**Seed Corn Competition**

**Winning projects**

***May all Beings be Well: Tracing the contours of the sacred and secular in contemporary British Buddhism***

**Dr Caroline Starkey (University of Leeds)**

The aim of this project is to produce the first sociological analysis of the growing phenomenon of Buddhist organisations providing ‘secular’ wellbeing classes and programmes for non-Buddhist audiences. Over the past decade, an increasing number of Buddhist organisations (particularly, although not exclusively, those catering to British converts) had begun to provide regular courses targeted specifically at non-Buddhists, focusing on teaching mindfulness through ‘secular’ meditation, life-coaching, compassion training, and re-connection with the natural world through walking or gardening. These courses are popular, often with waiting lists, and with some residential programmes costing over £500 for a weekend, they are becoming an important revenue stream for Buddhist organisations trying to survive in a crowded spiritual marketplace.

During a previous project, funded by Historic England, I noticed some increase in secular provision in British Buddhist spaces, but I was unable to investigate whether this was a more widespread trend, and what this might mean. Thanks to the Seedcorn funding, I have been able to construct a focused project looking specifically at this issue, resulting in written outputs (journal article, book chapter - in progress), as well as initiating a network for scholars interested in Buddhism in Britain, and hosting the first Buddhism in Britain Research Symposium in December 2021, with a number of national and international participants.

As part of the Seedcorn Grant, in 2021-2022, I conducted 14 interviews with Buddhist teachers providing ‘secular’ programmes, and also attended several online and in-person teaching sessions, including a mindful writing workshop, a compassion festival, a ‘relax and de-stress’ and a ‘mindfulness for challenging times’ retreat, and a secular mindfulness group walk. The combination of the interviews and the observations allowed me to get a strong sense of the range of provision, answering my primary research questions for the project which were: why would Buddhist organisations and teachers want to facilitate ‘secular’ or ‘non-Buddhist’ programmes, and how, where and by whom are they taught? How is the idea of the secular understood and operationalised by Buddhist groups in this context? How does this understanding of the secular relate to ‘Buddhist’ teaching and practice in the lived experiences of teachers and organisations? The interview and observation phase of the project has been completed, and I have presented the preliminary findings at the American Academy of Religion in November 2021, and I am now working on completing the written outputs before the end of the project in August 2022. I’m very grateful for SocRel extending the length of the project due to the impact of Covid.

Caroline Starkey, 2022

***2019***:

***Living Well Together: Learning from Women Healthcare Chaplains about Religion, Gender and Human Flourishing***

***Dr Sonya Sharma and Professor Sheryl Reimer-Kirkham***

Healthcare chaplains, dealing with human fragility and wellbeing, are at the forefront of creating more flourishing forms of ‘living well together’ at the intersections of faiths, values, communities and cultures (Beaman 2017). In a previous study of healthcare contexts in London and Vancouver (Reimer-Kirkham and Sharma et al. 2020), we found healthcare chaplains’ work could be transformative. For example, exposing assumptions about self and others, connections made across differences, continuities of care provided in the face of difficult decisions about medical treatment, and through ordinary acts the encouragement of equality between groups and individuals. However, the lacunae that became apparent and that we aimed to address in the current research was how issues of gender affected the work and visibility of women healthcare chaplains.

Through generous funding from the British Sociological Association’s Sociology of Religion Study Group (2019), we were supported to conduct qualitative interviews with women healthcare chaplains based in London and Vancouver about gender, chaplaincy work and religious and social change. The rationale to include a few Canadian women healthcare chaplains was that by seeking international comparison we might better understand the British context itself and to consider transferability of our findings. We were also supported to conduct a group dialogue with participants and invited scholars to understand how the women’s individual and collective work could be leveraged as strategies for living well together and recommendations for future research.

References

Beaman, L. (2017) Living well together in a (non)religious future: Contributions from the sociology of religion. Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review78 (1): 9-32.

# Reimer-Kirkham, S., Sharma, S., Brown, R. and Calestani, M. (2020) *Prayer as Transgression? The Social Relations of Prayer in Healthcare Settings.* Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press.

***2018:***

***Churching: The Revival of a Ritual for Mothers in the Church of England,* Dr Dawn Llewellyn, University of Chester**

This project qualitatively examines the reasons why the women in an Anglican church in the North-West of England have reintroduced ‘Thanksgiving for Women after Childbirth’, or ‘churching’, to their Parish. The ritual, rooted in Jewish and Christian rites of purification after birth, was usually held 40 days after childbirth to mark a mother’s return to the community after surviving the dangers of pregnancy and delivery (Cressy, 1993). Formalised in English liturgy in the twelfth century, its emphasis shifted away from purification towards blessing and thanksgiving. Although it features in the Book of Common Prayer, and it was once widespread and an active part of church life in the twentieth century, it is thought to have been abandoned; considered superstitious, misogynistic, and outdated (Houlbrooke 2011).

However, despite its apparent disappearance and current unpopularity, it has recently been reintroduced by a group of women belonging to a Church of England parish, ‘St James’, in North West. In 2010, Beth, a Reader in the church, along with other volunteers, organised and oversaw a churching service. Without a priest but using the formal church space, Beth organises and leads four services a year for church members and non-members, writing liturgy and leading prayers for women who have requested the service, to acknowledge the times they have given birth. Family and friends are also welcome and take part, and once the service has ended the attendees move to the back of church, rearrange the furniture, and have a celebratory lunch in time for the mother and toddler group to join in.

Through the genorosity of the British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group, I have been funded to trace the re-emergence of churching at St James; to examine the women’s motivations for initiating and participating in the service; and to investigate the processes through which the women are adapting, using and remaking churching, and what meanings it offers those involved. I will undertake participant observation of the services during one liturgical year and conduct interviews with the women, their guests and the clergy team. I am awaiting ethical approval from Chester (pending, December 2018) and I plan to attend the first service on 2019 (scheduled for February). I will report on my progress during SOCREL’s annual conference in 2019.

***2017:***

***Religion and Intimate Life*, Dr Sarah-Jane Page, Aston University**

I am currently undertaking a pilot project called ‘Religion and Intimate Life’ with the seed corn funding Socrel generously awarded to me earlier this year. This project is using qualitative methods to explore religious attitudes to sexuality, in particular, attitudes to abortion and homosexuality. The key question posed by this pilot project is: What is the relationship between religion, intimate life and opinion-formation? This project will assess how religious individuals experience intimate life and formulate their views and opinions on intimate life, to ascertain the extent to which qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews can be utilised for a more detailed understanding of opinion-formation, particularly in relation to how opinion is constituted and the extent to which opinion alters over time. The pilot study is a methodological test, used to inform the construction of a large bid to a major research council, and is based on in-depth interviews and questionnaires with 15 individuals of various religious affiliations. I am currently in the middle of data collection. The second part of the funding is concerned with fostering connections with research teams and scholars around the world who are willing to collaborate on the aforementioned research bid. This connection-building is going very well; there is currently a lot of interest in this topic area within the discipline. This project is running over 18 months (the lengthy gestation due to my currently high administrative load as an Associate Dean). I will be reporting findings from the research at the Socrel conference in 2018.

Dr Sarah-Jane Page, August 2017