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Welcome

Dear friends and colleagues

I was delighted to be asked to be chair of the BSA's Sociology of Religion Study Group and hope that I can serve the study group well over the next 3 years. Sophie Gilliat-Ray is a tough act to follow, and I want to thank Sophie for her service to the study group during her years as chair. She has passed on the baton with her characteristic warmth and generosity, and I'm most grateful for her support - as well as our excellent Exec Committee - in helping me get to grips with what's involved. It's a real privilege to play a part in leading this academic community and take forward its traditions of collegiality, peer support and critical scholarship. I'm excited to explore what we can achieve together.

Socrel has been my preferred academic network since I was a PhD student, and I have been coming to the group's annual conferences pretty much every year since 1999. Throughout that time, I've stayed involved because the conversations have remained fascinating, and I've made lots of good friends. I've also realised that it is at the annual Socrel conference that I am reminded why I got into this field in the first place; this is the context in which my intellectual curiosity is stimulated most and the context in which I learn most about the sociology of religion. I know I'm not alone in feeling this way; indeed, Socrel only works so well because more people feel this way. That's a precious tradition and one I want us to preserve and develop. We've a lot to celebrate.

We've also got much to look forward to, even in the strange wider circumstances in which we all find ourselves. The Covid pandemic has introduced a distinct kind of isolation and social fragmentation, one that highlights the fragile nature of human connectivity. We need, perhaps more than ever, to remember the importance of collective engagement, of supporting one another, of the fact that we achieve so much more when we work together and share the fruits of our endeavours. Covid has also triggered some interesting religious responses, from the resistance of anti-vax evangelicals to the communities across faiths who have provided havens of hope and support for the vulnerable, and the abundance of online activity that has reflected new forms of social creativity. Some excellent scholarship has already emerged on these phenomena, and I look forward to hearing of more at our Socrel events.

On the latter, I am especially looking forward to our Chair's Response Day, on 'Teaching Religion', at the University of Nottingham on 12th November. Thanks to Tim Hutchings for taking on the local organisation of that. It promises to be a great event, so do come along if you can. If not, I look forward to seeing you at some point in the not-too-distant future.

Mathew Guest (Chair)
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2021 Annual Conference: Beyond Binaries in the Sociology of Religion

Last July, Socrel held its annual conference online. While we missed seeing Socrel members face to face, and the opportunity to catch up informally with peers, the Committee was delighted to be able to arrange for the conference to take place virtually and avoid a cancellation. The theme of our conference this year was “Beyond Binaries in the Sociology of Religion”, which led to thought-provoking papers, and stimulating conversations.

This conference marked the (belated) 45th anniversary of our study group and provided us with the opportunity to reflect on our discipline. To mark the occasion, we hosted a panel of prominent scholars in the field of sociology of religion, who reflected on how the discipline had evolved over the last four decades, what challenges it currently faces, and the opportunities that lay ahead. The special panel was constituted of Prof. Grace Davie (University of Exeter), Prof. James Beckford (University of Warwick), Prof. Eileen Barker (LSE), Prof. Linda Woodhead (Lancaster University), and Prof. Colin Campbell (University of York), and was chaired by Prof. Sophie Gilliat-Ray (Cardiff University).

During our three-day conference, we were also joined by Dr Sarah-Jane Page (Aston University), Prof. Colin Campbell (University of York), and Dr Samuel Perry (University of Oklahoma) who delivered fantastic keynote presentations, reflecting on ways forward for the discipline of sociology of religion. Sarah-Jane demonstrated that a queer feminist framework would offer a much-needed lens to critique the taken-for-granted, unpack power relationships, and give a voice to individuals and communities who are at the margins. Colin talked about the relevance of the ‘cultic milieu’, reflecting on its meaning for the discipline. Samuel spoke about religious nationalist movements, and how they present our discipline with opportunities to revisit old assumptions and classifications. If you missed our conference, you can use #SocRel21 on Twitter to see photos and read comments from presenters and delegates.

We would very much like to thank Elaine Forester, Events Coordinator at the BSA, for all her efforts and guidance as we made the transition to online events. We would like to thank Socrel committee members: Sophie Gilliat-Ray, Céline Benoit, Joanna Malone, Caroline Starkey, Kim Harding, Michael Munnik, and especially Rachael Shillitoe. Finally, thank you to all delegates, keynotes, colleagues, and friends who have come to present their work and engage with the work of others! We look forward to seeing you all soon.

Written by Céline Benoit.

Introducing the New Socrel Officers

Mathew Guest, Robert Barward-Symmons, Gillian Chu, and Isabella Kasselstrand have recently joined the Socrel committee that is also made up of returning officers Céline Benoit (Convener), Caroline Starkey (Membership), and Kim Harding (Internet Officer). Learn more about the new committee members from the short bios below.

Chair: Mathew Guest

I am excited to be taking on the role of chair of the Sociology of Religion Study Group this year and look forward to working with such an impressive community of scholars. I have been a member of Socrel since 1999 and it has been my academic community of choice ever since. I'm keen to do what I can to sustain and enhance the lively, inclusive culture that has been the hallmark of Socrel events for as long as I can remember. I'm Professor in the Sociology of Religion at Durham University, where I am Head of the Department of Theology and Religion and have held a teaching post there since 2004. After initial research on the evangelical movement in the UK and on value transmission in clergy families, I have spent the last decade researching the status of religious identities within contexts of higher education.

Events Officer: Rob Barward-Symmons

It's a pleasure to be joining the SocRel committee as Events Officer having greatly valued the role of these events and the wider community in my own development over the past few years as a PG and Early Career Researcher. I completed my PhD last year at the University of Kent, exploring Evangelical Christian youth groups as spaces of religious formation through the lens of ritual theory, and since then I have been working on a project with the University of York exploring the responses of churches to the COVID-19 pandemic and how these were experienced by those involved. We're already developing some exciting new ideas for how to develop our events in light of the past 18 months and I'm looking forward to working on these with the rest of the committee over the next few years. Do let me know if you have any specific thoughts about our events.

Postgraduate and Early Career Scholar Liaison Officer: Ann Gillian Chu

I am excited to be serving on the Socrel committee as the Post-graduate and Early Career Scholar Liaison Officer. This role involves organising a PG/ECR day at the annual conference, relaying PG/ECR concerns to the committee, among other things. I've been inducted into the field of Sociology at a young age: as a pre-teen, I had a front-row seat watching my mom complete her PhD in Sociology, with a research focus on Hong Kong female entrepreneurs. Other than my Socrel endeavours, I spend most of my time completing my PhD (Divinity) at the University of St Andrews, in the Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics. My doctoral research investigates how Hong Kong Christians conceptualise ideas like democracy and rights in light of recent resistance movements, using ethnographic methods. Having completed my undergraduate degree in the University of Edinburgh, it feels like coming full circle to be doing my PhD in Scotland. I look forward to

meeting like-minded people, especially with fellow PG/ECR scholars, during my time serving on the Socrel committee.

Publications and Communications Officer: Isabella Kasselstrand

I am delighted to join the Socrel committee as Publications and Communications Officer, which includes the task of editing this newsletter. I recently returned to the UK for a Lecturer position in the Sociology Department at the University of Aberdeen after having spent seven years living and working in California and Colorado. I completed a PhD in Sociology at the University of Edinburgh in 2014 with a thesis on religious decline in Scotland and Sweden. Since then, I have continued to conduct quantitative and mixed methods research on secularization and secularity primarily from a cross-national and comparative perspective. In addition to my role with Socrel, I also serve as co-editor of the journal *Secularism & Nonreligion*. I am excited to be part of the community of sociologists of religion here in the UK and I look forward to making new connections during my time on the Socrel committee.

Interview with Sarah Harvey – History of Socrel Project

Socrel has awarded £5000 in funding to Dr Sarah Harvey for the History of Socrel project. This project involves composing a history of how Socrel and the Sociology of Religion have evolved in the UK over the past 46 years.

Dr Harvey is currently Senior Research Officer at Inform, an educational charity that focuses on minority religions. Inform is based at King's College London and was founded by Prof. Eileen Barker in 1988, when she was Chair of Socrel. She notes that Prof James Beckford, the first convener of Socrel, has also been involved with Inform, and explains that Inform “has always had connections to Socrel and to the Sociology of Religion more widely.” At Inform, Dr Harvey engages in a wide range of roles “from being the first port of call to anyone making an enquiry on our telephone line or email service; to maintaining our database of over 5000 religious and non-religious movements; to managing commissioned research projects. As such, it is difficult to specialise, but over the years I have developed particular interests in themes relating to religious education and schooling, millennial movements, gender and health and healing.” In other words, she has developed broad expertise and insights in the field of sociology of religion – experience that, needless to say, will be of great value in the History of Socrel project.



Dr Harvey first saw the call for proposals advertised on the Socrel mailing list and decided to apply because she thought it sounded very interesting and relevant. “I think it is a much needed project – tracing the history of the Sociology of Religion in Britain using Socrel, its events and members, as a means to explore the discipline’s key moments, issues and themes of focus.”

In addition to her interest in the topic, Dr Harvey also applied because she was in a strong position to carry out the project given her role with Inform and her experience and contacts in the broader field. Indeed, she has been involved in the sociology of religion for many years. After completing her undergraduate degree in Comparative Religion and Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester, she achieved a master’s degree in social research Methods at the

London School of Economics – where she took classes taught by Prof Eileen Barker. She subsequently completed a PhD at the University of Kent under the supervision of Prof Gordon Lynch. Over the years, she has also been actively involved with Socrel. On this note, she states that “I have found Socrel a friendly and engaging community and I have had contact with many of the office holders over the years.”

When asking her about her plans for the project, Sarah explains that she will begin with some archival research, which includes exploring the BSA archive in Durham and going through newsletters, past events, and online materials. She will also make use of Sociology of Religion textbooks and course materials throughout the decades to “map key areas of interest and how they have changed over time.” On this matter, she states that “if anyone has recommendations of textbooks to look at, or can share past course material, I’d love to hear from you” (sarah.harvey@kcl.ac.uk). Finally, she plans to interview around 20 Sociology of Religion colleagues, including both members and non-members of Socrel to gain a better understanding of their involvement in Socrel and in the broader research field. With the aim to trace research areas, themes, and key events over the years, Dr Harvey hopes to create a short film and a journal article about the project. She will also present her results at a future Socrel conference.

The Socrel committee looks forward to seeing this project unfold. Good luck, Sarah!

Written by Isabella Kasselstrand.

Announcements

Chair's Response Day

On November 12, SocRel will be hosting our annual Chair's Response Day, this year exploring the theme of "Teaching Religion" at the University of Nottingham. Along with a keynote workshop from Dr Dawn Llewellyn inspired by the work of bell hooks, sharing good practice around building learning communities in the study of religion, the event will explore ideas, experiences, and critiques of the teaching of religion in the UK today. We will be welcoming papers from both sociologists of religion and those involved in teaching Religious Education themselves, whether at Primary, Secondary, or Tertiary levels, offering invaluable opportunities for discussion across the different spaces of expertise. The event will conclude with an online panel discussion, with further involvement from academics and teachers exploring the topic of teaching religion and worldviews. *Registration closes on November 5.* More information can be found [here](#).

Religion or Belief Group – Monthly Newsletter

As some of you will know, Dave Perfect, the former policy and research lead for religion or belief at the Equality and Human Rights Commission, established the Religion or Belief Group at the end of 2020. It now has more than 500 members. Members are sent monthly newsletters which cover forthcoming events and recent or forthcoming publications relating to religion or belief, equality, and human rights issues. If you would like to join the Group to receive future newsletters, please contact Dave at david.m.perfect@btinternet.com.

Socrel Member Interviews

Adam Dinham

Professor of Faith & Public Policy

Co-Head of Department

Goldsmith's University of London



You recently published your book *Religion and Belief Literacy: Reconnecting a Chain of Learning*. What is it about and what do you see as the book's main takeaways for sociologists of religion?

The book really pulls together my academic journey so far, which I think of in three phases. In the first, I wanted to open up the connections between religion/belief and public policy at a time when policymakers were suddenly paying so much attention to them. I kept coming up against a sort of anxious desire to get it right on religion and belief, alongside a serious lack of ability among policymakers to talk about them. So, I realised I needed to switch to a second phase – which I think of as a sideways step in many ways – designed to address this. This is when the idea of ‘religious literacy’ became central for me. I wanted to work out an approach through which policymakers could recover some sort of ability to talk about religion and belief, whatever their own particular stance. In the new book, ‘religious literacy’ has evolved into ‘religion and belief literacy’, to more visibly include the whole range of religions, beliefs, worldviews, and values, including non-religious perspectives. After about five years working on this idea, more recently I’ve turned back to what I see as the bread and butter of exploring connections between religion/belief and public policy, with the goal of influencing better policy. As presented in the book, I’ve done detailed documentary and policy analyses of the treatments of religion and belief in primary and secondary schools, universities and the health and social care professions, examined through the lens of religion and belief literacy. The main finding is that each treats religion and belief with inner inconsistency, let alone consistency between the spheres, and that it’s no wonder therefore that publics and professions are confused. I suggest a way of lining up treatments such that the differences and debates can remain but are recognised, acknowledged, and signposted.

In your research, you emphasise that religion and belief literacy is deeply connected to social justice work. Could you tell us a bit more about this?

Well, I think religion and belief are disadvantaged in three ways which, for me, makes this a social justice issue. First is the general way in which secular thinking infuses the public sphere, especially, oddly, among elites and leaderships. These are all too often still the white, straight men whose own intellectual formation was taking place in universities in the 70s, and 80s when religion and belief were widely regarded as irrelevant things of the past. That

makes it difficult for any kind of religion or belief identity in public spaces, even though critiques from the sociology of religion and elsewhere were painting a complex picture of secularity, continuing traditional religion, new forms, and growing numbers of no-religion. I feel this played out – and still does – in how religion and belief minorities experience services and workplaces of all kinds, and especially in health and social care. Then second, within that, the religions and beliefs which are newer to Britain and Europe find themselves minoritized in ways which intersect with other minoritized identities, especially ethnicity and class. I think this got even worse when 9/11 happened and a so-called ‘race problem’ quickly became seen as a faith problem. The huge majority of law-abiding, kind and decent Muslims were smeared with ideas of radical extremism, resulting in discrimination and sometimes violence against *them*. And third, the range of views and values out there is all too often transposed as a culture war so that religious beliefs about same sex marriage can only *fight* with liberal ideas about homophobia and human rights (among many other tensions). As a man married to a Muslim man, with our mixed ethnicity, mixed religion children, I feel these battles sometimes very painfully, and my personal experience translates into an intellectual effort to find better ways to have the conversation with more light and love than heat and hate.

You approach research from an applied and multidisciplinary perspective. What are the greatest opportunities and challenges in doing so?

When I was working at Anglia Ruskin University, somebody from Brunel, where I’d also worked, said to me on the station platform after a conference, ‘I think anybody at a post-92 university is a failure, don’t you?’ That captures for me the many ways in which I’m so over academic hierarchy, disciplinary protectionism, and snobbish notions of good and best universities. For me, it’s a wonderful miracle that universities exist at all and that places like Anglia Ruskin and Cambridge can exist and make such different offers in the very same city. The Settlement Movement in the 20th and the Arts and Crafts movement in the 19th century echo strong for me in their view of universities as places of liberation, empowerment, and creativity. In my own institution, Goldsmiths, we were founded in 1891 as ‘unsectarian, undenominational, serving the working-artisanal poor of London with technical skills for good jobs alongside community activism and creative arts because work alone is not enough: man [sic] must take responsibility for the community around him and revel in the beauty of art’. I don’t think these working poor, and their contemporary equivalents, care much about disciplines or stand-alone theory, useful though they have been, and are. For me they exist to *serve* the adventure that is learning, not to boundary it. My professional perspectives keep my feet on the ground of what it feels like to offer services to people and to respond to a highly regulated policy environment. My academic perspectives enable connections between thoughts about politics, society and meaning which enrich each other. Altogether I feel the combination enables me to freight ideas about religion and belief, through a policy milieu which knows it needs it, but struggles, into professional practices. It’s hard to work like that and I often find myself in peer review being not quite enough of any one discipline to satisfy everyone. But when it works, the rewards outweigh the challenges, and I feel really proud of my interdisciplinarity which I deeply feel, and believe in.

Martha Shaw
Associate Professor in Education,
London South Bank University



Your research focuses on the teaching of religion and worldviews in schools. What is the meaning and significance of the term ‘worldviews?’

Much like the concept of ‘religion’, that of ‘worldviews’ is contested and means different things to different people. To me it means ways of being in the world, including the beliefs, values, and practices that make up our day-to-day lives. I am aware that this is very broad but when thinking about worldviews education, we are talking about understanding people in the world, what is important to them, what

motivates them and what challenges them and how they relate to others. To give the concept more shape, I think it is helpful to think of it as encompassing religious and non-religious, personal, and organised ways in which people conceive of and express their relationship to the world. Given the word itself, there is a tendency to reduce worldviews to ‘ways of understanding or seeing’ the world. I think this is limiting not only because there is much more of interest than peoples’ perspectives on the world but also because a worldview is not necessarily lived as a coherent set of ideas, neither does practice always correlate neatly with belief.

I think the term ‘worldview’, whilst perhaps imperfect, represents an important shift in education in this area. At a school level, the way in which a ‘worldviews approach’ is being interpreted has potential for education that gets a lot closer to the contemporary reality of lived worldviews. The term certainly has more scope for including the dynamic, fluid, and ‘messy’ nature of worldviews as both tradition and identity. As the ‘worldviews approach’ is gaining ground in RE, it is tied to pedagogical approaches rooted in philosophical hermeneutics. This foregrounds the interpretability of worldviews and I think this is really significant in terms of students’ understanding and in its potential to contribute to wider educational concerns around the representation of knowledge.

In 2015 you published a report (with Prof Adam Dinham) entitled ‘RE for REal’ in which you highlighted the fact that Religious Education in schools is often disconnected from the ‘real religious landscape’ of the country. Would you say that this is still the case today, and if so, what are your main recommendations going forward?

The REforReal research came at a time when research in the sociology of religion was growing substantially, building on the ESRC/AHRC Religion in Society Research

Programme. It was clear to us at that time that most teaching in schools didn't get to grips with the 'real religious landscape' as we called it. Most RE focused on the 'big six' religions and on beliefs and practices, presented as linked to static traditions. I think things have changed a bit since then. There is certainly more awareness of the critique around the world religions approach. RE is fortunate to have a very strong and vibrant subject community and organisations like Culham St Gabriels, AULRE and NATRE ensure that RE develops and responds to contemporary challenges and debates. But how this translates to every RE classroom across the country is another question. This is why Adam and I recommended a statutory national framework for education in this area. The National Entitlement proposed by the Commission on RE goes some way towards this. A key issue is that, as a school subject, RE is part of the broader education of the child and debates around its role have been rife forever. With that in mind, the way forward is about more than content. Pedagogy is as important. We need to think about what we want RE to do for young people and how that can be achieved. This is what I have been grappling with in my work on worldview literacy. Rather than a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes vis-a-vis religious diversity that can be taught, I see worldview literacy as a process of praxis, which should engage young people in reflexive encounter with difference. As such this has as much to do with citizenship education as RE and is as much about process as content. Such a process should develop students' epistemic and personal awareness in relation to their engagement with worldviews. This means starting with concepts like 'religion', 'worldview' etc and including an explicit deconstruction of the representations that dominate in society and in education. I think such an approach is necessary if we are to avoid education that is disconnected from the 'real religious (or worldview) landscape.'

Could you tell us more about your current project that explores how RE can be re-imagined in schools? Did you come across anything surprising or unexpected while working with the five different schools for this project?

This project set out to explore how schools were engaging with the recommendations of the CoRE report in terms of the proposed National Entitlement and to show case examples of RE that spoke to the new direction for RE articulated therein. This resulted in five case studies that are available **online** as PDFs and short videos. What we found was further evidence of an appetite for reform and for the study of worldviews as *lived*. A key focus amongst all the schools was the interpretability of worldviews and the importance of understanding how worldviews are experienced by their adherents on a day-to-day basis. This is nothing new to many in the RE world and subject pioneers have been promoting such a focus for years, but to some teachers, many of whom are not RE specialists, the standard approach of teaching 'facts' about the 'main world religions' prevails. Something else that the project demonstrated is the importance of teacher-research partnerships. For the teachers involved, sustained involvement with the project and subject networks was a key factor in bringing their vision for change to fruition, as well as providing a valuable space for reflexive action. There is, I think, a much stronger link between research/academia and teaching these days and as RE rethinks itself, its relationship to the sociology of religion and religious studies are vitally important if it is to stay relevant. This of course depends on opportunities for such partnerships.

Fatou Sambé
PhD researcher
Cardiff University



What is the focus of your PhD?

My PhD project is exploring the long-term experiences of converts to Islam, specifically converts who have children. At the same time, I am interested in including the perspectives of the next generation, the (adult) children of converts. Whilst there has been quite a lot of research on 'Conversion to Islam', particularly about conversion stories, motives, gender and identity issues, there has been minimal research on long-term processes or the experiences of convert children.

And there are so many interesting questions to consider. For example: How do Muslim converts raise their children (religiously)? Do they want to raise their children in the Islamic faith? What challenges come up with navigating different communities and extended families? When does a new Muslim or convert stop being a convert or 'new' to the faith? How do parents navigate their conversion if their child was old enough to witness it? How do those children experience their parents' conversion? How do children of converts navigate their extended families and often mixed backgrounds? Do children of converts experience some of the same challenges as their parents (as highlighted in the literature)?

It was also very important for me to include the experiences of Black participants. With a few exceptions, there has not been a lot of research about the experiences of Black Muslims, especially in the UK context. We know that race (and racism) is relevant in British Muslim studies, so it's surprising we have not considered it much in the topic of conversion to Islam. Whilst whiteness and conversion to Islam have been interrogated, we have not asked what it means to be a Black Muslim convert, or what it means to be Black and have (a) convert parent(s). It is crucial to include Black and non-white perspectives and narratives in research about Muslims (and conversion), considering that Muslim communities in Britain are ethnically diverse.

What led you to this topic?

My undergraduate thesis was about the experiences and challenges of Muslim convert women in Scotland and Germany. During those interviews, where the focus was more on the conversion narratives, I noticed that some of the women mentioned the challenges that came with raising their children as convert women. So, it was always in the back of my mind, that

if the right opportunity came along, I would do an extended research project on the topic of post-conversion experiences. Having done a small project on children of converts during my master's at Leeds University, it seemed ideal to combine these two topics to research Muslim convert families in Britain for my PhD. Additionally, I am also the child of a convert mother, so I'm personally invested and interested in this topic.

What was your experience of navigating the PhD data collection process during the pandemic?

The pandemic started right at the beginning of my fieldwork. I managed to conduct two in-person interviews and then found out that we would be stuck in our homes for the foreseeable future. Therefore, my fieldwork plan and methodological approach required some rethinking and rewriting. I continued my interviews online via Zoom, which had many benefits, such as reaching those with a hectic and busy life and work schedule, saving on travel costs, as well as greater flexibility for both me and the participants.

Unfortunately, collecting data during the pandemic also meant that I had to drop one of my research questions, as I could no longer conduct any ethnographic fieldwork at convert support group events. I was interested in exploring convert support groups and the role they play in supporting and providing a space for converts and convert families. I think the ethnography would have helped to contextualise my findings and complemented the interview data. This might be something I will explore further in the future.

However, I have still managed to collect a significant and rich amount of data. I have conducted 46 in-depth interviews with 50 participants with diverse backgrounds from all over the UK. Many of my participants have expressed a lot of enthusiasm for my PhD topic and were keen to tell their stories, which was very encouraging and motivating. I look forward to the next step and getting into the nitty gritty of coding and analysing the interview data.

Socrel Committee

Chair: Mathew Guest

Convenor: Céline Benoit

Membership Officer: Caroline Starkey

Events Officer: Robert Barward-Symmons

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Internet Officer: Kim Harding

Postgraduate Representative: Ann Gillian Chu

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