

# Connected Communities

## Sacred communities: connected practices across place and time

A joint review and scoping study

Dr Abby Day, Anthropology, Dr Ben Rogaly, Geography: University of Sussex



# Background

## Executive Summary

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**The project's purpose was to jointly review existing qualitative and quantitative data from two separate projects, providing new insights on grounded and embodied community practices in the context of everyday religion and belonging. Researchers engaged in knowledge exchange and dialogue with new and former research participants, other researchers involved in similar research and wider academic networks beyond the core disciplines represented here, principally anthropology and geography.**

Key concluding themes related to the ambivalent nature of 'faith'; connections over place and time and the contested nature of community. The collaboration was useful to allow mutual engagements and important insights about religion, place, space, and faith. Implicit in terms like faith, community and life course are larger interwoven narratives of space, time, place, corporeality and emotion. In conclusion, we found that understanding how places, 'communities' and 'faiths' differ and intersect requires an understanding of social 'relatedness', including the social boundaries through which relationships are formed, experienced, mediated and transmitted. Further research is necessary, potentially cross-culturally, on the sometimes invisible roles of community volunteers and activists, particularly older women and young people.

## Researchers and Project Partners

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**Dr Abby Day**  
Anthropology, PI

**Dr Ben Rogaly**  
Geography, Co-I

### Researchers

**Dr Abby Day**  
Anthropology

**Dr Ben Rogaly**  
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### Key words

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Faith  
Religion  
Transnational  
Community  
Volunteer  
Age  
Gender

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## 1. Introduction

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This was an experimental interdisciplinary collaboration between Dr Abby Day, an anthropologist, and Dr Ben Rogaly, a geographer. We undertook to follow the AHRC reviewer advice to engage with researchers on the AHRC/ESRC Religion & Society Programme and others nationally and internationally.

## 2. Method

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The project began by reviewing and connecting two projects originally listed in the proposal: Day's AHRC-funded work *Believing in belonging in Contemporary Britain* and Rogaly's ESRC-funded project *Deprived "white community"? Social action in three Norwich estates, 1940-2005*.

Substantively we set out to compare our original material from interviews with a total of 143 interviews in the mid-2000s with children, teenagers, and adult men and women in two separate projects in North Yorkshire and in Norwich. Rogaly's work in Norwich was already a collaborative interdisciplinary study with historian Becky Taylor and Day's work continued through an ESRC grant allowing her to revisit participants first studied between 2002 and 2005. Rogaly also enriched his contribution through his AHRC Fellowship *Places for All? A Multi-Media Investigation of Citizenship, Work and Belonging in a Fast-Changing Provincial City*.

As part of the project, the researchers tested emerging findings amongst former and new research participants and further tested ideas amongst practitioners and academics nationally and internationally.

## 3. Findings

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While Day's work made central issues of belief and belonging and the relation between them, and thus provided deep insights into faith and religion (see, for example, Day 2011), these were only accidental bi-products of Rogaly's and Taylor's work, the central concern of which was a critical analysis of the construction of the study's location as a 'deprived white community' (2009). These differences produced both synergies and creative tensions between the two studies and allowed Day to gain from Rogaly's broader understandings about geography and Rogaly from Day's background in the anthropology of religion.

Three key findings emerged: (1) the ambivalent nature of 'faith' and consequential boundary blurring between the 'secular' and the 'sacred' (2) connections over place and time that foster senses of belonging can drive voluntary activities (3) contested nature of community can cause confusion. Gaining an emic understanding is essential. See, forthcoming, Day and Rogaly 2013 and attached bibliography.

## 4. Learning from experience in engaging communities

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Rather than holding a single public engagement event, we became aware that groups tended to look more to themselves than externally – with the exception, for example, of groups constituted for an inter-group purpose (see, for example, notes in the next below on the 'Faith xchange' and Dinham 2011). We learned from attending events with members of the Religion & Society Programme, for example, (see, for example, Hopkins et al. 2011) that many young people find multiple sources of meaning drawn

from place-based social networks. The situated nature of community groups meant that we found that engagement was more effective on a more targeted basis.

## 5. Research benefits for communities and other stakeholders

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### Enriching a student volunteer network

Dr Abby Day engaged in participatory community research by joining the Advisory Board of a SIFE, a national student voluntary organization that enables students to create and manage local and international voluntary projects. See External Links attached. By attending advisory board meetings, freshers' events and having both informal discussions and two structured interviews over 12 months Day was able to gain a better understanding of young people's motivations, processes and benefits involved in volunteering and how non-religious faith and belonging were principle constituents of their experience.

Impact: Day reported back to the SIFE management team at the end of the Sacred Communities project. One of the project's key findings - that social engagement and a sense of belonging drives voluntary activities - altered and improved how the management team communicated. Her involvement resulted in one of the members speaking at two international events Day organized in Kent and in Cairo as part of her AHRC British Council Fellowship.

### Engaging former research participants.

Dr Ben Rogaly organized a meeting for Dr Day to travel to Norwich, the site of his former

project, and discuss the project's emerging findings with a group of his former research participants.

Impact: It was the first time several of the original research participants had been together for more than one year and they found the experience allowed them to re-engage and re-commit to some of their former mutual associations. When Day shared some of the project's emerging themes she was able to enrich her and Rogaly's findings. The participants affirmed the emphasis on relationships and connections.

### Invited talk, Faith and Cohesion Network, Peterborough

Rogaly was invited to speak to the Peterborough Faith and Cohesion Network on 23 November 2011 about his ongoing AHRC-funded work in the city. The concerns of the network are to bring religious faiths together to tackle social issues of mutual concern. Although faith is not one of the main foci of the work Rogaly is doing in Peterborough, because of his involvement in the Sacred Communities project he was able to make central insights around the range of perspectives on religious faiths within 'communities' identified, often by others, as 'faith communities', in particular the simultaneous presence of ambivalence, indifference, religious certainty and hostility to religious faith. He was also able to engage Faith and Cohesion Network members on the central ideas of the connections over space and time of embodied practices and community. This is of particular interest in Peterborough where 'communities' based on religious faith are often seen by city authorities and by some publics as having distinct bounded interests. The meeting with the Faith and Cohesion Network was also inspiring for Rogaly and Day in their ongoing Sacred Communities work

because of the successful work of the group in bringing religious faiths in the city together to counter the anti-Islamic message of the English Defence League (EDL) and to lead a city-wide strategy in connection to the rally held by the EDL on 10th December 2010.

**Impact:** Following the meeting, Rogaly was asked to advise the Faith and Cohesion Network on their future work and helped to establish a link between Muslim, Hindu and Sikh religious organisations in the city and the Peterborough Central Library Archives. He also helped with the initial planning of the Faith and Cohesion Network's 'Journey to Jerusalem' visit to Israel and Palestine in late 2012 with Muslim and Christian leaders in the city.

### **Invited talk, Husseini Islamic Centre, Peterborough Interfaith Week Event, 25th November 2011, John Clare Theatre**

Following on relations made across the religious faiths in Peterborough as part of his AHRC Fellowship work, Rogaly responded to an invitation to speak at this event about 'faith and community', bringing a critical appreciation both of the possibilities and pitfalls of working with these concepts and of Peterborough's success in bringing people together across religious faith identifications.

**Impact:** Rogaly's short talk affirmed the role of interfaith work in Peterborough causing Peterborough residents present to enhance their positive sense of belonging to a place which respects and builds a sense of community out of multiple perspectives on faith, including those of major organised religious faiths. This thus contributed to ongoing work on community cohesion in the city.

## **6. Engaging the Academic Community nationally:**

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### **Connected Communities Summit Glasgow July 2011**

Day attended on behalf of the project to share findings and help develop key themes for future Connected Communities programmes.

### **BSA Sacrel Study Day London November 19 2011**

The British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group is the second largest study group within the BSA with 150 members. Day helped organise their Annual Study Day on November 19 2011 on the theme 'Religion and Social Action', 'and presented a short paper on Sacred Communities.

### **AHRC /ESRC Religion & Society Programme**

Day attended two events organised by the Programme and discussed her and Rogaly's work in both the formal conference proceeding and in informal exchanges.

**Faithxchange:** London – 27 September 2011; Faith, Young People & The Future

**AHRC/ESRC Religion & Society Programme reports:** London 18 May 2011.

### **London School of Economics 2 November 2011**

Day attended and participated in Religion Forum seminar on 'Sacred action and Symbolic Ritual'.

## 7. Engaging the Academic Community internationally:

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### **Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (US): Washington DC 29-31 March 2011**

Day attended as an Invited Member of 6-person Connected Communities delegation to workshop on the theme "The place of community in pluralistic societies: workshop comparing UK and US perspectives on community in pluralistic societies." She presented emerging findings from Sacred Communities.

### **Association of American Geographers, Seattle, USA, April 13th 2011**

Day and Rogaly attended the conference and the first session of the panel organized by Betsy Olson (Edinburgh) and Claire Dwyer (University College London) on Transnationalism and Religion/ Travelling Faith. Day presented their joint paper, entitled *The role of transnational life geographies in embodied practices of faith and community in England* in that session.

The paper was well-received and discussed by participants both at the panel and at an informal lunch afterwards. Rogaly brought insights from the Sacred Communities project into his comments at a second session of the same panel later the same day.

### **International Society for the Sociology of Religion Aix-en-Provence July 2 2011**

Day presented a paper jointly authored with Rogaly.

### **European Association for the Study of Religion: 18-22. September 2011. Budapest**

Day was invited to attend and was part-funded through School of Global Studies, University of Sussex Research Incentive funds. She presented a paper on religious ambivalence, secular/ sacred religiosity and connections over place and time. While there she initiated discussions with other researchers about creating a volume for the AHRC/ESRC Religion & Society Programme series published by Ashgate on sacred and secular identities. The contract has now been issued (see below under SSSR). She also forged a connection between the BSA Sociology of Religion group and the British Association for the Study of Religions to host a joint panel at the 2012 BASR conference on 'Religion and the Public Benefit'.

### **SSSR (Society for Social Scientific Study of Religion) Milwaukee, USA, October 28-30 2011**

Day's attendance was invited and part-funded by SSSR President's Discretionary Fund. Day presented a paper on 'The Social Construction of the Sacred' and distributed a Call for Papers for the proposed AHRC/ESRC Religion & Society Programme series published by Ashgate (discussions having begun at the EASR, see above). A contract has now been issued (March 2012) for the volume, a collaborative book project connecting the work of 15 researchers in the UK and North America, primarily from the AHRC/ESRC Religion & Society Programme. See bibliography.

She was also able to continue discussions with representatives of BRIN, an AHRC/ ESRC Religion & Society project examining geographical variations on religion.

## University of Sussex Department of Geography field trip - March 2012 Egypt

Through Day's involvement with Rogaly in the Geography Department she was able to connect with Dr Mike Collyer and his students planning a field trip to Egypt to assess water and issues and the effect on local communities. She financed the students to attend workshops she organised in Kent and Cairo as part of her AHRC British Council Fellowship.

people and older women, potentially in another national setting, such as Egypt, where Day's recent work suggests great potential for such research.

## 8. Continuing Impact Through Appointment as Visiting Fellow

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Day's work on the Connected Communities programme with Rogaly ended on December 31st 2011, but her involvement with the Department was extended through her appointment as a Visiting Research Fellow in the Department of Geography, 2012.

## 9. Tangible Project Outputs:

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Academic paper currently under review by Journal of Contemporary Religion. When published, a copy with Executive Summary from this Final Report will be sent to the Department for Communities and Local Government.

## 10. Recommendations

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The review and engagement activity suggests scope for further research into processes of belonging and activity more distinctly related to ambivalence about community, the sacred and the secular. Further, the study revealed scope to further investigate hitherto neglected forms of voluntary labour carried out by young

# References and external links

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