Faith and suburbia: secularisation, modernity and the changing geographies of religion in London’s suburbs

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Spectacular new religious buildings on London’s outskirts are often cited as evidence of London’s multicultural diversity. However, the suburban location of these new buildings is usually dismissed as incongruous, drawing on familiar tropes of the suburbs as sites of modernisation, materialism and secularism. This paper uses this assumed incongruity to address the complexity of relationships between religion and suburban space by tracing the significance of religion in changing suburban geographies through a focus on London’s suburbs. The paper begins with a critique of the absence of religion in suburban studies, which emphasise secularisation and homogeneity. The rediscovery of the creative potential of the suburbs gives little consideration to religious creativity. Similarly recent work on diasporas and religion have little to say about the significance of the suburban. Our paper uses three case studies, of different faith groups, from North and West London to explore three distinctive articulations of the relationship between religion and suburban space that we call ‘semi-detached faith’, ‘edge-city faith’ and ‘ethnoburb faith’. These examples are not intended as ideal types but as analytical categories that open up the relationships between space, faith and mobilities. We argue there is a need to more carefully theorise the ways in which faith communities have engaged with the challenges of suburban geographies including processes of secularisation and suggest that the study of faith in suburbia offers new ways of thinking about the complexity of suburban space.

Key words religion; suburbs; modernity; secularisation; multiculturalism; London

Introduction: faith and suburbia

Approaching London on the M4 motorway, just past the exits for Heathrow, your eye may be caught by the glint of sunlight off a large golden dome, perhaps a kilometre to the north. You drive on for five minutes and just as the final elevated section of the motorway descends into Chiswick, you catch sight of another dome, rather closer, surrounded by trees, this time pointed, blue, covered in golden stars and topped with a large ornamental cross. These two buildings, the Sikh Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha in Southall, and the Cathedral of the Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God and Holy Royal Martyrs in Chiswick (better known as the Russian Orthodox Cathedral) are two prominent examples in a recent wave of construction of spectacular religious buildings around London. The most famous of these is perhaps the Neasden Hindu temple or Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, just off the North Circular Road, close to Wembley stadium and the Ikea superstore. Other prominent examples include the Mohammadi Park Mosque in Northolt, and the Jain temple at Potter’s Bar (see Figure 1).¹

These buildings are often used as signifiers of what is now a rather familiar story of the development of London as an extraordinarily diverse multicultural city. However, what is less often reflected on is the relationship between these sites and their suburban location. Most commentators simply point to the incongruity of spectacular and ‘exotic’ architecture in mundane suburban spaces. Thus in August 1995 when the Swaminarayan Hindu temple was opened in Neasden, headline writers vied to express the incongruity of ‘Neasden’s Taj Mahal’ or the ‘Temple to the gods of NW10’, emphasising the ‘extraordinary reality’ of a Hindu temple built among the ‘cut-price, crinkly tin, shopping sheds’ and ‘grim-grey, pebble-dashed suburban streets’ (The Guardian and The Independent 28 July 1995).

This supposed incongruity between the sacred and the suburban can also be seen in the response to these same places in the 1930s, the time of the great expansion of ‘semi-detached London’ (Jackson 1991). Late May 1934 saw a run of performances of T.S. Park Mosque in Northolt, and the Jain temple at Potter’s Bar (see Figure 1).¹

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Eliot’s pageant play *The Rock* at the Sadlers’ Wells Theatre in central London (Eliot 1934). *The Rock* was written after Eliot’s conversion to Anglicanism and was part of a fund-raising initiative in support of the ‘Forty-Five Churches Fund’, a campaign to combat the secularisation of mid-twentieth-century London, particularly its new suburban districts (see Ellis 1991). *The Rock* directly addressed the nature of suburban life and its supposed alienation from organised Christianity:

> I journeyed to the suburbs, and there I was told:
> We toil for six days, on the seventh we must motor
> To Hindhead, or Maidenhead.
> If the weather is foul we stay at home and read the papers. (Eliot 1934, 8)

In the land of lobelias and tennis flannels
The rabbit shall burrow and the thorn revisit,
The nettle shall flourish on the gravel court,
And the wind shall say, ‘Here were decent godless people: Their only monument the asphalt road And a thousand lost golf balls.’ (Eliot 1934, 30)

*The Rock* repeatedly castigates the new 1930s suburbia as a space beyond faith, of godless people ‘dispersed on ribbon roads, where no man [sic] knows nor cares who is his neighbour’ (Eliot 1934, 30). Eliot’s conflation of modernisation, materialism and secularisation corresponds closely with dominant readings of twentieth-century suburbia, in London and more generally. His fears about the secular future of suburban society also draw upon the same sense of
incongruity reflected in the response to the new religious landscapes of twenty-first-century London.

This paper uses this supposed incongruity as a starting point to address the complexity of the relationships between religion and suburban space. Rather than simply counterposing the spectacular and the mundane, or the spiritual and the material, we examine the significance of religion in changing urban geographies. Our focus, as indicated by the introductory discussion, is on London, arguably the place where mass suburbanisation began, and the site of unprecedented suburban growth between the mid-nineteenth century and the Second World War (see Gilbert 2010; Jackson 1991). In the post-war period, suburban London was a significant site of post-imperial migrations. The experience of cultural transformation, in well-known examples like the South-Asian ‘ethnoburb’ of Southall, but also much more generally across suburban London, has disrupted a conventional reading of migration and cultural change that treated suburbia as an end-point in processes of assimilation (Li 2006, 2009). London’s suburbs have become important points in transnational networks, spiritual as well as social and economic.

There are two lines of argument that run through this paper. The first of these is about the nature of suburbia. Vaughan et al. have recently claimed that beyond the most basic and perfunctory of definitions of suburbs (perhaps as parts of a larger functional urban unit, but located beyond the central core of the city) it is far from clear what is meant by the term ‘suburb’, ‘or indeed, whether it can be thought to possess meaning at all’ (2009, 475). They argue that too often ‘the language of the suburban floats free from the suburban built environment’ pointing to an ‘under-theorization and over-representation’ of suburban space (2009, 475, 477). The position presented here has some sympathy with this; we do not treat suburban space as a simple container or backdrop, nor are we working with a predefined set of assumptions about the nature of the suburban. Instead we focus on the specificity and intricacy of the relationships between different suburban built environments, religious organisations and practices. This study, we argue, is part of a broader task directed towards understanding the complexity of suburban geographies, not just in terms of built form as for Vaughan et al., but also in forms of material cultures, organisation, practice, belief and feeling. The task is not merely to chart changes in the forms of religion that take place in outer London, but to think about what they can tell us about the nature of suburbs and the suburban condition.

The second theme that runs through the paper is about the relationship between suburbs, religious belief and secularism. The anxiety that underpinned Eliot’s response to 1930s outer London was part of a wider understanding of suburbia as a key element in the decline of religious attendance and organisation in Britain. His references to golf and motoring echo wider tropes that cast suburbia as an environment that inculcated more materialistic and privatised lives, and a consequent loss of both spiritual belief and communal activity. There has been a recent flourishing of research on geographies of religion, spirituality and belief, reanimating study of the relationship between religion and space (Dewsbury and Cloke 2009; Holloway and Valins 2002; Kong 2010; Olsen and Silvey 2006; Proctor 2006; Yorgason and della Dora 2009). Some of this recent work in geography challenges the inevitability of secularisation, building upon wider debates within the sociology of religion. José Casanova (1994), for example, has convincingly deconstructed the notion of a singular modernising process of secularisation, through a theorisation of the process that draws attention to social differentiation and the ‘privatisation’ of religious faith, as well as simple notions of religious decline. Casanova’s emphases on complexity, and particularly on the shifting boundaries between the public and private expressions of religious identity, directly provoke questions about the spatiality of religion and secularism. Recent work explores how spaces are actively produced as secular (Beaumont and Baker 2011; Gökarıskel 2009; Howe 2009; Wilford 2009), and the significance of material cultures in the making of ‘sacred space out of place’ (della Dora 2009, 225; see also Tolia-Kelly 2004).

However, this turn towards taking religion more seriously has had limited influence on what might be described as traditional mainstream sub-disciplines; for example, work on religion in the city has yet to impact much on urban geography more generally. As Wilford suggests, geographies of religion have tended to work at a ‘finer scale’ of specific religious buildings, neighbourhoods and local practices rather than to think about the significance of religion in wider debates about the character of, for example, urban or indeed suburban space (Wilford 2010). Wilford is particularly concerned that this narrow focus displaces consideration of bigger issues such as the significance of the secular and processes of secularisation. We argue here that suburban religion in London and beyond has been shaped by an intense, explicit and complex relationship with secularisation, in which the characteristics of suburbia are not simply a kind of externalised, secularising environment, but rather are active elements drawn upon in the making of both the spiritual and the secular.

The paper has two main sections. In the following section we examine the ways the relationship between religion and suburbia has been understood in two key fields of work. We focus on the treatment and often
the absence of discussion about religion and suburbia in both suburban studies, and in approaches to diasporic cultures. Certainly in British suburban studies there has been a pervasive sense of the marginality of religion to suburban life, and an implicit acceptance of the inevitability of secularisation. Although religion has been more visible in studies of diasporic cultures, there has been both a tendency to treat religion as a marker of ethnic difference rather than to study beliefs and practices, and very little work that has thought about the distinctiveness of suburban diasporic faith. The second main section of the paper turns to think about specific geographies of suburban faith in London. The section considers three distinctive articulations of the relationship between religion and suburban space that we call ‘semi-detached faith’, ‘edge-city faith’ and ‘ethnoburb faith’; these are intended not as fixed ideal-types, but as analytical categories that allow us to approach the complexity of suburban space, by opening up the relationships between space, faith and mobilities. The section is focused on detailed readings of three suburban faith spaces, deliberately juxtaposing different faiths (Anglican Christianity, Islam and Jainism) and covering different time-periods of suburban development. What we draw from this analysis are not just differences of experience, but also common themes in the engagement of different faith communities with suburban space. We explore suburban hybridity, as manifested in the buildings, practices and material culture of these faith spaces, and different specific responses to secularisation. We also address the ways that each combines a very particular response to their immediate suburban locations with positioning in wider metropolitan or transnational networks.

Religion and suburban space

Suburbs and secularisation

If for nineteenth-century critics and commentators, industrial urbanisation was often described as the geographical process threatening organised religion in Western societies, by the mid-twentieth century suburbia was regarded as a key site of secularisation. The classic secularisation thesis draws on both Weber and Durkheim in suggesting that modernisation causes social dislocation, the erosion of traditional forms of authority and ritual, and consequently leads to the decline of religion as a significant feature of public life (Garnett et al. 2007; Taylor 2007). In writings about the condition of England in the nineteenth century, urbanisation was identified as both locus and partial cause of the loss of (Christian) faith, but by the twentieth century this was an increasingly common response to the suburbs and suburban life. In the work of Lewis Mumford, mass suburbia represented the ‘anti-city’, where connections with all forms of challenge or higher calling were lost to the ‘bland ritual of competitive spending’ and where life became ‘based on a childish view of the world, in which reality was sacrificed to the pleasure principle’ (1966, 563). Such ‘moral geographies’ of suburbia cut across important international differences both in suburban form and in the relative success of religious faiths in the twentieth century. A long-running strand of analysis of suburbia developed this theme of a materialistic, leisure-obsessed environment to emphasise its antipathy to spiritual life.

Writing in 1909 on The condition of England, the liberal commentator Charles Masterman identified the ravages made on organised religion by the open indifference seemingly built into an Edwardian suburbia of ‘Sunday cyclers’ and ‘Sunday music’ (1909, 87–8). In the United States there was a different inflection to the idea that suburban culture was a corrosive influence on faith. Many sociologists, particularly in the post-war decades, held almost as given that migration into suburbia and exposure to its consumerist culture would inevitably lead to a decline in traditional religion. More recent accounts of American suburban history, such as Kenneth Jackson’s Crabgrass frontier (1985), Robert Fishman’s Bourgeois utopias (1987) and John Palen’s The suburbs (1995), have generally written religion out of their story completely. This shows the power of the suburban secularisation narrative, and the marginalisation of the study of religion in (sub)urban studies. In accounts that have generally sought to emphasise the materialistic, domesticated and atomistic nature of suburban society, the power of religious association has often been ignored or downplayed, despite the continuing manifest success of organised religion in many American suburbs (Dochuk 2003).

Those American sociologists who did look directly at suburban religion took a rather different line. In both Will Herberg’s Protestant, Catholic, Jew (1955), a sociological study of religion in mid-century America, and in William H. Whyte’s famous The organization man (1956), a sociology of the new American middle classes, what we find are claims about a ‘hollowing out’ of religion, a decline not necessarily in attendance at churches and synagogues, but in the depth of spiritual belief and full participation in ritual and liturgy. Writing on the ‘church of suburbia’, Whyte identified a move towards what he described as a ‘more socially useful church’ among both Protestant and Catholic congregations. This ‘socially useful church’ meant not that the mission of the church was directed towards social problems but that the church served a social function in providing focus in a world of what Whyte called ‘transients’ (i.e. new suburban dwellers):
What the transients want, most urgently, in short, is a sense of community – and they are coming to care far less than their elders about matters of doctrine that might get in the way. For some people, the result may be far too secular, but … what is the alternative? (Whyte 1956, 351)

In Britain the decline in organised Christianity, particularly as expressed in attendance at Anglican, Catholic and Methodist churches, has been much more dramatic, with less than one in ten of the British population attending church by the end of the twentieth century (Bruce 2002, 326; Christian Research 2008). For many the movement to new suburbs in Britain created not so much a ‘hollowing out’ of organised religion as close to its wholesale abandonment. Writing explicitly on the challenges facing suburban churches, Brown has recently suggested that the ‘transient, anonymous and unrooted nature of suburban life’ has facilitated ‘a society with only the thinnest understanding of obligation and duty’, and has entrenched ‘social atomization’ (Brown 2009, 66).

Religion and the new suburban studies

These recent perspectives fit into a remarkably consistent intellectual and academic response to suburbia from the late nineteenth century onwards that certainly includes Masterman, Eliot and Mumford. This view treats suburbia as monolithic, monotonous and materialistic, the locus of petty lives of narrow, truncated perspectives (Carey 1992). Recent work in what can be described as ‘new suburban studies’ has challenged some of the most common stereotypes of the suburbs, particularly those associated with what Dolores Hayden (2003) has described as the mass-produced ‘sicom’ suburbs of the twentieth century (see Gilbert and Preston 2003). An early strand re-evaluated the architectural landscapes of suburbia. Before the better-known Learning from Las Vegas (1977), Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi sought Learning from Levittown (1970). In Britain, Oliver, Davis and Bentley’s brilliant polemic Dunroamin (1981) rescued the suburban semi-detached house from the condescension of history. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a more developed response to the social and cultural geographies of suburbia. A key statement of this re-evaluation of the suburban was Roger Silverstone’s introduction to Visions of suburbia (1997). Silverstone calls for a shift in the study of suburbia away from the straight-jacketing perspectives of social modernisation and mass society, towards an emphasis on suburban modernity. Removed from standard preconceptions, suburbia is treated, at least potentially, as a site of creativity, agency, social innovation, flexibility and complexity.

Religion rarely gets much of an explicit mention in this work, and indeed is still sometimes treated simply as a marker of suburban narrowness and conformity. This is particularly so in cultural studies approaches to suburbia, often fixated with what McAlister (2008) has described as the ‘narrative inversion of suburban morality’ – i.e. with authors and film-makers that represent a dark and amoral underside to a suburban life riddled with hypocrisy. This response is in fact almost as old as the modern suburbs themselves, and can be seen as one particular version of the association between suburbia and materialism – where the traditional surface values (including organised religion) are being eaten away by avarice and desire. The shift from treating suburbs as modernisation to the analysis of suburban modernity undermines this approach, and in turn threatens any simple deployment of secularisation as part of a wider modernisation necessarily associated with the spread of suburban materialism.

A feature of new writings on suburbia has been a re-evaluation of the creative potential of consumer and popular culture recognising the unexpected richness of everyday activity and the seemingly ordinary (see Clarke 1999). Very rarely this analysis has been extended to think of the connections between religion and suburban culture. Diamond (2000 2002), in his work on the history of consumerism and suburban Orthodox Jews, calls into question the standard antinomy of belief and consumer culture that runs through much discussion of secularisation. His study shows how, in the North American Orthodox Jewish context at least, religious consumerism ‘represents an important way in which suburban commercialism and religious traditionalism fuse into a single idea’ (2002, 503). Diamond discusses the development of kosher haute cuisine restaurants, kosher pizza parlours and boutiques selling Orthodox youth fashions in American and Canadian suburbs from the 1980s and 1990s onwards. What was important was that while this might have looked very much like secularisation, the pattern of consumption remained a religious act. Diamond’s model is not the conventional narrative of swamping of religious identity by material culture, but of adaptation and indeed strengthening of religious communities through the development of a distinctive suburban culture (see also Ochs 2009).

Recent work in what might broadly be termed the American tradition of congregational studies has explored the new suburban contexts of Christian organisations. Mobility, transience and the geographical attenuation of community are treated as challenging influences on the nature of religious organisation, rather than inevitably secularising forces. Eisland’s (2000) study of urban restructuring and religious ecology in a ‘southern exurb’ on the outskirts of Atlanta, and Paul Numrich’s (2000) discussion of congregations in an ‘edge-city technoburb’ in Naperville, Illinois, trace the specific ways that mobile societies present challenges for traditional forms of localised
Christian congregations. Much of this work has focused on the development of suburban megachurches (Connell 2005; Warf and Winsberg 2010). As Wilford (2010) shows in his study of Saddleback, Orange County, California, the organisational strategies of such megachurches are an active response to the character of contemporary suburbia and exurbia. Megachurches are more than just spiritual equivalents of suburban shopping malls, pulling car-commuting worshippers into giant churches surrounded by vast parking lots; they also work with the grain of new suburbia in other ways, through ‘demographically sensitive’ church services, small groups in homes, parks, coffee shops and workplaces, and continuously updated outreach programs’ (Wilford 2010, 341). Such megachurches are often engaged with forms of conservative politics or globalising evangelical missions, but Wilford argues that these are used ‘explicitly to engage the local postsuburban narratives of identity formation and self-fulfilment that are so salient to their targeted local demographics’ (2010, 341).

Their visibility, economic wealth and often aggressive evangelism make such megachurches the most apparent expressions of suburban religion, particularly in the USA, but there are other forms of religious response to the suburban condition, particularly in those faiths associated with diasporic movements and cultures.

**Diasporas, religion and suburban spaces**

Another emphasis of new suburban studies has questioned uncritical assumptions about their cultural homogeneity, particularly in terms of racial and ethnic identity (Clapson 2003; Nicolaides 2004). Kruse and Sugrue identify the demonstration of suburban social diversity as a key element of the ‘new suburban history’ (2006, 8). A dominant image of suburbia as a racially homogeneous ‘white’ space, a viable generalisation for mid-twentieth-century America, now does no justice to its complex social geographies. While twentieth-century African American migration to the northern cities of the USA was an influence on ‘white flight’ to the suburbs, from the 1960s onwards there was a significant movement of the black population into suburbia (Wiese 2004). More generally, by 2000 racial and ethnic minorities made up over one-quarter of the suburban population in the 100 largest metropolitan areas of the United States, with similar diversity in the suburbs of Canadian, Australian and British cities.

Greater London has particularly complex geographies of ethnicity and religious identity, which are changing rapidly in the twenty-first century (Vertovec 2007). The 2001 Census showed that the most religiously diverse local authority in the UK was the borough of Harrow in the London suburbs (religious diversity index of 0.62), with four other outer London boroughs, Brent, Redbridge, Barnet and Ealing also having high religious diversity (defined as scores of 0.50 or higher) (Office of National Statistics 2006). Nonetheless the sense of suburbs as beyond multiculturalism retains some power both in popular culture and as a focus for opposition to the construction of new non-Christian places of worship. In Britain such opposition has drawn upon racialised notions of place that juxtapose a ‘multicultural’ inner city with an imagined ‘white, English’ suburb (Nayak 2010). Eade (1993) describes the vigorous local campaign mounted against the Dahwoodi Bohra mosque in Northolt that mobilised imaginaries of a ‘garden suburb’ and constructed the mosque as ‘an alien development’ (see also Crinson 2002; Naylor and Ryan 2002).

An important strand of work has recognised the diversity of suburbs by repositioning them in networks of migration and transnational culture. The best-known analysis of this is Li’s (2006 2009) identification of ‘ethnoburbs’ in North America and Pacific Rim countries. These are suburbs with significant concentrations of new and second/third generation migrant populations that are much more clearly integrated into transnational networks than with their immediate metropolis. The existence of ethnoburbs highlights the limitations of older orthodoxies of social geography, particularly those that drew upon a simple reading of Chicago School sociology in identifying cities as primary centres for migration and suburbs as secondary sites of subsequent cultural assimilation (Harris and Lewis 1998). Work on the transnational or diasporic dimensions of suburbia has focused much more on economic and cultural networks than on the impact on religion, while studies of religion and ‘new’ migration have tended to remain focused on the urban. In the USA there is a strong tradition of city-based in-depth ethnographic studies of different religious communities drawing on the established traditions of congregational studies (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Leonard et al. 2005; Levitt 2007; Warner and Wittner 1998). These studies develop familiar themes in migration studies. They ask how religious communities adapt and develop their practices; how faith is transmitted to the second generation, particularly when worship remains in the parental first language; how gender roles change in migration; and discuss the difficulties of securing premises and religious leaders. Ebaugh and Chafetz’s study of Houston echoes Peach and Gale’s (2003) work on the establishment of new migrant religious spaces in urban Britain in its emphasis on the use of temporary and provisional premises, such as disused office, factory or warehouse buildings, or in some cases the sharing of premises between migrant and more established religious communities with ‘parallel’ congregations attending services in different languages.
Such urban immigrant religious institutions often take on an important role as a community centre or ‘immigrant hub’ (Ley 2008), providing services and networks for new migrants and sometimes working actively with state agencies to aid the integration of migrants.

Recently there have been calls for a shift from the study of gateway cities to ‘non-conventional places like suburbs’, and some studies of specifically suburban experiences of diaporic religion (Marquardt 2005; Mehta 2004; Vasquez 2005, 234). For example, in the US Mehta (2004) describes an emerging suburban landscape of Hindu temples in Northern California, while Waghorne (1999) studies the Sri Siva-Vishnu temple in the ‘split-level world’ of suburban Washington DC. In Auckland, New Zealand, Friesen et al. (2005) detail ‘retail and religious landscapes’ (including a former church that is now a mosque) in their discussion of ‘spiced up Sandringham’. In Canada, analysis of new immigrant religious buildings in the suburbs (Germain and Gagnon 2003; Hoernig 2006; Isin and Siemiatycki 2002) suggest the ways that zoning laws can work to encourage the development of new religious sites in industrial and retail areas where parking can be provided and noise disturbance avoided (although see Hackworth and Stein 2011 for examples where religious institutions come into conflict with economic development). Other studies have also considered the changing demographics of suburban Christian churches and their adaption to incorporate new migrant groups (Marquardt 2005; Watson 2009).

In London, the most prominent forms of new suburban religion relate to the suburban geography of the South Asian population reflecting the patterning of early post-war reception and employment opportunities, and the significance of home ownership for these groups (Peach 2006). Most notable is Southall, one of the largest centres of the South Asian diaspora. It is also in many ways an unexceptional outer London suburb, characterised by relatively low-density (certainly by inner London standards) Edwardian and inter-war housing, and several substantial parks; there are four golf courses within three miles of central Southall. Southall might rightly be identified as a London variant of an ‘ethnoburb’, and has been variously described as an ‘ethnoscape’ (Nasser 2003), ‘metropolitan borderland’ (Nasser 2006) and a ‘BrAsian suburb’ (Huq 2006). Southall has a dense cluster of Hindu, Sikh and Islamic religious buildings that range from early conversions of redundant Christian churches, industrial premises and social clubs, through more functional purpose-built temples, gurdwaras and mosques, to the spectacular Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara. Such buildings are powerful expressions of Southall’s position in transnational networks – at the opening ceremony of the £17m Gurdwara, Sant Mann Singh who was flown in from the Punjab, celebrated ‘a temple second only to the Golden Temple in Amritsar’ (cited in Singh 2006).

By contrast other new diaspora religious buildings around London are not located within a settled migrant religious community but are a function of the opportunities of the suburban or peri-urban fringe for building new and expansive religious buildings. The Swaminarayan Temple in Neasden was refused planning permission in the more affluent suburb of Harrow before gaining a vacant industrial site in the ‘suburb’s suburb’ of Neasden (The Independent 17 August 1985, cited by Zavos 2009, 886). Similarly the Mohammadi Park Mosque in Northolt occupies a disused canal-side warehouse site after it was displaced from its previous premises in a former Jewish youth club in the neighbouring suburb of Ealing. Krause (2009) suggests that the ‘post-industrial’ landscape of the Lea Valley Industrial Park provides a flexible space that is ‘financially affordable and tolerant of noisy worship’ for ten different African transnational churches. Significant diasporic religious buildings have also been sited in the outer commuter belt of the metropolitan region. The Jain temple in Potters Bar (see below) and Bhaktivedanta Manor, a site of Hindu worship and pilgrimage in Hertfordshire (Nye 2000) not only take advantage of the motorway system to bring together a widely-spread faith community, but also respond in their architecture and landscape design to their semi-rural parkland contexts in the green belt.

What emerges from these literatures, in the ‘new suburban studies’ and from new studies of diasporic communities and religious affiliation, is a requirement to rethink the suburban, and particularly to move away from the simplifications of a kind of bowdlerised Chicago School sociology (Harris and Lewis 1998). Rather than a water-tight model of the interrelations between modernising secularism, urban form and suburbanisation, in which the suburban is conceived as both the final geographical destination and the final shaping force in a process of assimilation, this discussion turns attention to a more complex geography of suburban space and its relationships with religious faith, identity and practices. Like the developments in the sociology of religion that have challenged any simple monolithic theory of secularisation as modernisation, this turn emphasises the specificity of particular suburban places and the role of religion in making different kinds of suburban space.

Three suburban faith geographies

We now turn to consider three specific case studies of faith institutions in outer London, examining particularly their relationship with the nature of suburban space. The cases do not provide an exhaustive typology of suburban religious types, even within London,
but have been chosen to draw out the ways that different kinds of suburban context offer particular opportunities and constraints for faith communities, particularly in terms of organisation, built form and material culture. The differences between the case studies also indicate the complexity of suburban space in modern London, and by extension the limitations of simplistic understandings of suburbia. The examples also highlight the distinctive geographies and configurations of suburban faith particularly in terms of the relationship with place.

_Semi-detached faith? St Thomas the Apostle, Hanwell_

The church-building programmes in the 1930s by both the Anglican and Catholic Churches were a direct response both to staggering suburban growth and to very specific fears about secularisation. The Churches were confronted with a kind of urban frontier, of large tracts of housing, usually speculatively built and without planned community facilities. The Middlesex Forty-Five Churches Fund launched by the Anglican Church in 1930, for which _The Rock_ was commissioned, aimed to plant new churches in this sea of semi-detached housing. Writing in 1934 in the journal of the Anglican London Diocese, Reverend R. Webb-Odell, secretary of the Forty-Five Churches appeal, bemoaned the impact of consumer materialism on this new suburban environment: ‘Left alone with no man [sic] to care of their souls there is the Wireless, the Cinema, the Public House, everything that is for the body provided – huge districts without a soul’ (Webb-Odell 1933, 161). As Rex Walford argued in his comprehensive study of the inter-war Anglican Church in Middlesex (the historic county that encompassed much of outer London), the historiography of the London suburbs has implicitly or explicitly propagated a ‘myth of secularisation’ and almost totally ignored these churches. The comparison with the glut of studies of inter-war suburban cinemas is striking, even though twice as many churches as cinemas were built in Middlesex between 1920 and 1942 (Walford 2007, 336). Although the Forty-Five Churches appeal struggled to raise the enormous resources required to build new churches, it was remarkably successful, and an important indication that secularisation was neither complete nor uncontested in the period. In total the Anglican Church built around 70 new churches in outer London between the wars, with Catholic and other protestant denominations combined constructing a similar number (Walford 2007, 319). The churches that were built were both an attempt to remake suburbia and a response to the nature of inter-war suburbia.

An example of these is the Anglican church of St Thomas (Plate 1), which stands on a main road in West London, about half a mile north of the commuter tube station at Boston Manor. Its tower can be seen from the M4, half-way between the Southall Gurudwara and the Chiswick Orthodox Cathedral. The church is surrounded by typical outer London housing, a mixture of 1920s and 1930s semi-detached houses to the south, and slightly more densely-packed Edwardian houses to the north. This is archetypal middle-class London suburbia, a landscape of gardens and home-improvement, a product of the great expansion in white-collar work in London in the first half of the twentieth century and the efforts of speculative builders to profit from the demand for owner-occupied housing in commuting distance of the city.

St Thomas’ was a product of its suburban context in a number of ways. Firstly it was a direct physical expression of the changing geography of the city. The resources to build the new church came from the sale (and subsequent demolition for redevelopment) of St Thomas’ Portman Square in central London. In 1923 the Bishop of London had proposed that near-empty central churches should follow the people and be dismantled, brick-by-brick, and rebuilt in the suburbs (Walford 2007, 101). This happened in a few cases: St Andrews, Wells Street, in the West End was extensively rebuilt as St Andrews, Kingsbury, and the tower and Wren-designed interior of All Hallows, Lombard Street, in the City was moved to the side of an arterial road in South West London. At St Thomas’ the
material movement consisted of the church plate, the
organ and a large reredos (Julyan 1957, 4).

The material form of the church responded to its
suburban setting in other ways. The church was
designed by Edward Maufe, who was also the archi-
tect of suburban churches at St Saviours, Acton, and
All Saints, Esher, as well as Guildford Cathedral (the
Guildford diocese covers most of the commuter
‘stockbroker’ suburbs to the south-west of London).
Maufe’s churches retained a conventional gothic
form, but with modernist influences that pared
this down to the bare essentials (Glancey 2003).
St Thomas’ is characterised by the contrast between a
soaring white interior, powerfully spiritual in its sim-
plicity, and a red-brick exterior that echoes the design
and materials of the surrounding houses. St Thomas’
was the focus of considerable creative effort in its
interior decoration; one of the underwritten stories of
the inter-war church-building programme is its signifi-
cance for architecture and the decorative arts. This
seemingly ordinary suburban church contains signifi-
cant sculptural work by Eric Gill and Vernon Hill,
both now recognised as major figures in English twen-
tieth-century sculpture and design. Other art in the
church made more direct connection to the suburban
middle-class lives of the congregation. A mural by
Elizabeth Starling in a small children’s chapel places
the annunciation and nativity in a landscape of semi-
detached houses and allotment gardens (see Plate 2);
the ceiling painting of ‘Christ as Morning Star’ in the
lady-chapel was by Kathleen Roberts, one of the main
designers for Heals, suppliers of fashionable furnish-
ishments and fabrics to London’s middle classes (Julyan
1955, 17). The church emerges, then not just as a sig-
nificant site for creativity in the suburbs, but of crea-
tive responses to the new suburban world. The
decoration, furnishings and fittings of the church are
recognisably of their time and place in terms of mate-
rials and style, but are used to create a sacred space
in the suburbs.

This new church in Hanwell, consecrated on 10
March 1934, built upon a longer history that also
showed creativity, flexibility and responsiveness to
suburban context. Like many suburban churches,
St Thomas’ began as a mission district planted in an
area of new housing. The first services were held in
1907 in a brand-new suburban semi-detached house
at 1 Elthorne Avenue. A bay-fronted upper room
(usually the main bedroom in these houses) became a
place of worship, with a tiny altar and lectern
squeezed in (Plate 3). In 1909, the congregation
moved to a rough and ready temporary church,
known locally as the ‘Tin Tabernacle’ or more ambi-
tiously as the ‘Tin Cathedral’. Although initially
‘planted’ by the central London diocese, this common
pattern of house and tin-shed churches showed strong
evidence of bottom-up creativity, a flexible and
improvised use of suburban spaces at odds with
accounts of an atomised and privatised materialistic
world.

From the start, St Thomas’ defined itself as the
centre of a parish, and the key focal point for local
associational culture. The new suburban churches saw
their mission directly as an attempt to create distinc-
tive and discrete places in suburban space. They were
reconstructing an older geographical structure of par-
ishes that drew upon the notion of the village church
in this new territory. St Thomas’ defined itself as a
space for common worship that was open both to
confirmed believers, but also provided a spiritual ser-
vice to those who attended less frequently, perhaps
just at Christmas, Easter and Remembrance Sunday,
or for the rituals of baptism, marriage and funerals.
Until the 1960s the church was extremely successful

Plate 2 Elizabeth Starling Mural, St Thomas the
Apostle Church, Hanwell
Source: The Authors

Plate 3 House Church at 1 Elthorne Avenue
Source: Archives of St. Thomas the Apostle, Hanwell

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through this parish-based mission, with upwards of 400 regular worshippers filling the church for three Sunday services. Such place-making was also attempted through a rich, cross-generational associational culture of Sunday schools, youth clubs, scout and guide groups, fairs, pantomimes and charabanc trips to the sea. In 1960 there were 400 children registered at the Sunday school (Anonymous 1983, 6).

This traditional parish focus attempted to make a distinctive, bounded community from the suburban space around the church, and was relatively successful in the mid-twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, the church survives as a traditionalist Anglican Church, not just in terms of liturgy, worship and beliefs, but also its sense of itself as a centre of a geographically defined and delimited parish community. It attempts to maintain its commitment to community and associational culture, but with much more limited human and financial resources. The core congregation has shrunk to around 100 worshippers, but this is not straightforwardly indicative of secularisation so much as a transformation of the local geography of suburban religion. In part this is about migration into the area of people of diaspora faiths, particularly Hindus and some Muslims and Sikhs from the 1960s, and more recently Catholics from Poland. But the change is also about the developing breadth of Anglicanism and the mapping of different ideas of mission and response to the challenges of faith-making in suburbia. There have been tensions between St Thomas’ and neighbouring evangelical Anglican churches that have a much more fluid and expansive sense of their geographical reach, and which see their mission primarily in spreading the gospel rather than serving the broader needs of a delimited parish.

St Thomas’ was a response to the semi-detached world around it, seeking to transform what contemporaries saw as a landscape of privatisation and materialism into a place-based community, with the church at its centre. In conventional interpretations of suburbia, the domestic house is often interpreted as the locus of inward-looking nuclear families and a barrier to more public cultures. The early histories of both St Thomas’ and the following example of the West London Islamic Centre indicate the partiality of this interpretation, reminding us of the frequent use of suburban homes as sites for formal worship as house churches, synagogues and mosques. We might also consider wider attempts to sacralise domestic space, and in so doing directly challenge the supposed connection between private space and secularisation. This is most explicit in the organisation and practices of some evangelical Christian churches that look for inspiration to the small-cell, house-based example of the very early church. However, the use of the home to extend the spaces of suburban faith beyond dedicated religious buildings is very common, for prayer meetings, textual study and as part of the broader associational culture of the group.

Around London the suburban house is a particularly flexible building form, capable of redecoration, rearrangement of rooms, physical extension and subdivision. These characteristics have been important in the responsiveness of suburbia to recent changes in household and family structure, and to large-scale migration, but what they also provide is the opportunity for forms of religious expression. Tolia-Kelly (2004) has discussed Hindu shrines as a part of the domestic landscape of London, contrasting the simple mandirs of inner city flats with the dedicated rooms found in suburban Middlesex. Domestic spaces are highly significant in the geography of the sacred for Hindus, and owner-occupied suburban houses give great scope and autonomy for its material expression (Nesbitt 2006). This is given vivid expression each autumn in the dramatic displays of Diwali lights covering many West London semi-detached houses. Many other houses have more subtle displays of iconography in suburban front and back gardens or house names that provide evidence of the presence of the everyday suburban sacred.

**Ethnoburb faith? West London Islamic Centre**

Half a mile away from St Thomas’ Church, behind the nondescript high street of West Ealing and sandwiched between 1960s in-fill local authority housing blocks, is the converted warehouse that serves as the home of the West London Islamic Centre. This mosque caters for a diverse Muslim congregation, which at Friday afternoon prayers overflows to stand and pray in the surrounding car park and streets (see Plate 4). The origins of the masjid lie in a fledgling Muslim community of West Ealing, most of Pakistani heritage who began to meet, from the mid-1980s, in two adjoining suburban houses in Oaklands Road (just around the corner and in the same Edwardian development as Elthorne Avenue, where St Thomas’ had begun). In 1996, with the support of the local authority, they purchased an abandoned warehouse, raising the £260 000 needed in cash loans from the local Muslim community. Today the building has been adapted over four floors to provide male and female prayer rooms and washing facilities; a large hall used for weddings and Friday prayers; office space; a book shop and a gym that provides boxing and aerobics classes. Popular because sermons are in English and Arabic, as many as 1200 worshippers attend Friday prayers at the mosque. Although the original founders of the mosque are of Pakistani heritage, the congregation of the mosque is ethnically diverse, swelled by recent migrants from Somalia but also including Arabs, Bosnians, Iraqis and even Poles. During the
week there are a wide variety of religious activities, including study groups for men and women, daily Quran study classes for children, while the mosque also offers a supplementary school in English and Maths for children at the weekend. Imams from the mosque support the bereaved and act as chaplains at the local hospital. The mosque also fulfils many extended community activities, including support for recent migrants and assistance with translation for those in court or requiring state assistance. This role reflects the extensive community links the mosque’s committee has built up with local councillors and the police service, who set up a stall outside the mosque after Friday prayers offering advice and support.

We use the example of the West London Islamic Centre to explore a second geography of faith and suburbia through an interrogation of ‘ethnoburb faith’. Although it does not discuss religion directly, Li’s (2009) discussion of the changing transnational geographies of ethnic suburban spaces has important ramifications for the way we might approach suburban faith. Changing demographics and new geographies of settlement have shifted some of the functions of diasporic faith organisations in the ‘urban gateway’ to other parts of the metropolis; it is no longer necessarily in the inner cities that religions organise to support new migrants. The range of activities organised at the West London Islamic Centre provide plentiful examples of the ways in which the mosque operates as a community space for recent immigrants and as a gateway to access secular civic organisations and services (Ley 2008). If suburban culture is seen by many within the community as a driving force for secularisation, particularly through the impact of materialism, then the mission of suburban diasporic faith organisations is simultaneously to provide support for new arrivals and to defend the faith against its erosion. The West London Islamic Centre is part of the national UK Islamic Mission, based in Central London and founded in 1962, which sees its mission as the propagation of Islam and Islamic charity. Members of the mosque are involved in inter-faith initiatives locally, sponsor a weekly information stand in Ealing town centre and have organised several exhibitions to educate a broader public about Islam. Their commitment to wider community issues is also reflected in their membership of West London Citizens, a broad-based coalition of faith groups and trade unions, which campaigns on a range of local social issues (Jamoul and Wills 2008). These activities suggest that the mosque cannot be read only as an ethnic enclave promoting a strongly bonded suburban faith community, but has also developed an associative culture that responds to the wider secular suburban society in both theological and social initiatives.

The full implications of Li’s conceptualisation of the ethnoburb highlight transnational linkages so that suburban locations become highly networked ‘extroverted’ spaces echoing the postcolonial critique of suburban spaces developed by King (2004). Two of the founder members of the mosque describe the current mosque congregation as ‘cosmopolitan’. The ethnic diversity of the attendees is shaped by West London’s suburban multicultural ‘superdiversity’ (Vertovec 2007), but the popularity of the mosque also reflects its intellectual reputation with English-speaking imams and teachers who are highly educated (the mosque offers well-regarded courses in Islamic studies). The West London Islamic Centre is thus embedded within a range of different transnational connections that encompass both links to Pakistan through the ethnic heritage of its founders and the UK Islamic Mission, but also stretch more broadly within the wider Muslim umma encompassing further transnational familial connections with Somalia, Bosnia and Poland and across the Arab world, as well as important transnational intellectual linkages with universities in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. While Li’s discussion of transnational linkages focuses on ethnic business and familial networks, his depiction of an ethnoburb might be extended to consider many other different spiritual linkages, such as the exchange of religious resources, remittances, prayers and sacred objects.

Plate 4 Worshippers outside the West London Islamic Centre
Source: West London Islamic Centre
While the current building has little external modification, in 2010 the West London Islamic Centre gained planning permission for the construction of a purpose-built mosque to provide an extended range of community activities, including a gym, health centre, nursery, banqueting hall, library and community centre, in addition to prayer rooms. Although the architecture of the new mosque is more purposively Islamic (see Plate 5), the plans for the mosque are described as ‘sensitive to the local environment’, intended to blend with existing buildings and will take place alongside the renovation of the neighbouring housing estate. The community suggest that their modifications are flexible – should the congregation continue to expand and require new premises, the buildings could, they suggest, be easily adapted to non-religious use. Thus the West London Islamic Centre provides further evidence of flexibility and creativity within the suburban built environment. Like St Thomas’, worship at the West London Islamic Centre began within an intimate domestic space before being adapted within a flexible, functional, multi-purpose building, but will eventually occupy a more architecturally significant local landmark.

The West London Islamic Centre provides a productive example to explore further articulations of the relationship between religion and suburban space. By extending Li’s concept of ethnoburb to consider the significance of diaspora faith spaces we suggest that suburban space is shaped not only by the distinctive local associational cultures of recent migrant communities but also by complex transnational geographies of spiritual and material connections. These multiple extroverted faith networks rework suburban space as dynamic, multi-scalar and complex.

**Edge-city faith? Shikharbandhi Jain Deraser, Potters Bar**

Our final example moves us further north, to Potters Bar in the affluent ‘stockbroker belt’, just outside the M25, the London orbital motorway. Here a new Jain Temple, Shikharbandhi Jain Deraser, was opened in 2005 (Plate 6; see Shah et al. 2012). The Deraser was the culmination of a 20-year project for the Oshwal Association of the UK, a close-knit transnational Jain community whose members began to settle in the UK from East Africa in the early 1960s. The temple is situated in the 80-acre grounds of Hook House, a Grade II listed manor house bought by the community in 1979. The house now holds the headquarters of the Association, and has been augmented by two large assembly halls and parking for 400 cars, forming a multi-purpose community centre (Oshwal Association of the UK 2005). The facilities are regularly used for large- and small-scale events, including weddings, religious and cultural festivals, and community events such as a careers fair, as well as being rented out to members of other communities as long as dietary and alcohol prohibitions are observed. We use this final example of a spectacular new place of worship by a diasporic faith community to explore a third distinctive geography of faith and suburbia, which we describe as edge-city faith. This draws upon Joel Garreau’s terminology used to describe new extra-urban

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**Plate 5** Proposal for the new Mosque at the West London Islamic Centre  
*Source: West London Islamic Centre*

**Plate 6** Shikharbandhi Jain Deraser, Potters Bar  
*Source: The Authors*
geographies, particularly in the USA, relatively detached from existing urban centres, and focused on highways and the connections made possible by a system of automobility (Garreau 1992).

For mid-twentieth-century commentators on the nature of suburbia, mobility and transience were key factors eroding sociality in general and organised religious structures in particular. However, recent work on mega churches, particularly in North America, suggests this thesis might be reworked, indicating instead the ways in which mobility and transience become part of a response to as well as a cause of secularisation (Wilford 2010). In London some new religious communities have found that suburban locations enable the realisation of expansive religious buildings in greenbelt or post-industrial spaces that are well connected to arterial transport routes. As we suggested above, in North America such edge-city faith developments are closely imbricated in the planning system, with location often in part a result of zoning codes. A spectacular example of this is Vancouver’s ‘Highway to Heaven’, an extraordinary suburban religious landscape adjacent to Highway 99 in Richmond, made possible by zoning for ‘assembly-use’ (see Dwyer et al. 2011). The story of edge-city faith around London is more fragmentary and more opportunistic, but here too relies on negotiating planning regulations, whether on peripheral industrial estates like the Neasden temple or in the green belt like Bhaktivedanta Manor (Nye 2000) and the Potters Bar Jain temple. The case of the Jain temple shows how such an edge-city location is important not just for enabling access to a distantiated community of faith commuters via the motorway system. What we see at the Jain temple is also a response to the planning context and landscape setting of a particular kind of English edge city, a controlled greenbelt site whose characteristics have been integral in the realisation of the temple as a potential pilgrimage site.

The site in Potters Bar was found after a protracted search for a site in other suburban locations in North-West London that would have placed the temple closer to clusters of the Jain population. Planning permission was granted initially in 1979, despite the location in the greenbelt, because of a commitment to restoring listed sites and because of the recognition of the need for a religious centre for the UK Jain community. While other sites were more obviously located in suburban residential areas, the semi-rural setting of Hook House offered the Oshwal community the opportunity to build a new temple on so-called ‘virgin land’, providing the possibility that the temple could become an ‘official’ pilgrimage site or ‘tirth’ for the European and global Jain community after a century of worship there. In India Jain tirths are situated in silent and serene green surroundings, enabling meditation away from day-to-day life. The pastoral landscape gardens at Hook House thus became integral to the realisation of the new temple. The temple is a complex response to the site and to the planning regulations in force. Planning regulations required that the top of the temple could not be higher than the existing building on the site, so the temple is sunken in an ornamental garden that incorporates Jain religious symbols and statues. Within the garden are 52 eucalyptus trees to represent the 52 villages in western Gujarat from which the majority of the Oshwal community traces its ancestry. The temple itself is a spectacular recreation of Jain temples in India, made from Indian marble and red sandstone, with pieces carved by craftsmen in India and assembled at the temple site. An Indian architect was employed to complete designs, source materials, manage carving of the stones, their shipment to the UK and recruitment of skilled craftsmen to assemble the pieces on site, working alongside a British architectural firm, Ansell and Bailey, who were employed to negotiate planning and building regulations. In addition to compromises related to the religiously approved symmetry of the temple, other structural and building changes were made to address weather and climate conditions. The form of the Shikharbandhi Jain Deraser in Potters Bar, as the first purpose-built temple with the potential to be an authentic Jain ‘tirth’ or pilgrimage site, is thus linked to the possibilities of its location in the greenbelt of the edge city. The development of a new temple within a pastoral landscape suggests an engagement with the possibilities of this semi-rural site to create a new hybrid form of Jain temple that works within the traditions of the English landscape garden and the restrictions of the greenbelt. Like St Thomas’ church, the Jain temple – often narrated as an ‘authentic recreation’ of an Indian temple – responds to the distinctiveness of its edge-city site.

While successful in developing the site to meet the needs of the Oshwal community in the UK, and in particular creating a Jain cosmological space in an English setting, these developments have not occurred without compromises to the religiously approved symmetry of the temple, subtle structural and building changes to accommodate local climate, or shifts in usage to accommodate local community sentiments. At the same time, what is clear is the political significance of this landscape. The English ‘country’ landscape in the green belt embodies a shared public discourse on appropriate amenities and neighbourliness that was seen by some to be violated by the change in land use at Hook House. There was sustained opposition from some local residents to the location of the temple in Potters Bar. What recurs in these challenges is both a shared and privileged discourse of amenity shaped by tropes of the English landscape and a suggestion from some that the reli-
畿 activities of the Oshwal ‘belong’ elsewhere in the (implicitly racialised) multicultural city.

Like some North American suburban megachurches, the edge-city location provides a means of accommodating a dispersed and mobile faith community. The edge-city location adjacent to London’s arterial motorway the M25, with ample parking, accommodates a regional community of ‘faith commuters’ since a large proportion of the UK’s 30,000 Jain community lives in north, north-west and north-east London (Sanghrajka, Institute of Jainology, personal communication 2007). The location also enables visitors from Jain communities in Luton, Wellingborough and from further afield. Jains do not have a tradition of large sites of collective worship and Jainism does not promote mass worship. Temples are visited for individual worship to renew spiritual commitment and religious practice and ‘seek blessing’ during special occasions such as marriages or births. For large-scale festivals, such as Paryushan and Dush Lakshana Parva and for weddings, the assembly rooms are used. While not sharing the characteristics of mass worship typical of suburban mega churches, like them the Oshwal Association relies on electronic networks to link the wider community, but has also begun to engage with some of the challenges of suburban, mobile faith communities. Plans are therefore under discussion about the opportunities for extending this expansive site to provide more fixed communal housing for the elderly. In recent years the temple has also become a significant focus in creating a Jain diasporic identity. The Archbishop of Canterbury’s visit in May 2010 reinforced its significance as the representative site for Jainism in the UK, an important moment in generating visibility for this faith. Notably this symbolic centrality works not through spatial positioning at the heart of the Jain community, but through its positioning in regional and transnational networks, and through its adaptation to the distinctive landscape of the outer London green belt.

Conclusions: faith and suburbia

These examples are of course far from exhaustive of the geographies of religion in modern London’s suburbia, but they do highlight key dimensions of the relationship between faith and suburban spaces. What has developed is far removed from the undifferentiated mass society imagined and feared by critics. The church-making initiatives of the early twentieth century, as exemplified by the work of the Forty-Five Churches Fund and The Rock, were trying to build a structure of highly localised parishes in suburban London, combining a renewal of faith with an inclusive local associational culture; in short to build broadly based church-centred communities. What has developed is a much more complex geography of suburban faith spaces, an overlapping mosaic of different units, scales, constituencies and congregations. This is neither a pure space of places nor a pure space of flows. This is a geography that is hard to map, a mixture of some intensely localised faith groups, some more traditional parishes, local mosques and temples and other extended faith networks increasingly dependent on car journeys and other forms of faith commuting, all set within wider networks that reach beyond London. This complicated geography has developed in part through changes in religious identity in outer London, most obviously in the growth of diasporic religions, but also through the growing significance of new forms of Christianity, both inside and outside the established churches, that have broken with traditional models of parish communities.

At the same time, this geography of faith can also be seen as the result of different responses to the challenges of secularisation. Instead of a ‘sea of unfaith’ washing over suburban society, what has developed are quite specific responses that draw upon distinctive elements of modern suburbia. We have suggested here three such geographies: semi-detached faith, ethnoburb faith and edge-city faith as intersecting forms that draw out different dimensions of the relationships between faith, space and mobilities. These are intended not as a model but as signalling ways of learning from (outer) London and as a framework for further empirical analysis of suburban faith spaces. These geographies draw attention to the complexities of the relationship between faith, secularisation and space in suburbia. Justin Wilford has justifiably questioned general claims that we are moving into a ‘post-secular’ age and called for a renewed and critical understanding of the nature of the secular; however, his chosen geographical metaphor is of archipelagos of faith surrounded by seas of secular culture (Wilford 2010). There is danger that this metaphor revives the older antimonies of The Rock, of faith spaces as defensive refuges from the threatening waters of suburban materialism. Our analysis of faith in modern London demands different interpretations, with relevance to the study of other suburban places. This is a geography of overlays of different faiths (and indeed different secularisms), and of intermeshing and sometimes interconnecting networks.

There are significant lessons here about the geography of religion, but tellingly also about the nature of suburban space. It shows that there can be no straightforward homology between suburban spaces and secular materialism, and that religion is an element in a wider account that sees the potential for creativity, flexibility and innovation in suburban worlds. What we also argue is that any study of the suburban needs to
reach beyond the straight-jacketing assumptions about its nature that are still too often made, towards detailed analysis of its complexity. This echoes Vaughan et al.’s (2009) call for a new theorisation of the suburban coming out of detailed examination of its characteristics. What we argue, however, is that a new understanding of suburbia must reach beyond study of built form, morphology and travel flows, to include the geographies of organisations, material cultures, practices, beliefs and feelings. A full theorisation of the suburban needs to address not just the way these take place in suburbia, but to think about how they are both responses to the developing character of suburbs, and also in turn how they remake them.

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