basic ways. First: it involves the shaping of material nature (and building an urban environment) is – whether intentionally or not – an expression of fundamental beliefs (or non-beliefs) concerning the order of nature and of reality. The built environment articulates an openness (or closed-ness) to what is beyond, the unseen and unknowable, and expresses our relation to it, and thus to each other as beings on a level that is spiritual not merely social. Architecture articulate a concept of the human itself – of relations of hierarchy and authority and of human habitation. It is not for nothing that buildings and architecture have historically been central to the major faiths.

Second, creativity is of the divine character: all major religions view the primary force in the universe is one of *creativity* – that is, it was created by a being or entity that acts as a being and was not an impersonal physical mechanical or catastrophic cause-effect. The historical expression of faith in urban forms of life has always been creative – generating unique and distinctive forms of design, construction and function. And as creative acts, works of creativity are but moments in a dialogue with the divine, or at least, acts of worship. This, of course, in our own time is problematic, where faith communities do not have the level of cultural autonomy that can command such enterprising structures. They rather have to negotiate the compromised channels of national planning.

If creativity is a consistent ingredient in the ancient faiths, 'the city' is also a major theme for many. Jerusalem is example enough of the centrality to the three 'Abrahamic' faiths of actual physical-historical land or territory. From the New Testament and the promise of the New Jerusalem – influencing to come degree England's 18th century colonial view of its role in the world – to the seminal work of political theology in the form of St. Augustine of Hippo's 5th Century *City of God*, the concept of the 'city' is replete with spiritual meaning of the highest order. Augustine's legacy, despite his heavenward-gaze, was an irresistible vision of an earthly city inhabited by spiritual devotees who re-orientate that city towards righteousness, where the spiritual and the earthly find points of synchronicity – Vatican City is of course an exemplar of this theological dimension of Christianity.

'Territorialisation' is for Nezar AlSayyad one of the characteristics of faith communities, and thus one of the sociological difficulties of multi-culturalism as an urban policy. Many faiths work with an emphatic distinction between sacred and profane and other demarcations of space that in turn generate social protocols and behavioural adjustments from its inhabitants. While multi-culturalism has indeed featured the spectrum of (often incompatible) social philosophies that animate British public policy, the policy trajectory has been most certainly heading towards a tentative 'assimilationism'. The establishment of the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund in 2005, dovetailed with a massive re-orientation of Christian denominational theology and practice towards urban centres – which in some ways can be traced back to the C. of E.'s brave anti-Thatcher report 'Faith in the City' back in 1985. Since then, the Church Urban Fund (est. 1988), is still operating, and bodies like the ecumenical Faith Communities Consultative Council and the Faith Based Regeneration Network play a role in urban regeneration consultation. The rise of the 'urban' as a central term in Christian mission and ministry orientation is such that around 60 organizations are now involved.

However – as Richard Farnell (Coventry University and Coventry Cathedral) and others have pointed out – faith communities actually play a limited and often disillusioned role in urban development projects. They often experience a (predictable?) clash between their theology-embedded vocabularies of community, redemption and transformation and (yes, 'regeneration', which has a spiritual etymological root) and the instrumentalism of city council bureaucracy or just the straight economics of urban planning. In the excellent edited volume *Faith in the Public Realm* (2009, Policy Press), Dinham, Furbey and Lowndes identify the three ways in which faith communities have been appropriated in the context of urban regeneration. First, they are repositories of resource – in what the Home Office referred to as a 'mixed economy of welfare': they possess facilities, trained staff and aspirations to care and serve, mean contributing to delivery of not only core social services like education, housing or elderly care, but also developing regeneration initiatives, community safety and health promotion (Home Office 2004; Dinham, Furbey and Lowndes, 2009: 18). Second, faith communities are understood to be effective mechanisms of 'community cohesion' (bridging religious, class or ethnic divides, and it must be said in the case of ethnic-based religions, internal policing of community behaviour). And third, faith communities have participated in local and regional governance, through Local Strategic Partnerships and neighbourhood management boards, among other places.

Faith in the Public Realm is a fascinating volume, but marked by a paradox – the greater the involvement of faith communities, the deeper the lines of incommensurability with State-driven public policy. Faith communities are also sub-cultures, with value-embedded modes of communication and action not easily co-opted for the general good. The report on the 20th Anniversary of 'Faith in the City' – made by the Anglican Commission on Urban Life and Faith and called 'Faithful Cities' (May, 2006) – while intending to identify the role of faith in 'urban' development, tended to depict the faithful as an army of volunteer charity workers in the cause of Sate-driven social social welfare. In the light of this, the provision of a 'toolkit' for urban action by CULF, and subsequent attempts to generate a series of national public debates entitled 'What makes a good city?', failed to motivate the community of faithful. Furthermore, social welfare tends to make only transitory or provisional impacts on the real forces of urban development.

Having said this, the urban environment is changing in unexpected ways. Over 1,500 mosques have been built in the last 15 years – and as Richard Gale has pointed out, otherwise static planning conventions have become a site for dialogue and contestation (Gale, 2004; 2005). Our focus should therefore be the local arena rather than national, if we want a viewpoint on the actual impact of faith communities in urban change. And local, as pointed out by Habermas in his 'Religion and the Public Sphere', is not merely local, but more 'glocal' – for local faith communities are invariably part of a global religious public sphere, which, we may add, involves networked flows of international finance.

During my preliminary empirical research I have categorized four types of faith space – each of which are animated by a distinct political theology, and thus have implications for our cultural urban research. [I will omit empirical detail and further detail on informal interviews held with community leaders, and so on].

First, is what I call *Heavenly Retreat*: this faith community space is constructed to be a spiritual oasis, a place of calm, rest, protection, prayer, mediation and counseling. In some ways, this spatial model may seem co-extensive with the local parish church, but it is of course very different. While open to silent contemplation and detachment during a weekday, the parish church is a repository of all kinds of responsibility for local community life. The 'heavenly retreat' has no external reach, nor often wants one. It embodies what I would call the *political ontology of faith* – that all civil or political authority & the juridical is relativized, always only temporary, provisional, and itself subject to higher spiritual power. The heavenly retreat becomes a kind of dissolution of the civic order, as well as means of pacifying the restless. This is manifest through a contradiction – whereby the faith usually takes a creative cultural form, and yet more often than not hindered by an understanding of tradition as revelation – hence authoritative precedent.

Second, *Mission Station*: This is a faith 'HQ', administrative locus of communications, a place for strategic planning, teaching and equipping for evangelism. The space is not usually 'sacred' in that it actively separates itself from the profane for the purposes of worship or prayer; it is simply a facility, whose shape is pragmatic. It works with what we may call a 'Noah's Ark rescue' ethos, as those outside (the unbelievers) are doomed, and the communication in question needs to be spiritually empowered in some way to be effective. The 'missions station is often a dual-ontology location in the sense that its organizational management is pragmatic, yet the rationale, motives and content of the activity is deemed to be spiritually empowered and lived in anticipation of the 'realm beyond'.

Third, *Radical Polity*: These urban spaces are like time capsules, and tend to be 'museal' in character. They are repositories of artifacts of the faith, along with the various accessories that have accumulated as aids to the life of faith. There is a profound sense that both these repositories and accessories have been 'blessed' in some way, and are validated by the successful historical emergence of the faith. More importantly, they serve to make coherent a symbolic language of a holy life, usually lived in a profound sense of critical opposition to the corrupt life of contemporary society. All the main denominations have some version of the radical polity. The spaces of the radical polity are spaces of collective memory, with their own historical temporality, creating new cultural rhetorics and narratives of historical revisionism in abundance. And these are used as paradigms of pedagogy for the young members of the faith. They are spaces animated with conviction, self-sacrifice, but not asceticism and very different from the Christian monastic enclosure.

Fourth, *City of God*: this faith space may also contain a museal character, actively preserving and conserving the historical artifacts of the faith. However, organizationally, it is more akin to a cultural community centre, accommodating the whole range of community activities, and actively developing the faith communities capabilities and both social and cultural self-subsistence. Spiritually, it is a microcosm of the global expression of the faith, and in so far as it attempts to encompass all the social and cultural life of the faith community, is constructed like a model city. As a holy and righteous city, this faith space possesses its own government, polices the activities of the faithful, engages in education and welfare provision, and provides services in everything from cuisine, hospitality, and entertainment, co-extensive with study, prayer and worship. The holy city space is expressive of the full expression of a life of faith, where the pragmatic necessities of living in a secular world are a stimulus for continuing to develop its capabilities.

Discussion

My principle aim is to think about faith communities in terms of political theologies, and consider how these can be situated within urban cultural research. Faith, belief and theology all take many forms. The theology of a community is not normally an unreflexive and unmediated belief-system, like a regulated code of conduct or 'club-rules'. Theology – particularly in communities like Hindu and Bahi'a – is a complex weaving of historical narrative, pedagogy, and lengthy texts with no simple catechistic codification. And this is not to suggest that 'catechism', (most famously the Roman Catholic codification of biblical doctrine that goes by that name), is either simple, or 'downloaded' unproblematically into the everyday life of its faith community. Theology is a discourse of many dimensions, usually dynamic. Even sharia Islam, the most attentive to the explicit and disciplined interpretation of Scripture, is characterized by teachers (imams) for whom 'interpretation' – the communication of truth into the context of every day life – is not taken for granted. 'Political theology' if it to be used in a general heuristic, is simply the way in which faith community belief-orientations and discursive frameworks provide for a means of governance, ethics, morals and social interaction, which of course is conducted within the context of (in response to, or against) prevailing socio-cultural and political norms. A political theology approach to urban space will take an interest in not only the creative construction of these spaces (of separation and difference), but the way they mediate the broader landscape of urban life in which the everyday life of faith is lived out.

I conclude with some suggestions for further research:

1: The relation between the cultural production of faith communities and their urban territory – their concept of space, their creative production and articulation of faith in material production, their use and ethical regulation of space.

2: Understanding how faith communities mediate their own theologies in various modes of application, particularly in providing the cognitive framework for cultural production.

3: The processes of cultural production – agency, media and consumption, where faith communities act as a cultural 'avant-garde', cultivating the terms and means of active dissent, opposition and cultural critique.

5: The tensions, contradictions or compromises that emerge in the relation between faith spaces and the political expediency demanded by local urban regimes or political economy.

6. Faith and the construction of locale, minority, 'public spheres' and their role in the national public sphere (actual and imaginary).

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