



Faiths & Civil Society: Building Bridges or Walls?

**British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group (SocRel) Annual  
Response Day**

[www.socrel.org.uk](http://www.socrel.org.uk)

Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2018 10am - 4 pm

Venue: BSA Offices, Imperial Warf, Townmead Road, Fulham SW6 2PY

## Welcome

Old patterns of belonging are in flux, in politics and society as in religion. Strands of continuity are accompanied by fluidity and change. Brexit and Trump appear to be expressions of something important – but what? Loss of trust in leaders? Growing poverty and inequality? A climate change crisis? Anxiety about migration? Fear of violent extremism? This event will explore faith-based engagement with these civil society issues – both responsive and resistant: how faith in the public sphere forms part of new social movements, activism, digital spaces, the provision of services to meet need, critical voices, and emerging explorations of a new ‘common good’. Is public faith part of building bridges or walls? We will consider how the political, social and identity shifts that are underway affect our discipline and its scholars. What conceptual preoccupations and practical impacts will continue and emerge? After the twists and turns of 2016 and 17, how will sociology of religion respond?

## Programme Overview

9.45            *Registration*

10.00           *Welcome*

10.05 *Keynote 1 –Dan DeHanas- Thinking about religion in populist times*

10.50           *Coffee*

11.00 *Laura Jones - Challenging Islamophobia and Fostering Ambassadors for Islam: A Case Study of an Open Iftar Initiative.*

11.30 *Gwyneth Lonergan and Emma Tomalin - Becoming ‘professional’: secularisation and questions of identity among FBOs involved in anti-trafficking*

12.00 *Josh Bullock - Sunday Assembly: A ‘Radically Inclusive’ Congregation?*

12.30           *Lunch*

1.30    *Keynote 2 – Chris Baker - Religion and Politics in a post-disenchantment age.*

2.15    *Kevin McDonald - Miracles, hidden worlds and the uncanny: embodied experience, religious imaginaries and jihadist actors in Britain and France*

2.45            *Coffee*

3.00    *Greg Smith- - A diversity of diversities and boundary blurring in faith based action – a case study of work with Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Preston.*

3.30    *END*

## Thinking about religion in populist times

### Keynote Speaker: Dan DeHanas, Kings College London

Although much emphasis is placed on populism as perhaps the characteristic development of our time, little thought has been given to how populism can (and does) intersect with religion. Pundits and scholars alike use the term ‘populism’ as a shorthand to disparage a wide and contradictory range of political positions they find repugnant. My first task will be to define populism, building on the work of key political science scholars including Cas Mudde and Jan-Werner Muller. I will introduce a range of cases of populist leadership, from Trump in the United States to Modi in India, considering the ways in which religion has become an important tool in the populist repertoire. Finally, I will consider broader currents that make certain kinds of ‘thin’ politics and religion more prevalent, concluding with thoughts for those who wish to study religion sociologically in these times of bridges and walls.

## Challenging Islamophobia and Fostering Ambassadors for Islam: A Case Study of an Open Iftar Initiative

Laura Jones

Public discussions about Muslims before Ramadan 2017 were rife - UKIP published its contentious ‘anti-Muslim’ manifesto for the post-Brexit general election, Corbyn was criticised for comments on terror attacks, and a bombing by a Muslim man of a pop concert in Manchester raised the UK’s terror threat level to its maximum, not to mention Trump’s much-criticised visit to Saudi Arabia. ‘Iftar Together’ also took place that Ramadan, a series of events inviting non-Muslims into a Cardiff mosque to hear presentations about Islam, ask questions and share the fast-breaking meal. From my ethnographic study of the events, I argue Iftar Together responded to a political climate in which Muslims were increasingly demonised, reaching out to wider civil society to challenge such narratives. During the events, volunteers spoke about ‘breaking stereotypes’ and opposed dominant perceptions about Islam. Some non-Muslim guests adopted a similar anti-Islamophobic discourse, later participating in acts of solidarity with Muslims.

I argue Iftar Together acted as what Fraser (1992) terms a “subaltern counterpublic”, and describe both ‘accessible’ and ‘oppositional’ features of the events and the mosque which, respectively, helped welcome in wider society, and sought to oppose misconceptions about Islam. Thus, the events can be considered both responsive and resistant, building bridges but also drawing lines between positive and negative views about the faith.

The findings are significant in demonstrating how mosques, often perceived as un-integrated (Casey 2016), can build bridges with wider civil society. At the same time, the mosque remained somewhat ‘segregated’ in not compromising the idiosyncrasies of the space or certain views about Islam, but this follows Fraser’s theory that segregated spaces can be positive, if not essential, for facilitating engagement with the wider public. Additionally, this is one of the few studies

exploring a largely positive non-Muslim interaction with mosques rather than focusing on objections towards them.

## Becoming 'professional': secularisation and questions of identity among FBOs involved in anti-trafficking

Gwyneth Lonergan, University of Sheffield and  
Emma Tomalin, University of Leeds

In recent decades, Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) have become increasingly prominent in providing services in the place of the welfare state (Jawad, 2012; Beaumont and Cloke, 2012; Cloke et al., 2011). There is well documented FBO involvement in homelessness provision, social housing, food banks, and drug and alcohol rehabilitation. One of the key themes that has emerged from research on these activities is the impact this provision has on the FBOs themselves, and the questions around identity that arise as a consequence. FBOs have been forced to 'professionalise' and abide by government guidelines in order to win contracts (Williams, 2015); and they have entered into coalitions and partnerships with organisations of other faiths and none (Wills et al., 2009). For some FBOs, this has led to questions about what it means to be 'faith-based' and how to maintain a 'faith identity' (Bielefeld and Cleveland, 2013).

This paper will explore these question of shifting identities and secularisation among FBOs engaged in the field of Anti-Trafficking. In the UK, FBOs have recently taken an important role in providing services to trafficked persons, notably with The Salvation Army winning the contract to provide services under the National Referral Mechanism. However, anti-trafficking FBOs have encountered the same potentially secularising dynamics as those involved in other welfare provision. We will present evidence from our ESRC-funded research project suggesting that some anti-trafficking FBOs have been prompted to reflect upon how their faith influences their activities, to reconsider how they present themselves, and even to rethink what it means to be an FBO.

## Religion and Politics in a post-disenchantment age

Keynote Speaker: Chris Baker, Goldsmiths

This paper scopes the new religious and political landscapes that have emerged in the last 10 to 15 years and which have radically reconfigured existing ideas of the relationship between the religious, the secular and politics. The paper suggests that the current deformatisation of both the religious and the secular under the intense pressures of globalisation, neoliberalism and digital capitalism has helped create the conditions for a renewed search for re-enchantment and authenticity. This search is impacting on both the religious and secular 'fields' and creating innovative cross-overs and rapprochements, some of which are regressive (see Dan's paper) and some of which are progressive. I am interested in the more progressive elements of this 'turn' and will raise briefly its political and civic possibilities. I will close with some remarks on how the blurring of existing categories represented by these processes of deformatisation are

being slowly picked up in how religion and belief is being theorised within sociology of religion.

## Sunday Assembly: A 'Radically Inclusive' Congregation?

Josh Bullock, Kingston University London

My research follows the Sunday Assembly (SA), a secular (Godless) congregation that celebrates life, with the motto: 'Live Better, Help Often and Wonder More.' The SA entered the non-religious market place in January 2013 with their flagship London congregation. Now, over 70-franchised chapters exist in eight countries, attempting to provide belonging and community to the religiously unaffiliated market, while old patterns of belonging are in flux.

I draw upon a 15-month ethnographic study of the London SA and 35 semi-structured interviews to better understand lived non-religion and what the SA can tell us about the wider (non-)religious landscape. This paper presents findings in two ways: firstly, I discuss their apolitical stance and respond to the theme of 'building bridges or walls' by offering a secular communities' response to civil society issues and detail who the SA are helping when they 'help often'. Secondly, I analyse to what extent the SA are 'radically inclusive' by providing a multi-levelled answer to explain their lack of diversity in terms of age, ethnicity and social class.

## Miracles, hidden worlds and the uncanny: embodied experience, religious imaginaries and jihadist actors in Britain and France

Kevin McDonald, Middlesex University

Many of the conceptual building blocks of the sociology of religion continue to manifest the legacy of western culture and its forms of self-understanding. Among these in particular, as anthropologists such as Talal Asad argue, is an approach to the religious defined in terms of faith or belief. To this we might add the conceptual debt to models of civil society that became particularly influential following the work of Habermas. How adequate are these conceptual tools to make sense of contemporary forms of activism claiming a religious heritage or identity? This paper considers this question in the light of the emergence of contemporary forms of jihadism in Britain and France. For observers such as Gilles Kepel, these movements are a direct consequence of currents within Islam. For others such as Olivier Roy, these movements are fundamentally to be understood in terms of protest and societal dysfunction, with 'religion' simply a marker of the crisis of ideologies. Based on three years fieldwork involving interviews and analysis of social media use, this paper introduces the ways young jihadists construct a reference to the religious. Rather than highlight faith, this paper underlines the central importance of embodied experience and imaginaries such as the uncanny and the sublime, as well as visceral

themes such as disgust and purification. In each of these pathways we encounter forms of religious self-making, and the remaking of the religious. Understanding ‘the grammars’ of such practices and imaginaries is important, not only for specialists researching contemporary jihadism and its surprising capacity to impact the public sphere in Europe, but also more broadly for researchers attempting to understand the increasing importance of embodied imaginaries in the ways actors construct ‘the religious’, in particular through communicative practices and cultures constructed through social media.

## A diversity of diversities and boundary blurring in faith based action – a case study of work with Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Preston.

Greg Smith, William Temple Foundation

A recent paper by Spickard (2017) has helpfully explored the distinction between religious diversity as a social phenomenon and the concept of religious pluralism as political value and policy in the context of the USA. He cites some of my earlier work in East London (Smith 2000) and refers to the situation described there as “religious cacophony”. In this paper I present a case study of a different local context, in a smaller religiously diverse city, twenty years later. Reflecting (out of my own practitioner involvement) on the community work among Asylum Seekers and Refugees that has emerged in the City of Sanctuary movement I describe how people and communities of faith (and no faith) have collaborated to support vulnerable people who have recently arrived in Preston. In these processes religious practices, beliefs and values, some shared – some contested, are explicitly and implicitly present though sometimes parked out of sight, and often blurred.

In exploring the extent to which religious cacophony may have transmuted into a measure of harmony through local community and political networking I seek to develop a more nuanced conceptual framework for addressing religion and faith in the public sphere. Policy makers need to move on from reified notions of religion and “faith communities”. There is more to faith than identity politics and bonding social capital and the bridging and linking social capital that helps deliver public services to “hard to reach” minority groups. While religious differences and even conflicts are not totally eliminated local political processes involving religious actors can produce significant advances for the common good. In a diversity of diversities some local contexts such as Preston, may provide more favourable conditions than others for the ideals and politics of pluralism.

### References.

Spickard, James V. 2017. "Diversity vs. Pluralism: Reflections on the Current Situation in the United States." *Religions* 8, no. 9: 169.

Smith, Greg. 2000. *Global Systems and Religious Diversity in the Inner City—Migrants in the East*



