

Comparing the Incomparable? Urbanisation, Transnational Flows and Religion in the context of London and Lourdes

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The city has been seen by many scholars as the epitome of secular modernity where religion will retreat from the public sphere as the power of institutional religion inevitably declines. However, since the late 1990s there has been a growing awareness of the continuing importance of religion bound up, in part, with global migration to urban centres – see, for example, N. AlSayyad and M. Massoumi (eds), *The Fundamentalist City* (2010) and C. Baker and Beaumont (eds) *Post-Secular Cities* (2011).

In this talk I want to explore the challenges posed by the forces underpinning the continuing importance of religion by comparing two urban centres which appear at first sight to be very different. London has a long history as a national and international centre of trade, industry and government and rapidly overtook Paris during the nineteenth century as the most populous ‘world city’. Since the 1970s the growth of the service sector, especially in the areas of finance, banking and the cultural industries, has enabled it to claim a prime position as a ‘global city’ in competition with Frankfurt, New York, Tokyo, Singapore and Shanghai. Lourdes, on the other hand, was a sleepy French border town until the apparitions of a local shepherdess, Bernadette Soubirous, during 1858 turned it into a bustling pilgrimage town. London would appear to be a cosmopolitan centre of secular modernity while Lourdes appears to represent religious tradition and anti-modern beliefs concerning ‘miracle’.

While the two urban centres are very different in many ways, they are affected by economic, political and cultural changes taking place across Europe and globally. These changes involve, *inter alia*, increasing cultural diversity linked to global migration which is expressed through the growth of religious pluralism. In London this is expressed through the growth of Pentecostal ‘mega churches’, Hindu temples, Sikh gurdwaras and Muslim madrassahs and mosques. While Lourdes has remained formally a Roman Catholic shrine, the millions of visitors have become far more diverse. The shrine seeks to welcome all-comers, including those from other religious traditions such as Anglicans, Orthodox and Hindus, as well as those who do not subscribe to any religious institution. This increasing complexity presents considerable challenges to those defining themselves as ‘locals’ or ‘insiders’ and this is an issue which I will discuss in the concluding part of the talk.