Learning from experience: The value of analysing Avalon

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A B S T R A C T

In this article some of the experiences and insights gained from roughly fifteen years of conducting a long term study of Glastonbury are examined. Glastonbury, a small town in the south west of England, has become a multivalent pilgrimage site for a variety of spiritual seekers, and an icon of integrative spirituality (my preferred term for ‘alternative’ or ‘New Age’ spirituality). The concept of vernacular religion is explained, and its appropriateness in relation to both place-centred study and research into integrative spirituality is demonstrated. The rationale and some of the methodological complexities underlying this type of study are explored, and some of the trends and phenomena that the long term observation of one location has revealed are considered. The contextual detail and depth of knowledge gained from such long term study feed into an appreciation of both the internal dynamics of Christianity in Glastonbury, for example, and the growing institutionalisation of the Glastonbury Goddess movement and the spread of its influence through a variety of conduits. The role of the internet in framing expectations and presentations of Glastonbury is examined, and research relating to its unique spiritual service industry is briefly summarised.

While Glastonbury is by no means ‘typical’, it is indicative of a number of trends in relation to ‘integrative’ spirituality and therefore lessons learned from there can have wider implications for the study of phenomena increasingly common in the contemporary milieu.

Introduction

For roughly fifteen years I have been conducting a long term study of Glastonbury, the small town in the south west of England that has been variously hailed as Avalon, ‘the cradle of English Christianity’, ‘New Jerusalem’, the ‘epicentre of New Age in England’ and ‘heart chakra of planet earth’ (Bowman, 2004a).

In this article the rationale for committing to such research is explained, and some of the complexities but also the advantages of the long term observation of one location are explored. I look at some of the particularities of the religious milieu in Glastonbury, but explain why it is also a valuable focus for research in contemporary spirituality and vernacular religion more generally. In particular, the complexity of internal and external dynamics in the exchange, interaction and spread of ideas and praxis are discussed, in relation to Christianity and the Goddess Movement. The role of the internet in framing expectations and presentations of Glastonbury is examined, and research relating to its unique spiritual service industry is briefly summarised.

While Glastonbury is not typical, it is emblematic of the growth of a particular sort of religious diversity. While place-centred studies have more often been used in a variety of local and national contexts to examine the effects, experiences and controversies surrounding cultural diversity, the long term study of a location primarily known for its ‘integrative’ spirituality can nevertheless provide valuable insights into the contemporary milieu.

Locating Glastonbury

Glastonbury is a small town (population c9000) in an area of drained marshland known as the Somerset Levels, in the south west of England. There has been settlement in the area since prehistoric times, and before the marshes were drained Glastonbury was in
effect an island, accessible by boat. The Town contains a variety of striking natural features, including a curiously contoured hill, the Tor, which can be seen for miles around; the chalybeate spring at Chalice Well whose water stains red; and a thorn tree that flowers both in spring and in December. Although the decline in rural and agricultural activities throughout the twentieth century and the cessation of the major leather related industry since the late 1970s have resulted in the loss of some of the mainstays of its traditional economy, Glastonbury fares better than many other small market towns, in part at least on account of its distinctive religious and spiritual status.1

Glastonbury is one of the most popular and multivalent pilgrimage sites in the UK, exerting an attraction for a variety of spiritual seekers (and scholars) on account of the many myths that surround it and the myriad claims made for it (see for example Bowman, 1993, 2004a; Carley, 1996; Hexham, 1983; Ivakhiv, 2001; Prince and Riches, 2000). In response to this interest in Glastonbury, a unique spiritual service industry has arisen which includes ‘alternative’ bookshops; workshops, conferences and courses; a huge variety of healing; galleries selling ‘inspired’ and ‘inspirational’ art and artefacts; ‘physic services’ such as tarot reading; bed and breakfasts offering meditation and assorted therapies; shops selling goods to enhance people’s spiritual practices, and so on.

Some believe that Glastonbury was a significant prehistoric centre of Goddess worship, while others regard it primarily as a Druidic site. For many Christians, Glastonbury’s status rests on it being the ‘cradle of English Christianity’, where Christianity took root in England, allegedly brought there by St. Joseph of Arimathea; even more significantly, many believe that Jesus himself came to Glastonbury.2 Glastonbury has also been identified with the Isle of Avalon, the place where in Arthurian legend King Arthur was taken for healing after his last battle.3 By the Middle Ages Glastonbury Abbey, with its Lady Chapel allegedly built on the site of Joseph’s original church, was a major pilgrimage centre, the ground plan of the town exemplifying the extent to which it literally grew up around the Abbey. However, the Abbey, brutally suppressed at the time of the Reformation, fell into ruins. That dissolution has left a very obvious space at the centre of the town. Although there may have been speculation about the Abbey site’s prehistoric status and significance had the Abbey survived, it seems that this space – not exactly empty but certainly not full, now only occupied by a church, was a major pilgrimage centre, the ground plan of the town exemplifying the extent to which it literally grew up around the Abbey. However, the Abbey, brutally suppressed at the time of the Reformation, fell into ruins. That dissolution has left a very obvious space at the centre of the town. Although there may have been speculation about the Abbey site’s prehistoric status and significance had the Abbey survived, it seems that this space – not exactly empty but certainly not full, now only occupied by Christianity in a literally fragmented way – has been significant in promoting a variety of contenders for the heart and soul of Glastonbury.

From the late 19th and early 20th centuries, influences from the Celtic revival, Theosophy and esotericism were felt in Glastonbury and there was a remarkable degree of religious speculation and experimentation, plus tremendous creativity, involving people such as John Arthur Goodchild, Frederick Bligh Bond, Wellesley Tudor Pole, Dione Fortune, Alice Buxton, and Rutland Boughton (see Ball, 2003; Benham, 1997; Cutting, 2004). Spiritual seekers, visionaries, experimenters and practitioners of various sorts, diverse religious and spiritual groups, all found themselves drawn to Glastonbury, and from the 1970s Glastonbury gained a media reputation as the ‘epicentre of New Age in England’, a centre for hippies, ‘Travellers’, and people seeking alternative lifestyles and spiritual experiences (see Hexham, 1983). Simultaneously, however, British Israelites have seen Glastonbury as ‘New Jerusalem’ and some feel that the restoration of the Abbey could go hand in hand with ‘the restoration of Britain’s greatness’. Now perceived by many as the ‘heart chakra’ of planet earth, Glastonbury is also regarded as a centre of earth energies, a node where leyines converge and generate powerful forces for healing and personal transformation.4 New people and ideas are constantly coming to, passing through or taking root in Glastonbury.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Bowman, 2000, 2005), few (if any) places in the UK enjoy such high status among believers and spiritual seekers of so many different persuasions as Glastonbury. Thousands visit Glastonbury each year for the Anglican and Catholic pilgrimages; for courses at the Isle of Avalon Foundation (which regards itself as the successor to the Druidic university some believe existed in the town); for the array of healing on offer; for annual events such as the Goddess Conference, the Glastonbury Symposium (on crop circles), and other events that continue to proliferate (Megalithomania, The Secret Knowledge Convention); for ritual activity at various times on the eightfold calendar widely observed by non-aligned pagans, Druids and Wiccans; to visit the Goddess Temple (reputedly Britain’s first Goddess Temple officially registered as a Place of Worship); for monthly Mystic and Psychic Fayres; and as individual pilgrims, spiritual seekers and tourists. People come not just from Britain but from all over Europe, North America, the Antipodes and elsewhere. In addition, many more know of Glastonbury through countless myths, novels set in or around Glastonbury (particularly the highly influential Mists of Avalon by Marion Zimmer Bradley), through books, articles, television features and – increasingly significant – large numbers of Glastonbury-related websites.

In addition to locally born ‘Glastonians’, assorted groups and individuals with differing worldviews seem to have felt drawn not just to visit but to settle in Glastonbury on account of its spiritual ‘specialness’ at various points in the 1980s, 1990s and again since 2000. The latter are often referred to as ‘Avalonians’, people who feel that they are not simply living in a small West Country market town, but who are in some way experiencing Avalon.

As a result of all this, Glastonbury is constructed, inhabited, experienced, used and contested in a great variety of ways – and this is what makes it such a valuable and varied focus of study. While Glastonbury cannot be described as typical, what happens there is indicative of a number of trends and issues in vernacular religion and contemporary spirituality that are frequently ignored or misunderstood when they occur in less obvious or concentrated contexts.

1 Glastonbury’s overall economy is surprisingly varied, including building and engineering related industry, printing, and the manufacture of plastics, wetsuits and digital model railway control systems.
2 The words of the 18th century poet and visionary William Blake
And did those feet in ancient times
Walk upon England’s mountains green?
And was the Holy Lamb of God
On England’s pleasant pastures seen?
are widely thought to express this belief.
3 The alleged 12th century ‘discovery’ by monks of the body of Arthur in the grounds of Glastonbury Abbey seemed to confirm the popular association between Arthur, Glastonbury and Avalon.
4 It should be noted, however, that these energies are not considered unambiguously benign; some perceive strong negative energies, stressing the need to work for the restoration and maintenance of ‘balance’ individually and collectively.
Studying Glastonbury

Adopting an ethnological approach, which Kockel (2003) claims is ‘particularly suited to studying local-level interpretations and negotiations of global processes,’ I have been involved in fieldwork on a variety of phenomena in Glastonbury since the early 1990s. Research in Glastonbury has been conducted within the broad framework of vernacular religion, that is, ‘an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the religious lives of individuals with special attention to the process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioral, and material expressions of religious belief, and the ultimate object of religious belief’ (Primiano, 1995: 44). Furthermore, as the term ‘vernacular’ indicates, this approach is also concerned with ‘bi-directional attention to environments upon individuals and of individuals upon environments in the process of believing’ (Primiano, 1995: 44), particularly suitable for a location so well endowed with natural features that are endlessly speculated upon. Being interested in the same sorts of questions raised by Smith (1987) in *To Take Place*, rather than simply looking at ‘religion and spirituality in Glastonbury’ I have been exploring religion and spirituality in relationship to/with Glastonbury and Glastonbury in relationship to/with religion and spirituality.

I was drawn to Glastonbury for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the practical circumstances of having moved to Bath (around an hour’s car journey away) made commitment to regular visits feasible. I was interested in Glastonbury’s very distinctive vernacular Christianity and the internal pluralism of Christianity demonstrated there (despite the fact that Christianity often gets missed out of accounts or awareness of contemporary spirituality in Glastonbury); in the variety of religious pluralism and non-aligned spirituality to be found there; in the use of myth, and the creation and development of traditions, calendar customs and material culture by various groups; in the (often uneasy) interaction between different segments of the population; in different forms of pilgrimage being conducted there; in the changing face of the High Street and the development of highly diverse and specialised spiritual service industries.

It was very clearly a context in which cultural tradition, informal transmission, personal experiences of efficacy and individual insights were likely to be as important as (or more important than) ‘authoritative’ texts or religious professionals, and where more conventional markers, measures and characteristics of religiosity might not apply. There thus seemed to be a good ‘fit’ between my methodological preference for fieldwork (Bowman, 1992/2004b) and academic interests in ‘religion as it is lived: as humans encounter, understand, interpret and practice it’ (Primiano, 1995: 44) and the location.

I deliberately set out to conduct a long term study, quite simply to watch and wait, see what changes occurred, what trends emerged, what peaked and declined in relation to belief and practice, myth and custom in Glastonbury. I did not go in with the intention of testing a particular hypothesis; I went there to observe and to theorise only in response to the data. In this respect I was influenced by the work of David (‘Doc’) Rowe, the multitalented fieldworker and folklorist who has been recording British calendar customs for over thirty years. By returning to the same location year after year for notionally the ‘same’ event, he has built up a unique and valuable archive that documents continuity and change; the impact of individuals, changing socio-economic conditions, the media and outsiders on custom; and the complex social and relational networks that function within the framework of the custom. My aim was to achieve a similar effect, but through looking at a broader range of phenomena in one location, to maintain a long term overview of spiritual trends and fashions, clashes and co-operation, and so on.

Such an approach has both disadvantages and advantages. Constraints include the reality that other commitments can make being there as often or consistently as one would wish problematic. There is also the difficulty of trying not to be seen as being on anyone’s ‘side’, of maintaining as far as possible an ‘impartial outsider’ status in terms of avoiding being pigeon-holed as belonging to or advocating a particular ‘faction’ within town. Similarly, there is the constant self-monitoring necessary to keep confidences and to avoid being the inappropriate conduit of information. As with all fieldwork based research, there is an element of serendipity; while some data can be obtained through ‘formal’ interviews, or conversations that have been initiated for a stated purpose, other material comes informally or fortuitously, such as through overheard conversations in cafes and casual comments in the public domain.5

The experience of conducting long term ethnology in one location has taught me much – primarily that no matter how much you know, there is always much more to learn.6 However, playing the long game affords the cumulative knowledge, the contextual insights, the overview that can add value to the researcher’s grasp of current events. It allows time for reflection. It is frequently the case that the insight, actions or inspiration of an individual take a while to become obvious. There are points when, after incremental changes, definite shifts in spiritual emphasis or community relations suddenly become clear, as I discuss below (see Bowman, 2007).

It is also worth noting that, as for others involved in long term location studies, my involvement with Glastonbury has fed very usefully into teaching, fieldtrips and teaching materials.

Varieties and implications of academic research in Glastonbury

Glastonbury has been the subject of academic studies by various students and scholars, demonstrating both the breadth of religious activity there and the widespread nature of interest in the town.7


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5 For example, I happened to be in a shop once when a proprietor was explaining to a new assistant how she set prices on numerological principles and therefore did not like certain combinations of numbers.

6 I only learned this year that the gold crown worn by the statue of Our Lady of Glastonbury was created from jewellery donated by parishioners, for example.

7 Summaries of some of the past academic work on Glastonbury and current work in progress will appear in a special issue of *JASANAS* (Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies).
innovation and developments within Christianity, which when I first went to Glastonbury gave the impression of being beleaguered and 
(Bowman, 2000, 2003–2004), to emphasise that Christianity is very much part of the contemporary spiritual scene there, and to observe 
Internal dynamics: the case of Christianity 
sketched here.

extent to which seemingly disparate groups, ideas and traditions in the same space influence each other, either through overt or indirect 
about crop circles (many of which appeared in the Glastonbury area) but which is in turn now receding.

around there. Things move fast in Glastonbury, so one can see things develop, change or disappear. Interest in and discussion about aliens 
students experimenting with and sampling a variety of ideas, beliefs, praxis, experiences and lifestyles, all of which can be found in and 
tradition have been created, adapted and used strategically in this contested context, and different modes and understandings of pilgrimage 

Dynamics of continuity and change in Glastonbury 
Through a series of articles over the years I have attempted to provide overviews of the range of spiritual activity in Glastonbury, 
‘snapshots’ of particular trends and developments there (e.g. Bowman, 1993, 2000, 2004a, 2007, 2008), showing ways in which myth and 
and willingness to cooperate in research, seeing scholarly interest as a form of recognition (if not validation) of 

Internal dynamics: the case of Christianity 
It is important to point out the centrality of Glastonbury’s distinctive ‘vernacular Christianity’ in many seemingly ‘alternative’ spheres 
(Bowman, 2000, 2003–2004), to emphasise that Christianity is very much part of the contemporary spiritual scene there, and to observe 
innovations and developments within Christianity, which when I first went to Glastonbury gave the impression of being beleaguered and 
fearful. (The town council put high railings around St John’s Church on the High Street, to prevent ‘hippies’ and ‘crusties’8 getting into its 
grounds and acting ‘inappropriately’.)

Ecumenical and inter/multifaith activity in Glastonbury has gone through various phases, partly a reflection of influential personalities 
and willingness to engage in dialogue at any given point. Quest, an ecumenical Christian community, was established in the 1990s to 
encourage communication and interaction between all types of residents and visitors to the town. Inspired by the Iona Community, it used 
Celtic spirituality creatively as a sort of common currency between pagans and Christians, and simply by being open and offering practical 
assistance provided a positive and powerful image of ‘non-institutionalised’ Christianity which impressed many outside (and irritated some 
within) the Church. At one time, when well dressing and tree dressing were particularly popular in town, Quest had a ‘prayer hanging’, 
a loosely woven piece of material, onto which pieces of wool could be tied to symbolise a prayer. This allowed people who perhaps were not 
used to praying, or who might be unable or unwilling to write a prayer request (as is common in other Glastonbury churches) to perform 
a symbolic act of prayer. Although Quest’s founders have moved on, and various functions and activities associated with it have been 
reorganised or curtailed, it has left a lasting legacy.

When a female vicar, Maxine Marsh, was installed at the Anglican St John’s Church in 2002, delegates from the Glastonbury Goddess 
Conference called in to congratulate her and wish her well. At that point the URC and Methodist ministers were also female, and this was 
taken by some to signify that ‘softer,’ ‘more feminine’, more cooperative energies were emerging in the town. A concerted effort is being 
made now to keep St John’s Church open on weekdays (depending on volunteers), and people are welcome to sit in the church grounds 
again, provided no alcohol is consumed there (this is not unanimously popular). The practical example of genuine respect and friendship 
between Rev Marsh and the Roman Catholic priest played an important part in promoting ecumenism. The Catholic Shrine to Our Lady of 
Glastonbury has been increasingly vigorously promoted and is attracting worldwide interest via the internet.9 The rhetoric at the Catholic

8 The term ‘Crusties’ was widely used to describe in a derogatory manner those perceived as encrusted with dirt.
9 Internet petitions to the ‘virtual’ shrine are printed and placed before the statue in the church within 24 hours of receipt.
Pilgrimage (possibly one of the most ‘multi-cultural’ events in Glastonbury) has to some extent moved away from concentration on Glastonbury’s martyrs – Abbot Whiting and the two monks hanged on the Tor at the time of the Dissolution – towards celebration of Glastonbury’s long history as a Marian shrine and an emphasis on healing. The increased rhetoric about the provision of healing in a variety of Christian contexts interacts interestingly with the plethora of therapies and holistic healing on offer in Glastonbury.

This is not to say that there are not still tensions, mutual distrust and occasional flashpoints such as that created and widely reported in 2006 when a small minority of Catholics attending the Youth 2000 event in Glastonbury confronted those in The Magick Box (a shop selling a range of goods relating to witchcraft) threatening staff with eternal damnation and being aggressive. It was announced that the event would not in future be hosted in Glastonbury, and some local Christians called into the shop to express regret and solidarity. While the ‘traditional’ Holy Thorn Ceremony (created in its present form in 1927 by the then vicar of St John’s) seems to be declining in importance (see Bowman, 2006), since 2005 St John’s has pioneered the Shining Branches Festival of Trees which involves providing trees within the church which are then ‘adopted’ and decorated by different groups. In 2006, trees were adopted not only by different Christian denominations and youth groups, but by the Glastonbury Festival, Growing Needs Bookshop, the Goddess Temple and The Magick Box – the latter’s tree was decorated with the symbols of a variety of religions and miniature broomsticks, with the sign ‘Coexist’.

Although it may be hard to imagine this happening elsewhere, the more general point is that the closely observed study of a location, and the internal dynamics thereof, help to unpick, contextualise and explain what at first sight might seem illogical, surprising, or even shocking. In very simplified diagrammatic form, we can see how important it is to be aware of interactions and intersections between different constituents in one location (Fig. 1).

External dynamics: the Goddess in (and beyond) Glastonbury

One of the most striking features of the past fifteen years has been the development, flourishing and institutionalisation of the Goddess movement in Glastonbury. The annual Glastonbury Goddess Conference, co-founded in 1996 by Goddess author and ‘sacred dramatist’ Kathy Jones and Tyna Redpath of the shop The Goddess and The Green Man, has not only been important in the consolidation and celebration of Goddess spirituality in the town itself, it has become influential in Europe, the USA, the Antipodes and elsewhere. Speakers, writers, artists and figures inspirational to the national and international Goddess Movement, such as Starhawk, come to Glastonbury for the conference. The conference has created a number of ‘traditions’, and has proved a great forum for creativity in relation to Goddess-related music, drama and material culture, as well as ritual and myth (Bowman, 2004a, 2007; Watkins, 2000), which then gets disseminated by attendees.

Kathy Jones has been particularly influential in promoting the vision of Glastonbury as an important pre-Christian site of Goddess devotion, and is extremely keen to help others ‘rediscover’ and promote the Goddess in their own locations. The establishment of Britain’s first officially registered Goddess Temple in 2002 has provided a year-round focus for celebration and pilgrimage, while a training programme for Priestesses and Priests of Avalon has produced confident, creative and experienced ritual celebrants. An ever increasing range of books, CDs and artwork has been created and promoted in connection with Conference and the Temple, and a material culture protocol of particular colours for different times on the Temple’s distinctive, Glastonbury-based wheel of the year. Whereas for some years before 2002 celebratory Goddess shrines were created in various venues at significant times of year (Beltane, Samhain, etc.), having the Temple provides a year-round focus for devotees and visitors, and the context for continuing creativity and the development of the Glastonbury Goddess aesthetic. It also necessitates continuous fundraising and finding a pool of labour for attending to and opening it – similar to the problems encountered by the churches in Glastonbury!

While there are those who are uncomfortable with the commercial aspects of the Goddess Conference, the fundraising, and the establishment of a form of hierarchy resulting from the Training Programme, for a great many women and men the Glastonbury Goddess activity is inspirational. Nor are the effects and the impact of the Glastonbury Goddess activity confined to those who can visit the town. The
Conference, Temple and Priestess/Priest Training Programme which evolved over a number of years, very much in response to the landscape of Glastonbury, are now being transplanted ‘en bloc’ to other locations, including the Netherlands and Hungary. The founder of the Hungarian Goddess Temple, for example, had read and been moved by Bradley’s (1986) Mists of Avalon (a highly feminised recasting of the Arthurian myth) ‘but didn’t think there could be such a place now’; on the internet she found out about the Glastonbury Goddess Conference, attended in 2004, and it proved to be a ‘life changing experience’. She organised a Goddess Conference in the summer of 2006, with Kathy Jones and other personnel from Glastonbury, and founded the Temple in the autumn of 2006, as well as initiating a Priest and Priestess training programme on the Glastonbury model.

Bystanders watching a procession of brightly clad, chanting women, processing through the streets of Budapest in the summer of 2008 could be forgiven if they did not instantly connect this activity with a small Somerset town. Keeping track of outside input, internal developments and ideas and phenomena originating in but moving beyond the focus of research is part of the complexity of location studies – and among the many good reasons for scholars to share information on ‘their’ locations.

**Virtual dynamics**

An increasingly important and complex aspect of any location based study is consideration of how that place is represented and represents itself online. A place’s ‘virtual’ existence can influence that location’s self-perception; frame the expectations of visitors to that place; and provide a platform for claims about the site and individuals’ or groups’ place within or relationship to it. It is also, of course, an important portal for commerce. The influence of the web in relation to Glastonbury has become increasingly obvious in a number of ways.

For instance, what might be considered the ‘alternative’ or ‘unseen’ history of Glastonbury – those aspects such as Jesus’ connection with the town or the existence of the Druidic university – for which little or no tangible, conventional evidence can be brought forth, frequently gets repeated as authoritative on Glastonbury-related websites, colouring perceptions of Glastonbury’s past, present and future significances. Events, conferences, workshops, rituals, etc. are publicised on the internet and bring people to the town, but teachings, artefacts, ideas, organisations also flow out from Glastonbury via the internet. The Holism Network, a not-for-profit organisation located in Glastonbury, is campaigning through a variety of means, including its website, to have ‘Holistic Spirituality’ included and well represented on the next UK Census. In a recent survey, I discovered that 74% of the businesses who responded who had internet or mail order operations felt that it was very important or important to their customers that they were based in Glastonbury.

The internet has also been the vehicle for a form of social bridging in Glastonbury, indicative of other trends towards more cooperative and community building ventures. Realising that for the most part it was the ‘alternatives’ who were making best use of the internet to boost business or publicise events, Glastonbury Online Ltd was formed as ‘a not for profit company assisting the development of internet use amongst Glastonbury businesses, community groups & people. Any profits generated are put back into supporting the development of community webpages/websites for local organisations.’ They are ‘proud of our good relationships with other webworkers in the town and continue to promote co-operation rather than competition in our community’ (http://www.glastonbury.co.uk, accessed 26 September).

Keeping track of a location’s virtual as well as ‘real-time’ reputation and activities, and the extent to which they intersect, is vital.

**Understanding Glastonbury’s spiritual economy**

The focus of my current research is its spiritual economy; a small grant from The British Academy has enabled a pilot survey among businesses in the town, alongside a series of interviews with both ‘alternative’ and mainstream business people. Glastonbury seemed an ideal site for a study of how the spiritual economy functions, not only by looking at different examples of spiritual entrepreneurship, but by examining the extent to which it is compatible with, complementary to, or at odds with the ‘regular’ economy.

Pilgrimage centres always generate distinctive economies, a mixture of specialist goods and services and the regular sector which serves both locals and pilgrims. Glastonbury is an example par excellence of a contemporary pilgrimage centre, with traditional and new forms of religion, traditional and new goods and services, producing a distinctive economy. Conventional business surveys of Glastonbury tend not to do justice to the diversity and creativity of economic life in Glastonbury, because the ways people make a living, or the sorts of goods (spell kits, wands, Tibetan singing bowls) and services (past life regression, spiritual house cleansing) on offer do not easily fit ‘mainstream’ categories. A large number of people in Glastonbury make or supplement a living through economically small scale healing, clairvoyance, and other spiritually related activity; there is also a ‘time banking’ scheme and barter is common. This all needs to be factored into any overall understanding of how the economy operates.

While scholars working on diaspora communities have commented on issues of visibility in relation to the building of mosques and temples in Europe, the equivalents for Glastonbury and those involved in ‘alternative’/‘integrative’ spirituality are frequently shopfronts and centres. When the leader of the Sufi Naqshbandi-Haqqaniyya, Sheikh Nazim al-Haqqani al-Qubrusi, visited Glastonbury in 1999, for example, he declared it ‘the spiritual heart of England’ and urged his followers to establish a presence there. This has been achieved through the Healing Hearts Charity Shop, which also functions as an informal centre for the sale of booklets by Sheikh Nazim and information about his teachings. Having a shop front in Glastonbury is a way of ‘staking a claim’ there, so it has been useful to record which businesses and/or religious groups have come and gone, while even those who stay might move around within the town. It was striking that recently three people within a couple of weeks commented on either how strange or how sad it was that Christianity did not have ‘a presence on the High Street’, despite the fact that there is both a large Anglican and a substantial United Reformed Church there; what they meant was that there was no Christian shop on the High Street. In Glastonbury, as elsewhere, ‘alternative’ shops not only offer the opportunity for commercial activity but are also regarded as ‘portals’ through which people might encounter new experiences, insights, and ‘tools for transformation’.

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10 This survey was conducted in conjunction with Sarah Robinson of Boundaries Unlimited, who provided the survey experience and technical expertise.

11 One woman is employed part time in a shop, is involved in Glastonbury Radio, and works in the evenings from home as a telephone counsellor for a national premium rate psychic hotline.

12 19% of respondents had an annual turnover of less than £5000, and 12% were in the £5000–£10,000 bracket.
Although the countercultural aspect was particularly pronounced in the 1970s, there is now a more relaxed attitude to money and business among many people in Glastonbury who nevertheless consider themselves spiritually active. As one man said, ‘There’s no point in being spiritual but bankrupt’. A number of the ‘spiritual entrepreneurs’ who settled in Glastonbury in the 1980s and later have now become local employers, with shops, some small scale manufacturing and/or warehousing and mail order/internet sales operations. While some of these people undoubtedly make a good living from their businesses, there is a notable lack of conspicuous consumption and a certain modesty of lifestyle among them. The entrepreneurs interviewed so far tend to see no contradiction between spirituality and business, and indeed tend to see success in business as confirmation of their spiritual skills and qualities.

One striking aspect to emerge from the initial interviews is the way in which some entrepreneurs self-narrate how they came to be in business in Glastonbury. There is a strong sense of ‘calling’:

(1) came to Glastonbury and just knew this is the place to be. It was more a calling from Glastonbury for my services, I think, more than me finding my place, there was just me being called to do my work here.

46% of those who responded to the survey indicated that Glastonbury’s reputation as a religious and spiritual centre influenced their decision to be involved in business there. The business sector is another example of where the influence of an individual has been quietly but significantly influential; a businessman with expertise in setting up not-for-profit organisations has helped a number of groups and individuals in the town, my survey showing a high proportion of such enterprises.

This project is envisaged as a pilot for potentially larger scale research into and more detailed examination of the various facets of the spiritual economy in Glastonbury, the range of ideas, visions and values informing the entrepreneurs, the long term viability of such enterprises, and so on. Apart from the initial contribution of this research to our understanding of the Glastonbury situation and of the different forms of the spiritual economy there, a useful by-product of the project might be to gain some insight into the nature and extent of the ‘Spiritual Economy’ more generally and the necessity for business studies to pay more attention to such developments.

Conclusion

For all the extravagant claims made for it, Glastonbury is a place where some people just happen to have been born; where some people retire to or commute from; where some people work in factories and shoe shops; where there are very real problems of poverty, mental illness and drug abuse. Glastonbury is, nevertheless, a location par excellence for studying ‘bi-directional influences of environments upon individuals and of individuals upon environments in the process of believing’ (Primiano, 1995: 44). While scholars see and use location differently for the purposes of their studies, for me Glastonbury is not simply a stage set, it is an actor – that is, it is perceived to have an active role – in the constructions and negotiations of the complex and varied forms of religion and spirituality found there. People detect and project reclining Goddess figures, a three-dimensional ceremonial maze, a Zodiac, a Druid grove, the Grail in the landscape; its natural features give rise to endless speculation and myth-making.

While Glastonbury is not typical, it can be regarded as indicative of trends elsewhere in the UK. It is a good (if extreme) example of the religious plurality/ism that is very widespread but is not so obvious as the religious diversity that can accompany ethnic plurality/ism. It also demonstrates that tensions relating to belief, practice and lifestyle can be as real and serious within a virtually monocultural situation as in a multicultural context, and deserve serious consideration.

There has been and continues to be a great variety of types of religion and spirituality – Christianity (esoteric and vernacular, as well as mainstream denominations), Baha’i, Druidry, Wicca, Buddhism, Indian-derived religiosity with diverse foci and forms, Celtic spirituality and assorted Paganisms – and considerable eclecticism in belief and practice. It is a microcosm of the development of non-aligned or de-institutionalised spirituality, of the movement away from membership of institutions to the importance of networks and new forms of community. The ‘autonomisation’ of spiritualities from religions, as Hanegraaff (1999:151) puts it, and the ‘turn to subjective life’ (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005) are particularly obvious in Glastonbury in the ‘integrative spirituality’ of those who exercise choice in relation to ideas and practices from a wide variety of religious, historic, indigenous and esoteric traditions in order to produce highly personalised forms of religiosity. However, it is clear that what is sometimes dubbed DIY (Do It Yourself) religion is not ‘do it by yourself’ religion, and Glastonbury has an important function as a centre of inspiration, training, celebration, pilgrimage and communities.

One of the enduring attractions of Glastonbury for me has been the extent to which it appears a place of parallel universes. In spatial terms, Glastonbury is a space enveloped in a number of spaces: administratively in Mendip, in the county of Somerset; physically in the Somerset Levels, in the South West of England; more esoterically it is considered by some to be within the Glastonbury Zodiac or on a triangle of British ‘light centres’ along with Iona and Findhorn, and so on. Glastonbury is not a single space; it has a variety of natural features and constructed sites which are imbued with different resonances, attractions and meanings. Space within Glastonbury is contested; sites such as Chalice Well, the Tor, and the Abbey are regarded, used and controlled in different ways, with varying degrees of flexibility as to what can (and particularly in the Abbey’s case, what cannot) be done there. To borrow Massey’s terminology, Glastonbury could be described as an ‘extra-verted’ space, for many there undoubtedly have ‘a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local’ (Massey, 1993: 66).

Committing to long term research in Glastonbury has enabled the pursuit of ‘an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the religious lives of individuals with special attention to the process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioral, and material expressions of religious belief, and the ultimate object of religious belief’ (Primiano, 1995:44). I have observed and chronicled the varied and versatile responses of Christianity to contemporary trends, the creation of myth and tradition, the immensely rich material culture and diverse goods and services produced and consumed by integrative spirituality, changing attitudes to money in relation to spirituality, and ongoing experimentation with and renegotiation of lifestyles and communities.

There is much to be learned from the experience of long term, place-centred research, wherever it might occur. However, Glastonbury has provided – and continues to provide – a constantly changing and developing scene and many, varied opportunities for research. In addition to the detail of different forms of religion and spirituality, and tracking fashions and trends, what happens there can be related to – and in some cases influences – broader religious, social, geographic and economic contexts. Moreover, while place-centred studies have been used in a variety of local and national contexts to examine the effects, experiences and controversies surrounding cultural diversity, the
long term study of a location primarily known for its ‘integrative’ spirituality provides valuable insights into the constant renegotiation of what constitutes ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ in the contemporary milieu.

References


