Photography in the Study of Religion

Michael Pye

New introduction (2015)

The paper presented here was first written for the Community Religions Project at the University of Leeds, England, in March 1977, starting off a series of internal working papers. That was nearly forty years ago. In the meantime, with the advent of digital photography, and the astonishing possibility for field researchers to take thousands of pictures at low cost, the practical situation has changed completely. At the same time, the tight economy of publishing means that, in general, books carry far fewer photographs than they did in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And how fascinating those earlier photographic records are a century later, or more! On the other hand the proliferation of images on the internet has changed the situation dramatically in other respects. Religious organisations themselves, as well as observers of religions, are able to compete in visual presentation, both on fixed web-sites and in live presentations. However, while we are cognizant of these dramatic changes, they are not our subject here. The article below attempted, at an early date, a systematic consideration of the methodological value of the use of photography in the study of religions (at that time commonly referred to in the singular as “religion”). In spite of the changing times this may still have some relevance today. Moreover the argument builds up a strong emphasis, among other things, on the importance of “characterisation” in the study of religions, steering between theology and sociology. It therefore positions the study of religions as a discipline with its own requirements.

For historical reasons relating to the above-mentioned Community Religions Project at Leeds the paper has been left completely unchanged except for the addition of one missing reference. The temptation to rewrite and to update, or even to re-spell, has been resisted. Readers are therefore requested to respect the original date of composition and to draw from these thoughts whatever may be still be of value today. The original paper now follows.

Photography in the Study of Religion

(Community Religions Project Working Paper No 1)

Illustration is not enough

Photography does not seem to have been put to significant use as yet in the study of religion, nor indeed very widely in the social sciences generally.[1] Its role has usually been seen as illustrative only. However, some attention has been paid to the matter by D. Reed (see further below), and the stimulus for these present observations was a limited

[1] Cf. Anthony D. King’s *Colonial Urban Development: Culture, Social Power and Environment*, London 1976, as an example of the systematic illustration of the uses of space as social data.

photographic exercise undertaken by Ms. N. Kellgren in connection with the Community Religions Project in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds (England). It is believed that photography would be an important research tool in the study of religion and indeed more: namely it could provide a factual component in the systematic presentation of data and even, rather like aerial photography, might indicate otherwise unnoticed structures in religious behaviour.

There must be few readers on religion who have not been struck by the purely illustrative power of photography. Works on new religious movements, for example, certainly gain from this when compared with other works without it. In this field compare Lanternari's *The Religions of the Oppressed* with *Modern Japanese Religions* by Offner and van Straehlen or perhaps even Sargent's *Battle for the Mind* with Nock's *Conversion*.[2] The fact that it is nevertheless possible to appraise these four works quite diversely, irrespective of the photography, shows that the latter has no integral relationship to the data presented or to the theories advanced. The illustrations are most worthwhile, but the fact is that they remain illustrations. Illustration has also been used to good effect in studies of shamanism, e.g. in works by Findeisen, by Dioszegi (ed.) and by Carmen Blacker.[3] Practices described in the latter's recent study of shamanistic religion in Japan are very effectively characterised by a combination of lively description, recorded speech and well produced photographs. The latter convey an inescapable impression of the seriousness of purpose on the part of participants in rites of purification and power.

The inescapability of what is conveyed is important, for while there may be problems about the interpretation of photographs they do represent a relatively "hard" form of evidence. Admittedly, a photograph is selective in choice of angle and time. Yet compared with paragraphs written by an observer, however skillful and precise, the photograph comes nearer to being a primary datum. The photograph is almost the only conveniently publishable record of data which allows the reader to make his own direct appraisal of the nature of a person's involvement in something. The participants themselves "speak", as it were, through their recorded facial expressions and bodily positions, in a manner which is not dependent on a third person's intermediary description. For this reason photographs are similar in status to published editions of primary texts.

Not all studies of religion are open to photographic accompaniment like those mentioned above. Yet it is surprising that numbers of substantial writings offering circumstantial descriptions of religion in various societies fail to make use of photography even at this obvious illustrative level. Perhaps there are simple reasons for this. Some

---

[2] Offner, C.B. and van Straehlen, H., *Modern Japanese Religions*, Tokyo 1963; Lanternari, V. *The Religions of the Oppressed, A Study of Modern Messianic Cults*, New York 1965; Sargent, W., *Battle for the Mind; A Physiology of Conversion and Brain-washing*, London 1957; Nock, A., *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*, Oxford 1933.

[3] Findeisen, H. *Schamanentum*, Stuttgart 1957; Dioszegi, V. (ed.), *Popular Beliefs and Folklore Tradition in Siberia*, The Hague 1968; Blacker, C. *The Catalpa Bow, A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan*, London 1975.

writers fear to appear popular and still believe that books without "pictures" are more grown-up. Some linguists would like to use cameras, but just do not know how, or cannot afford sophisticated equipment. Others are anxious not to appear like tourists when identifying closely with a particular cultural background other than their own. Photographic work also adds extra costs in publication of research work. The main reason however is probably that academics see photography as essentially illustrative in function, and therefore optional, indeed dispensable. A change of attitude is called for. For one thing, illustration itself is by no means an unworthy objective in the serious presentation of data. Yet illustration is indeed an elementary use of photography and brings us only to the beginning of our reflections. We need a more systematic view both of the auxiliary roles of photography in research and also of its possibilities as an integral component in the presentation of data and the articulation of theory.

Photography as exploration

The work undertaken recently for the Community Religions Project (mentioned above) was not intended to produce illustrations. It was intended to be a sustained, though necessarily limited photographic exploration in its own right. The brief was no more specific than to carry out a photographic exploration of some of the religious activities within an ethnically and culturally mixed urban area. Initial constraints included a time factor: all of the photographs were taken within a period of several weeks in early autumn 1976. Another constraint was of course that of access. This constraint was considerably lessened by the existence of previous contacts, while at the same time one or two religious groups were passed over because of their reluctance to allow photography. Access was gained to several buildings and private houses without direct dependence on previous contacts. In short, there was no predetermination of the work on a calendrical basis, nor on the basis of previous work by non-photographing researchers. The photo- grapher was not asked to work within the framework of a particular theory of religion, nor indeed towards any of the more specific objectives suggested later below. Nor was the photographer trained in the study of religion as a cultural and social enquiry, though she was highly trained in photographic and other visual techniques. That she had certain assumptions was of course unavoidable. What of these? It is known that those highly trained in other skills, such as interviewing, nevertheless have difficulty in keeping out relatively unconsidered assumptions about what counts as religion. The initiators of the work (the writer, and colleagues Mrs. U. King and Mr. W. Weaver) encouraged discuss- ion of this matter, and suggested that while the field of exploration was in a general way to be "religion", our interest lay basically in whatever human realities appeared to be of visual interest to a person skilled in visual perceptions. The photographer was simply asked to explore whatever she found visually interesting as a photographer, in the general area of religion. This latter was first identified by means of buildings with a specialist function to which it seemed difficult to refer in any other way. This may perhaps be described as a common-sense, though not a naïve, working pre-supposition. The subject was then pursued by following up the activities of people associated with the buildings, whether inside them or outside them. Apart from initial attention to the buildings themselves, which was not uninstructive, the main areas explored may be described most simply as Christian (Anglican), Hindu, Jewish (Reformed) and West Indian (Carnival). The resultant photographic collection includes however, among much more obviously “religious” subjects, shots of car-parks, policemen, streets, and even a drainpipe. This indicates that the problem of any conscious limitation of the subject-matter in a prejudicial way was overcome by the photographer to a most satisfying degree. It would be both boring and impertinent to attempt to attempt to summarise the contents of nearly two thousand photographs in mere words! However, apart from the sheer mass of informative detail which they contain, it is possible to indicate some of the ways in which they prove to be suggestive in principle.

Firstly, an uncharted exploration of this kind certainly makes forceful suggestions for more detailed lines of enquiry. (This is one of the research functions mentioned later.) To illustrate, one might give some idea of the subject-matter pursued in terms of fairly pedestrian though not unfair titles for various series of photographs, e.g. Jewish wedding, Jewish Sabbath, Anglican Communion service, Anglican visiting with communion for the sick, Anglican baptism, (Hindu) Dussehra, West Indian carnival. But this verbally expressed selection would illustrate the limited parameters of many popular assumptions about religion, shared perhaps by some of those photographed (some of whom made their own suggestions about what ought to be photographed). Ultimately however these parameters are not adequate to contain the irresistible scope of photography. For example, three out of four communities explored led unavoidably to the use of film on what can only be described as theatre. This included the celebration of Dussehra (enacting the Rama-Sita epic), rehearsals for the production of a religious play by some of the Anglicans, and a striking outdoor performance of feigned drunkenness in the context of the West Indian carnival. In the case of the latter the ever-tightening circle of onlookers seemed to suggest both a corporate involvement in the drama and a representative function on the part of the actor. But, recalling that more central religious rituals, such as the Anglican communion, have also been described in terms of drama, we are confronted with an unclear area of religious action which has not been adequately considered in the text-books. How many writers on comparative religion have used the category of drama in their analyses?

A second suggestive feature is the difficulty of being precise about which people in the photographs are participants and which are not. Two sequences show these to be inextricably mingled. In the case of the carnival it is unsurprising because it takes place out of doors and includes a procession. Whereas the specialist in religion might have concentrated on the main movements of the carnival and the procession on a step by step basis, the visual exploration draws attention to the untidy mêlée of persons on both sides of the rather half-hearted demarcation lines behind which performances were enacted. The overlapping of participants, that is people presumed to be participating in a religious event, and others who would perhaps count as outsiders, is strongly represented also in a sequence relating to an Anglican harvest festival. This shows the sale of harvest festival offerings in a public house, because their traditional destination as gifts had ceased to be practical, where others were drinking beer and playing billiards.

This event, which has probably not previously been charted in the history of Christianity, clearly raises the question, visually, as to just who is involved in the "religious" activities. If the theory of religion sometimes refers to "participants" in religious activities, the borderline between participants and others in such a case is very hard to determine. Thus the visual exploration ran interestingly beyond the boundaries which a restricted view of religion might have set. A naïve view of "participants" is shown to be inadequate.

Thirdly, a most important suggestive feature is what might be called the physical extension of the data. A photographer is interested, at least in part, in physical expressions and positions, and in this respect a whole range of data emerged which are not otherwise adequately documented in the historical or comparative study of religions. In part this feature of the materials is analogous to the valuable illustrative impact of photography referred to at the outset. Yet it is such a striking characteristic, when a moderately large number of photographs are seen without any dominating text, that it calls for further comment. The problem, for verbal documentation, lies in the fact that nuances of expression and position can only be described with such a cumbersome detour of language that they are thereby lost again. The opportunity, for photographic documentation, is that such matters can be extensively captured and displayed and their import briefly summarised. There are sufficient cases within the materials assembled, for example, to suggest that an account of the attitudes of people engaged in a ritual act could be controlled in part by a systematic photographic survey of their appearance. This potential refinement of method will be elaborated further below. The point to note at present is that there takes place through photographic exploration an extension into the physicality of religious behaviour which can scarcely be documented by any other means.

To summarise, for purposes of preservation negatives or photographs are kept in the order in which they were taken, and separated under simple subject headings and dates and locations: Anglican baptism, etc.. Yet to be confronted with several overlapping subjects in close proximity leads to an upsurge of questions about the theoretical categorisation of religious phenomena. Given this initial statement of a few selected stimuli afforded by photograph work which has in fact taken place, it may be helpful now to state more systematically the functions which photography might have in the study of religion.

Photography as a tool

A recent article by David Reed has summarized and commented upon the uses of photography in the social sciences as "a tool, no more".[4] It will be argued later that photography could be more than merely a subordinate tool in the study of religion, and that it could indeed become an integral part of the characterization of the data under

[4] Reed, D. "The Use of Photography in Sociological Research " in: *The British Journal of Photography* 9, July 1976. Cf. also W.T. Austin's "Can Photography Aid the Sociologist?" in: *The British Journal of Photography* 21, May 1976,

study. First of all however, Reed's argument is assumed. The uses which he considered will now be set out again briefly, though with a little more differentiation (Reed discussed four uses, while six are given here), and with special reference to religion.

(i) The first use of photographic work is as a focus for the definition of research questions. A series of photographs of, say, a harvest festival, concretises the abstract knowledge that there are such things as harvest festivals and demands reflection on a variety of contextual factors. A specific set of offerings, perhaps partly agricultural and partly industrial, but brought by photographically visible, real people, raises questions about the daily occupations of those taking part, which specific industry or even which factory they work in, etc.. How then does the involvement in this particular ritual relate to domicile, place of work, social status, etc.? What part does it play in forming an attitude towards employment? How does it relate to the other features of the religious or religiously coloured world-view of those taking part? The use of photography as a focus for the development of such questions is perhaps fairly obvious, and, one might say, it is possible to think of the questions anyway. Yet in practice it is highly stimulating, especially when strong impressions are created by individual photographs and these are responded to by more than one person.

(ii) The second use is in the preparation or orientation of research students. (This is closely related to the first.) A well-ordered sequence of photographs can provide preliminary acquaintance with the data to be studied in a way which goes far beyond verbal descriptions. Visual information easily brings out unexpected ignorance on the part of well-educated researchers. If what is visible cannot be commented on with reasonable accuracy, then clearly some additional preparation is required. Moreover, preliminary acquaintance through photography dramatically reduces the sense of strangeness in an otherwise unfamiliar building and among unknown people. This in turn reduces the tendency for an observer's presence to affect the behaviour of the observed. The relevance of this to religious occasions, some of which, like the Hindu Dussehra, are repeated, but not frequently, is obvious.

(iii) The third use is as an aid in the recall of observations. At this level the work needs to be carried out in conjunction with a planned series of observations and then used to correct or supplement resultant description. This use may include the elementary illustrative function referred to at the outset, but could reach a new sophistication as a detailed and systematic checking technique for many aspects of what is observed: numbers, positions, nature of clothing and various articles, etc.. This use is relevant to any work in social science, including the study of religions.

(iv) The fourth use is to provide "inventories", e.g. by photographing the contents of an entire room for subsequent analsyis. This use is related to the last, but represents a more specialized attitude to the evidence of artefacts. (Reed referred to the contents of a number of houses as providing evidence in sociological study.) As to religion in particular, the method is of value in gaining evidence of the domestic content of religion by itemizing religious paraphernalia, and assessing its position in the household. It could also be used for religious buildings.

(v) The fifth use is to obtain sequentially recorded data. This could be seen as a specialized sub-use of (iii) above, namely as an aid to recall. However it has the specific advantage of being more amenable than moving film to step-by-step analysis, and is particularly relevant to the study of ritual (see further below).

(vi) The sixth use is as an aid to interviewing technique. Here the interviewee is asked to comment on a photograph, instead of replying to a question. If the photograph is taken from the known field of experience of the interviewee, this technique clearly gets over the problem of the importation of alien concepts in the formulation of questions. Admittedly, even interviews conducted in this way can retain a certain artificiality and still represent a slightly rigged version of reality. Some observers will always prefer to elicit information in circumstances which do not seem to the participant interviewed to be an interview at all, but even at the level of unstructured enquiry photographs may be equally useful in eliciting unprejudiced verbalisations.

Photography and the characterisation of religion

The above uses were spelled out on the basis of Reed's discussion, which assumes that photography is essentially a tool and that the main application of it is in terms of sociological explanation. For example a sequence of photographs may be used to analyse the underlying social structure of a group, but the photography itself is subordinate to the explanation. This sounds plausible enough. However, an important stage in the general study of religion, which falls at least in part within the social sciences, is the initial characterisation of data. This needs to be stressed because quite often some form of sociological or theological interpretation or explanation runs on ahead of what has been adequately observed. Some writers have referred to this initial step in the study of religion as "the phenomenology of religion" but the term has a confused and chequered history.[5] Hence the term "characterisation" is preferred here, and it is intended to have a more or less technical meaning. It refers to the adequately summarised presentation of selected data in some part of the field for religion. This activity is quite indispensable in the study of religion because of the sheer extent of the data. For example, Anglican baptisms are too numerous for all of them to be studied. Only selected ones can be observed. Yet there are occasions when wider studies of religious ritual need to refer to "Anglican baptisms". Hence there is a need for a reliable "characterisation" of Anglican baptism which has been checked off by the usual criteria of the "phenomenological" study of religion (i.e. it does not subvert in advance the understanding of the matter which the participants themselves maintain, and at the same time it is knowable in principle by other observers). The same applies to numerous other religious rituals which are in principle repeatable though infinitely varied in their particulars. The first

[5] Cf. The introduction to the present writer's *Comparative Religion*, Newton Abbott 1972 etc., and also E. Sharpe's Comparative Religion, London 1976.

task of the researcher into religion is therefore adequately to characterise data so that they can be assimilated and appraised within the wider context of study.

But in what should such a characterisation consist? In the case of historical data one can only have recourse to documents and to the evidence of archaeology. But in the case of living religions there are innumerable opportunities to observe the data. While audial recordings and moving film cannot easily be reproduced in an integrated permanent characterisation of data useful to other researchers, it does seem possible to use photography in this way. At this level it is not merely a tool but directly provides a component part in the “characterisation”.

The example of Anglican baptism may be taken as a widely known rite, little studied by anthropologists. How indeed can it be characterized? It is not enough to refer to a published form of service, though that must be part of the whole. Even if published alternative forms of service are left aside there is a range of individual variations and “mistakes” on the part of the officiants and other participants, and these all form part of the reality. Nor is it a question of words alone, for there is an established range of actions to consider. Quite apart from the more or less formally established sequence of words and actions, including variations, there is also the question of the self-consciousness of the participants. How do they themselves inwardly understand what is being said and done? This can only be ascertained through interviews shortly after the event, but it represents an important second level of information about belief and attitude relevant to the characterisation of Anglican baptisms. The natural complement to this in terms of actions can only be a photographic sequence. Such a sequence displays (as the recent work shows) factual aspects of an Anglican baptism which would appear neither in the form of service nor in the personal accounts of participants. These include matters of space and position, light, timing, size of font, expression and gesture, nature of clothing, and so on. It is important to notice that reception of such data into an integrated characterisation does not in itself contravene the self-understanding of the participants. It does not itself import explanations which would subvert the understanding which those in the baptism have of it themselves. The main criterion of the “phenomenological” study of religion would be met. This integrated study of a baptism would need to be repeated several times and from the raw data a “characterisation” would then be abstracted. This would then be expected to form a stable guide in any subsequent investigations, or in any attempt to incorporate Anglican baptisms in a wider theory of religion or in sociological explanations of religion. Naturally the characterisation itself would be subject to modification if for some reason it later proved to be untypical, but it would only be modified by reference to actual cases of Anglican baptism investigated along the lines mentioned above.

The move from “characterisation” to theory-building or explanation is not easy to define precisely. Frequently theory seems to run on beyond the adequate characterization of data, while conversely what seem to be attempts to characterise are sometimes distorted by unjustifiable theoretical imports. It is indeed not easy to determine just how far a characterisation of Anglican baptisms can go before drifting significantly beyond the self-understanding of those involved, and hence turning into something else. However in so far as Anglican baptism is a ritual a further stratification can be proposed which might be deemed to fall within the initial characterisation. A recent article by T. Lawson has attempted to analyse "the" Anglican baptism in terms of recent linguistic theory.[6] Whatever the success of the detailed analysis (and Lawson's own thesis claims not to be dependent on this) the importance of the essay lies in its argument that ritual should be seen as a series of steps which have an internal logic, like a grammar. The participant in a baptism rite need not be aware of this any more than a speaker of a language needs to understand Chomsky in order to be able to speak. Yet, it might be argued, such analysis would also not significantly threaten or subvert his ability to perform the ritual, or to speak the language. As far as the observer is concerned, analysis of this kind might help to stabilise and regularise our understanding of what is being done. The argument is that analysis in terms of a model like that used in linguistics may be used to complement an "official" religious account of the various phases in the ritual. Needless to say, a third view of the phasing of the ritual could be elicited from interviews with the participants. To these three, a fourth might be added, namely, a photographic one. These four analyses would be complementary to each other. The sequential phasing achieved by the various routes might prove to be mutually reinforcing, or indeed the one might turn out to be a corrective to the other. The strength of photographic sequences would lie in (i) their relative independence of verbalised sequences, whether drawn from the written liturgy or from interviews, combined with (ii) their relentless closeness to movements which in reality took place and which are visually recorded. It would be the task of the photographer, as an expert in visual impressions, to provide spaced sequences (not just moving film) for several cases of Anglican baptism. These would provide a basis for an articulated visual reception of what takes place in the rite which could then be built into the integrated characterisation as a whole.

Although the work done so far has only been exploratory in nature, it has certainly suggested that photography ought to be used more systematically in the study of religion. It should not be confined to casual illustration, nor should it be seen merely as a tool subservient to the work of sociological explanation. Quite apart from its functions *within* the research process, there is a strong case for expecting that photography could provide a systematic factual component in the scientific characterisation of religious behaviour.

[6] E. Thomas Lawson, 1976. "Ritual as Language" in: *Religion* Volume 6/2, 123-139.