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Reckoning with the Past, BASR Annual Conference, University of Leeds, 2 - 4 September, 2024

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"Reckoning with the Past" was the promising title of the British Association for the Study of Religions annual conference in Leeds on September 2-4, 2024. Alongside this year's EASR conference focusing on climate change, this was another event thematising actual key challenges to mankind's collective presence on the Earth. "Reckoning with the Past" in Leeds included topics concerning indigenous traditions and colonialism, democracy and disinformation, reckoning with slavery, education, development and decolonisation in Africa, as well as reckoning with colonialism while thematising the Anthropocene and the environment.

Reckoning with colonial, hegemonic, settler, and exploitative pasts in Leeds was quite intense. Despite some potential overlap with reckoning with our way to climate catastrophe, reckoning in Leeds was concerned predominantly with the consequences of encounters between human collectives under conditions of economic, political and cultural domination and exploitation. The environment and climate entered the discussion only occasionally.

While leaving the (natural) environment somewhat intact might have complied with the intention to reckon primarily with the social and cultural consequences of political, economic and cultural domination, the relative lack of focus on material and embodied aspects of colonial pasts may be viewed as a weakness of the event. The conference concentrated on discursive and intellectual reckoning with the past – at least, this was my impression as someone who could attend only one panel from each parallel session (of four panels). I believe it would have been more pertinent if colonialism and Western global domination had been dealt with more in terms of interconnected material practices spreading across do-

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mains like the economy, politics, media and literature, education, and even healthcare.

The scene for the event was set by the organisers' announcement that "[t]he academic study of religion, with its roots in a variety of scholarly disciplines, is currently in a state of reassessment in terms of its history, relationship with colonialism, and problematic frameworks of 'religion'. This year's BASR conference, sponsored by the Hibbert Trust and CenSAMM, brings together scholars to reckon with the past – from a variety of perspectives."[1] Themes included "the decolonisation of religious studies, anti-racist education and education about the slave trade; in addition to the history of religious studies and colonial impacts"[2] and were covered in a series of engaging presentations that stimulated intense discussions, these often involving numerous contentious issues inscribed in attempts to reckon with colonialism. For instance, how might the Anglican church in Jamaica reckon with its colonial heritage and strong ties to colonising structures (of the Anglican Church), continue much of its empowering local work, and remain an Anglican Church at the same time?

This turned into a more general question: Can institutional structures like the Anglican Church be effectively decolonised at all? Is the organisational hierarchy willing to change anything about it, to loosen the influence and power of its (colonial) centre? Such discussions almost inevitably revealed crucial challenges of reckoning with the past: How can we reckon with the past if it is not past but continues to be enacted albeit in more subtle forms? How might we overcome slavery as the shared trauma of the slaver and enslaved if slave stories remain suppressed and the very institution of slavery has not vanished? How can we reckon with colonialism if colonial institutions persist in spite of predominant discourses that incorporate notions of universal human rights, liberty, equality, and even guilt for the atrocities of the past and the intention to reckon with them?

Such questions were raised time and again during the conference discussions. The repeated realisation that the past to be reckoned with is rather an inescapable present left many participants in despair. Such despair, however, might point to the limits of what might be called cultural analysis in religious studies (and more generally in postcolonial theorising) – as if the preoccupation with ideas and discourse did not allow us to analyse the material structures of colonialism, slavery and hegemony; as if it did not allow us to thematise how institutions like slavery and the neglect of marginal stories are inscribed into the normal functioning of our eco-

1 "BASR Annual Conference 2024," British Association for the Study of Religions, last modified January 11, 2024, https://basr.ac.uk/2024/01/11/basr-annual-conference-2024-2/.

2 "BASR Annual Conference 2024".

nomy, law, politics, science, media, banking, the division of labour, schooling, health care, and diplomacy – in short, into the whole complex of the dominant ways of world-making.

One might suspect then that reckoning with the past in the domain of cultural analysis remains inevitably confined to pointing toothlessly towards challenges appearing on the edge, while trouble is located at the centre: the elementary principles of the dominant ways of (seemingly collectively and diplomatically) making the world. Starting with the materiality, embeddedness, and embodiment of colonialism would instead subject such world-making to de-construction, thereby opening up a pathway to new collective re-composition. Such re-composition, unlike the present composition, might have a chance to become more compliant with discourses concerning universal human rights, liberty, legal equality, and equal chances for all to live a happy life. Instead of asking how to reckon with the past, the question would be rather: "Why are current dominant ways of world-making not truthful to their discursive promises? How is the power distributed within established institutions? What might a just (material) recomposition of our present look like? And how might it be brought about in a just and respective way?" The presented line of questioning may be understood as an organic continuation of conference brainstorming. And it also overlaps with issues concerning climate change: so far, the dominant ways of world-making have no more deviated from the path of global environmental catastrophe than they have from the path of colonial exploitation. And such coincidence is not accidental.

As the conference stimulated such questioning, I'd like to reflect on the excellent work done by organisers from the Centre for Religion and Public Life at the University of Leeds. Concerning the organisation of the conference, I am not able to judge how much it followed the usual form of BASR conferences (this was my first attendance) and what aspects were novel, i.e., the special contributions of the conference organisers. So let me try to make few points on why the conference was so stimulating.

I used the word "intense" while characterising the conference discussions. Some credit for this high level of engagement goes to the well-formulated theme, some to the scholarly quality of all contributions, and some to the friendly and constructive atmosphere. However, much also goes to the well-designed schedule, the smooth organisation, and the size of the conference, all of which fostered the enhanced quality of the debate.

In terms of size, the conference was relatively small and therefore intimate. Each of the hundred participants attending seven sessions of four parallel panels, two additional keynote lectures, and the annual meeting of the BASR, all events held during just one whole and two half days, had ample opportunity to engage with all others. The multicultural setting of

Great Britain that mirrors its colonial past was reflected in the multicultural and multiethnic composition of participants. This diversity, in turn, translated into diverse theoretical presumptions, subject areas, and positionalities within them. In addition, the schedule was strictly followed, thanks to excellent time management by both panel chairs and participants, and this secured a constant flow of intellectual exchange that took place in lecture rooms as much as during timely coffee and refreshment breaks.

The organisers succeeded in creating a real community comprising a dense network of ties and interactions. The registration fee included accommodation in university halls, breakfasts and evening meals were also provided by university facilities, and the lunch was prepared directly in the room dedicated to coffee breaks. Uninterrupted intellectual exchange was thus possible from morning till night.

In addition, the organisers prepared events that enriched the programme. The first, on the evening of the first conference half-day, was a fascinating guided tour through the black history of the Leeds University campus. The guide was, himself, born in a house donated to twenty black servicemen and women who became homeless during demobilisation after the Second World War and which was later bought by the university. As someone conducting historical research on black history in Britain he sensitively reflected on the impact of the ways (hi)stories are narrated on collective memories and social power relations. His narratives throughout the tour were carefully crafted to highlight what's hidden under the veil of neglect, to demonstrate how the working of neglect operates, and to retell the story to provide humanity to those stripped of it and empower them while not dehumanising the dehumaniser back. Being at the same time an actor, his tour contained sketches that were as educative as they were entertaining.

Apart from this exceptional experience, the programme offered a book reception organised by INFORM (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements), the educational charity founded thirty-five years ago by a path-breaking sociologist of religion Eileen Barker, nowadays a professor emeritus who also participated in the BASR conference.

The last event was a tour through religiously interesting sites on the university campus and beyond, guided by a member of the organising team. This was offered to participants who did not have to run to catch a train or bus home.

BASR, in a similar manner to the Czech Association for the Study of Religions, publishes an open-access journal, the Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions (JBASR). It welcomes conference presentations expanded into full-fledged papers for publication and en-

courages especially, but not exclusively, fledgeling scholars to use this opportunity to make their work public. BASR also provides a limited number of bursaries for scholars to enable them to take part in the conference if their conditions prevent them from doing so. An informal get-together for bursary holders was also scheduled in the programme.

Finally, the conference aimed to be as sustainable as possible. Apart from eco-friendly recommendations concerning travel, the omission of plastic use, and the minimal use of paper and printing, this included exclusively vegan and vegetarian meals served during the whole event. Since most delegates were from Britain itself, the carbon footprint of the conference should have been relatively small. Foreigners like me, getting there by plane, somewhat worsened the event's environmental impact. The environmental impact of flying, on the other hand, might be for the foreigner the only reason not to attend the BASR conferences if the standard met in Leeds remains the same. Overall, the conference at Leeds provided an intensive, engaging, enlightening, friendly, and socially pleasing experience.