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Welcome

Dear friends and colleagues...It has been some months now since our annual conference in Bristol, and I retain fond memories of the occasion. Those of you who were able to be there will recall a vibrant, warm, supportive gathering which was brightened further by some excellent academic papers, a fascinating panel discussion on religion and contemporary British politics, powerful keynote lectures from Tariq Modood, Anthea Butler and Lisa Oakley, and some very tasty pizza. It was a delight to be able to gather together in person once again, share ideas, and learn from one another, and I hope you all enjoyed the conference as much as I did. (For those who prefer their scholarship served with a generous slice of levity – like myself – I hope you enjoyed the post-dinner quiz, which will remain an annual fixture...)

Our 2024 annual conference will be held at the University of Northumbria in Newcastle. Please see the call for papers on page 8. It will be great to meet in the north east of England, and I hope the location will attract plenty of colleagues from the region's universities, including my own. Those of you less familiar with Newcastle as a city are in for a treat, and as Northumbria Uni is right in the city centre, there should be plenty of opportunities to have a look around. (I would especially recommend the Tyneside Cinema, Pani's Sardinian restaurant, the Baltic art gallery, and the lovely walk down Grey Street onto the iconic quayside.)

The theme of the 2024 conference will be 'Religion, Justice, and Social Action'. This reflects the strong contemporary interest in the relationship between religion and a variety of social injustices – whether understood as forms of abuse, corruption or exploitation – but also the recognition that religious movements often play an important role in combatting the moral problems we encounter in wider society. Some of these issues were addressed at the Bristol conference - including Lisa Oakley's powerful keynote on spiritual abuse - and the momentum behind associated debates suggested many of our study group members would embrace an opportunity to engage further with questions of justice and activism in relation to religious identities. I was seriously impressed by the thoughtful, creative discussion at this year's conference and look forward to seeing more of the same in Newcastle in 2024.

Thanks as always to the Socrel Executive Committee – including our newly appointed EDI sub-team of Ruth Sheldon, Krysia Waldock, Lois Lee, and Renasha Khan. We are always open to member contributions to our newsletter, so if you'd like to contribute a book or conference review, brief article, or report on some research or educational initiative you are pursuing, please do get in touch.

Mathew Guest (Chair, Socrel)

2023 Socrel Annual Conference

This year we held our first in-person annual conference since 2019, meeting together at the University of Bristol in early July to explore issues around 'Religion and Power'. We were delighted to welcome over 100 delegates, including a significant number who were attending an in-person Socrel conference for the first time. It was a joy to be able to rekindle old relationships and form new ones across the study group.

Throughout the three days our speakers and panellists explored the complex relationship between religion and power, and our delegates provided a fantastic and fascinating range of insights to the topic. Issues covered included politics, education, race, gender, sexuality, social justice and activism, conflict, and countless others across more than 75 papers, short papers, panels, workshops, posters, and discussions.

Alongside this, our three keynote speakers each brought a different lens to the vital issue. Tariq Modood (University of Bristol) opened the conference with an important exploration of the significance of identity definitions in the face of antisemitism and Islamophobia in particular, while also outlining the importance of being able to speak critically about religious and political groups – with a dialogical approach being central here. On Day Two we were joined, virtually, by Anthea Butler (University of Pennsylvania) to discuss race, religion, and nationalism in the US. Butler mapped out the relationship between White Christian Nationalism, explicit racism, and the pure pursuit of power and made clear the urgency of the situation, while leaving us with a call to action: we must draw together, organise, and get actively involved in countering this hate. Our final keynote came from Lisa Oakley (University of Chester), who drew on her extensive psychological research of the use, and abuse, of power within religious contexts, including accounts from survivors of spiritual abuse. Again, delegates were challenged to reflect on how we as a community and as a discipline more widely might play a role in responding to abuses of spiritual power.

On Day Two we welcomed Dilwar Hussain (New Horizons in British Islam), Chine McDonald (Theos), Tripti Megeri (Bristol Multi-Faith Forum) and Sarah Owen MP (Shadow Minister for Local Government, Faith and Communities) for our fascinating keynote panel exploring religion and power in politics, while Liam Harrison (University of West of England) also delivered a Postgraduate and Early Career Workshop on how we can learn from storytelling and creative writing to better communicate our research. Local poet Muneera Pilgrim, who performed for the conference on the second evening, also provided a workshop on her work exploring race, religion, and power through poetry.

I want to thank everyone who attended the annual conference this year for helping make it such a success, in particular for continuing to embody the friendly and nurturing community that Socrel has long prided itself on. We look forward to seeing you all again in July.

Written by Rob Barward-Symmons.

Feminist Identities in the Field

Since 2021, Feminist Identities in the Field has featured in Socrel's annual conference. The panel aims to explore what a feminist orientation means for social research in religion, particularly qualitative approaches. Despite attending and hearing fascinating papers during our membership of Socrel, we noticed that there was rarely the opportunity to discuss methodologies and methods at length, or to learn about the challenges and innovations in fieldwork. Moreover, we wanted to examine how gender, representation, positionality, perspective, and power are worked out in the generation of data and the relationships with participants. As Mary Maynard and June Purvis comment, while there is no single feminist methodology or methods, there are recognizable strictures within which 'feminists feel they, minimally, must operate, in to order to be rigorous about, and maintain integrity towards their work' (1994, 2). Adopting a feminist orientation to research can mean disrupting oppositions between researcher and researched and the personal and political; eschewing the notion of value-neutral research; attempting to minimise hierarchies and exploitation; and redressing gender-based discrepancies in the production of knowledge about religious people, places, and things.

The first roundtable discussed the gendered emotional labour of undertaking fieldwork, using examples from British Buddhism, non-religion and parenting, religion in schools, motherhood and childlessness, and abortion activism. The insider-outsider debate surfaced, highlighting that gender and religion, as markers of identity, can hinder and open new avenues for research; the extent that reflexivity can be securely called upon to refract power; and we also raised the challenges and appropriateness of disclosing to participants aspects of experience and the difference this makes to projects. However, audience members rightly raised important questions about the panel's whiteness, the invisibility of contexts that reflect the diversity of religion in Britain, the visibility of Christianity as the dominant research site in Socrel, and the positive impact that sharing a global heritage identity can ease the relationship with participants, particularly in marginalised contexts, were so valuable. While we had centred issues of power, in practice, we had obscured the dynamics of colonialism and the secular foundations of feminist research practices – a tendency that so often features in our field.

We wanted this conversation to develop, together. In 2022, those who had shared their constructive and critical insights and some of the members of the first panel hosted a follow up roundtable. The theme focused on 'comfort' and/or 'discomfort' shaped by speakers' subjectivities and experiences in the academy, in particular, we offered reflections on the critical whiteness of the study of gender and religion; the disjuncture between the sociology of religion and critical disability studies; a consideration of Saba Mahmood's call to 'develop an analytical language for thinking about modalities of agency that exceed liberatory projects (feminists, leftist, or liberal)' (2005, x); the connections between race, identity, and public narratives in Islam about motherhood; and decolonising the discipline and Higher Education.

We're delighted that we continued our exploration in Bristol. However, we took a more interactive, workshop approach! We began with short prompts that noted the significance

of academic feminist friendship, the ongoing neglect of women's religious identities in sociology, and whether the move to 'worldviews' reinscribes power relations in the sociology of religion and gender. Following which, our willing and enthusiastic delegates had a lively discussion on the application of feminist research practices to challenge inequalities; the relationship between 'the personal' and 'the political'; how feminism inhibits and opens the study of gender and religion; inspirational methods and theories that have shaped practices of inclusivity; and future, hopeful directions for religion, gender, and feminism.

While the series of roundtables have created space to examine the principles that many feminist researchers consider inextricable to the methodologies and methods they use to grapple with gendered inequalities in religion, it has resulted in other, important outcomes. Collegiality and collaboration have deepened as we worked together, outside of our usual networks and relationships, to talk and learn, honestly and sensitively, about power and privilege. Moreover, it has led to a critical and reflexive appraisal of how we can contribute to making Socrel an inclusive and critical space, which has led to the formation of committee sub-group to help drive this vision. We hope that 'Feminist Identities in the Field' continues to evolve and grow, and we'd love to hear from any members who would like to be part of next year's panel!

'Feminist Identities in the Field' has featured: Saleema Burney, Celine Benoit, Suma Din, Chloe Gott, Asma Khan, Renasha Khan, Dawn Llewellyn, Lois Lee, Sarah Jane Page, Sonya Sharma, Caroline Starkey, Rachel Shillitoe, Christine Taylor-Jackson, and Krysia Walcock.

Written by Dawn Llewellyn.

Introducing the New Socrel Officers

Lucy Potter, Ruth Sheldon, Krysia Waldock, Lois Lee, and Renasha Khan joined the Socrel committee this year. The committee is also made up of returning officers Mathew Guest (Chair), Sonya Sharma (Co-convenor), Dawn Llewellyn (Co-convenor), Saleema Burney (Membership), Rob Barward-Symmons (Events), and Isabella Kasselstrand (Publications). Learn more about the new committee members from the short bios below.

Postgraduate and Early Careers Officer: Lucy Potter

My name is **Lucy Potter**, doctoral candidate within the Sociology department at the University of Sheffield. I am researching how the British asylum system handles cases submitted under grounds of non-religiosity. My research explores non-religious identities and journeys to apostasy (leaving a religion); it will examine how persecuted non-religious people are dealt with by the UK's Home Office, who tend to overlook this category. This research connects the two broad fields of non-religion and migration which is rarely done. I am excited to start my new role as PGR/ECR Officer for Socrel and aim to bring a fresh perspective to the team. I am eager to contribute to Socrel's mission of promoting research, dialogue, and understanding in the Sociology of Religion, and I am particularly interested in initiatives that foster inclusivity and diversify the field's perspectives. I have lots of ideas to do this with collaboration with the PGR/ECR community, such as a buddy program, masterclasses, and publication recommendations. Watch this space!

EDI Officer: Ruth Sheldon

I'm delighted to be joining the Committee to contribute to Socrel's vital work on EDI issues, which are close to my heart. I've been benefitting from the friendly, supportive Socrel community since starting my PhD in 2010. I'm currently a Lecturer in Religion and Social Science at King's College London where I have been leading on our EDI work, including around decolonising the curriculum. My research is focused on ethnographic engagement with issues of ethics and justice affected marginalised groups within institutional and everyday life. Recent projects have included research with Jewish and Muslim students on campus and with strictly orthodox Jewish women in Hackney, London, where I live. These research and teaching interests, alongside my experience of combining academia with motherhood and caring for a disabled child, has contributed to my passion for all things EDI. I'm very much looking forward to being more involved with the Socrel community.

EDI Officer: Krysia Waldock

It's a pleasure to be joining the Socrel committee as one of the EDI officers. I have thoroughly enjoyed attending Socrel conferences over the last few years of my PhD. I am a PhD Candidate at the University of Kent exploring the inclusion and belonging of autistic people in religious groups, using role identity theory and social stigma theory as lenses to understand inclusion and belonging. I also teach on the Religion, Philosophy and Ethics course at Kent. Lois, Ruth, Renasha and I have had a few exciting conversations so far and I look forward to our coming activities.

EDI Officer: Lois Lee

I'm looking forward to working with Socrel as a contributing Officer to the new EDI role. Improving equality and diversity in research and teaching is a long-standing interest of mine, and I recently published *Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization: Practical Tools for Improving Teaching, Research and Scholarship* (co-edited with Abby Day, Dave S.P. Thomas and James Spickard, BUP), a project that was developed in partnership and conversation with many colleagues from the Socrel community; I am excited to continue developing this work in new Socrel collaborations. I am Senior Lecturer in Secular Studies at the University of Kent, and my main interest is in new existential traditions, and nonreligious and 'non-binary' worldview identities, as well as in the nature and politics of secularism and pluralism. I founded the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network, and co-founded the journal *Secularism and Nonreligion*.

EDI Officer: Renasha Khan

I am excited to be working with the Socrel Executive Committee as a part of the new EDI team. I have previously contributed to EDI schemes in decolonising curricula across the Arts and Humanities School at Kings College London during my research degree. I have just completed my PhD in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Kings College London where my research focused on the ways social media is being used by Muslim women to reframe their sense of identity, place, and belonging. Issues around EDI and representation have been a guiding aspect of my career as a producer-director in television, where I have produced documentary films on history, race, and culture for international broadcasters such as the BBC, Channel 4, and Nat Geo. I studied History and Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London before becoming a journalist and producer director. I also work as a director of Forward Culture, a social initiative working to empower South Asian women into creative industries through mentoring schemes and school partnerships. I am looking forward to collaborating with the team and Socrel in these endeavours.

Announcements

Socrel Annual Conference 2024 – Call for Papers

8 – 10 July 2023, University of Northumbria, Newcastle, UK

After the success of our 2023 conference in Bristol, we are delighted to announce the 2024 Socrel annual conference. This year we will gather at the University of Northumbria in Newcastle and we look forward to once again reconnecting with old friends and welcoming new ones. The theme for 2024 is **Religion, Justice, and Social Action**.

Religion is embedded in forms of justice and social action. Driven by teachings, philosophical ideals, or socialized norms, religion can galvanize change, limit social and political freedoms, and serve the suffering. Religion, when intertwined with justice and social action, can be observed in the organization of events and activities, the participation in protests, marches and sit-ins, the sharing of information among local and global communities, and in the bringing of individuals and groups together to provide food, shelter, care, connection, and subsistence. Yet, religion and religious movements can also act as a barrier to social and ethical progress, hindering justice, obstructing action, and delegitimising dissent, discouraging followers – and seeking to actively stop others – from enabling change. Religion can operate as a mechanism for transformation and a means of bolstering the status quo, with some movements jostling for influence at the heart of institutions while others seek to build new social structures set apart from the world according to their own frames of justice. As society has experienced and witnessed the pandemic, the cost-of-living and climate crises, and government decisions on war and violence, how have religion, justice and social action converged to bring about change and alternate responses? This conference invites papers that explore these dynamics, and religions' role in creating and hindering opportunities for response and action as well as the critiques they conjure.

We invite papers that address (but are not limited to) the following areas:

- Care and action: motivations, emotions, and ethics
- Power, abuse, and conflict
- Gender, race, sexuality, class, disability: intersectional considerations
- Environmental emergencies
- Peace, resolution, and reconciliation
- Activisms: individual and collective
- Social movements and forces
- Digital forms and responses
- Arts and alternative forms of resistance
- Papers on other topics in the sociology of religion

In looking to build on the success of last year we encourage submissions across a range of formats. In addition to traditional oral papers (of 20 minutes each, with an additional 10

minutes for questions), we would like to receive proposals for alternative formats such as but not limited to:

- Roundtable and panel discussions
- Workshops
- Sessions that discuss published work
- Short presentations (10-minute paper, 5-minute questions)
- Posters

We will also be running a stream specifically for papers by post-graduate researchers, early career researchers, and those presenting at a conference for the first time. There will be an option available on the submission form for those who wish to be considered for this stream, but those within this group who prefer to submit papers in the conventional way are also welcome to do so.

Abstracts of 250 words and a short biographical note (not more than 100 words) should be submitted [here](#) no later than **9 February 2024** to be considered.

We will notify you if your abstract is accepted, by **22 March 2024**.

Registration opens in January 2024.

Bursaries will be available for postgraduates, early career researchers, and academics on precarious contracts.

We look forward to seeing you in July!

Warmest wishes,

The Socrel Committee

Communications Officer

Socrel currently has a vacancy on the committee. The role of communications officer involves keeping the BSA Socrel website up to date, liaising with the BSA, keeping abreast of and making announcements on social media, and informing members of upcoming events and announcements via the Socrel listserv and attending the Socrel Committee meetings.

If you are interested, please send us a one-page Expression of Interest telling us why you are suited to the role and the contribution you could make.

Please submit this to **Dawn Llewellyn** or **Sonya Sharma**.

The Bible in Contemporary Britain – Call for Papers

We are currently planning our 2024 day conference, in collaboration with Bible Society, to be held in London on **Saturday 16 March**. Final details, including venue, to be confirmed in the coming weeks!

Whether in politics, philosophy, ethics, or the arts, the Christian Bible has had a vast impact on British life and society for centuries. Yet with active Bible engagement and literacy at an historic low among the public, and a population that is increasingly moving away from "traditional" forms of British Christianity, we might ask what role and influence the Bible continues to hold within modern British society.

Seeking to explore this question, a day conference has been organised collaboratively between the BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group and Bible Society. We encourage submissions from empirical researchers working in sociology, anthropology, practical theology, and other relevant disciplines, as well as from practitioners who have undertaken academic research on the Bible in their contexts.

Possible subject areas may include, but are not limited to:

- Attitudes towards and behavioural engagement with the Bible
- Abuse and weaponisation of the Bible
- The role of the Bible beyond Christian communities
- The role of the Bible in contemporary social thought
- The role of the Bible in contemporary social justice movements
- The Bible and social power
- The Bible and identity
- The Bible and ethnicity
- The Bible and gender
- The Bible and environmental crisis
- The Bible and mental health
- The Bible and young people
- The Bible and contemporary arts
- Education and the Bible

Oral papers will either be of standard length (20 minutes followed by 10 minutes of questions) or short (10 minutes followed by five minutes of questions). In your submission, please specify your preference. We also welcome poster submissions.

Please submit an abstract of 250 words and a short biographical note (not more than 100 words) to **Rob Barward-Symmons**.

Socrel Member Interviews

Mary Briggs
PhD Candidate
University of Edinburgh

Could you tell us a bit about your background and how you ended up studying religion?

I think that my upbringing in the United States fostered what would become my academic interest in religion. I spent the first fourteen years of my life in Southeast Georgia, which is part of the country's Bible Belt. Although we were a very agnostic family, we still attended church every week. Almost every family we knew regularly attended church; it was just part of the local culture. While I was in high school, we made a move across the country to the state of Vermont. This move was quite jarring for me in many ways, but the different religious culture was perhaps one of the most noticeable. It was entirely different from that of Georgia. Not only is Vermont a state with far fewer religiously identifying folks, but most of my peers did not identify as religious, and there was a good deal of disdain for evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. Like many teenagers, I then leaned into an atheist identity for a couple of years. However, even then, I was aware that my peers' distrust of religion was a product of their upbringing and social-cultural environment in the same way that my former friends and community members in Georgia were socialised into being evangelical Christians. In retrospect, I think that experiencing dramatic cultural shifts as a teenager moulded me into a future social scientist.

Once I started attending university at Beloit College, a small liberal arts college in Wisconsin, I was able to take a course focused on reading and interpreting Buddhist texts with Natalie Gummer in my very first semester. Even though I have not gone on to become a Buddhist studies scholar, this course that made me realise that I wanted to study religion more seriously and challenged me to think about religion differently and engage with religious texts in a whole new way. I feel quite fortunate that I had professors who inspired me to study religion in a way that was reflexive, critical, and compassionate. Ultimately, I majored in both anthropology and religious studies for my bachelor's degree.

I was also able to study abroad at Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea for a semester, which sparked my interest in studying religion in the South Korean context. On top of the immersive Korean-language program and regular classes, I was able to conduct some ethnographic research for what would become my honours thesis project. The project focused on the ways in which evangelical university students in South Korea cultivated



cosmopolitan identities. This experience absolutely solidified my interest in religion in South Korea, although I assumed I would continue to focus my research on evangelical Christianity if I pursued future research.

After working in South Korea as an English teacher for elementary and middle school students for a year, I went on to do an MSc in the Social Anthropology of Religion at the London School of Economics. The courses that were the most impactful for me were Fenella Cannell's course title Anthropology of Christianity and the Anthropology of Kinship, Sex, and Gender, which was taught by Nicholas Long. As a result of my interest in these courses, I explored how kinship is inextricable from religion in the Unification Church for my MSc dissertation. My time at LSE is when I became interested in focusing on new religions, especially Christian and Christian-adjacent ones.

What is your PhD about and how did you become interested in this particular topic?

My PhD examines the relationship between the Shincheonji Church of Jesus (a new millenarian Christian movement) and the South Korean state using a combination of digital ethnographic methods and media content analysis. I became interested in this topic while I was in South Korea in February of 2020, which is when an outbreak of COVID-19 in the city of Daegu was linked to a member of Shincheonji. At that time, many folks were blaming Shincheonji for spreading COVID-19. This created a real panic in South Korea about Shincheonji, and the church was constantly discussed in news and entertainment media in quite a sensational way. Of course, all this attention to Shincheonji piqued my interest as a scholar of new religions. While I understood that the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic directed a lot of negative attention to a church linked to a cluster infection, I felt that there had to be more of the story. The fact that Shincheonji was considered so problematic in South Korea could hardly have occurred overnight. At that time, I had already applied to PhD programs with a totally different project in mind. I ended up choosing the University of Edinburgh, and thankfully, my primary and secondary supervisors (Steven Sutcliffe and Arkotong Longkumer) were very supportive of my desire to change research topics.

Since I began my PhD in September of 2020, classical ethnographic methods simply were not possible for me, thus the pivot to digital methods and attention to media content. Although the incorporation of media methods initially came about out of necessity, I quickly realised that they were absolutely essential to the project. In my correspondences and interviews with Shincheonji members, I realized popular news, documentary, and entertainment media profoundly impact the lives of my participants by shaping public perceptions of their church.

Over the course of my data collection, I identified three popular narratives about the Shincheonji Church of Jesus and its members that were perpetuated by popular media sources, politicians, and prominent Protestant figures. Although highly simplified, these three narratives are as follows: Shincheonji is a secretive cult, Shincheonji breaks apart families, and Shincheonji is a destructive force on South Korean Protestantism. Ultimately, I have come to see that each of these narratives portray Shincheonji members as problematic

and misguided citizens, and they frame the church as incompatible with good citizenship. However, I hope to show that these narratives actually point to greater social and political anxieties about the major demographic shifts taking place in South Korea.

You presented research at the 2023 Socrel Annual Conference. Could you tell us more about your experience at the conference as well as the research you presented?

The 2023 annual Socrel conference at the University of Bristol was my first time attending a Socrel event, and I was fortunate to receive a full bursary from the BSA. I really enjoyed the whole experience and it was a great introduction to Socrel as an organisation.

I presented as part of a panel titled 'Power and Religious Outsiders,' which was certainly a good match for my research! My paper addressed a prominent popular narrative about Shincheonji that I identified while researching the relationship between Shincheonji and the South Korean state. This narrative states that Shincheonji works to destroy Protestantism by stealing members of mainstream churches through trickery and deception. In the paper, I drew on my media content analysis to demonstrate how one influential piece of documentary media from the programme 'PD Notebook (*PD Sujeop*)' perpetuated this narrative. I then presented accounts from two of my research participants that paint a complex picture of the diverse ways my participants have come to join the church. I then drew a connection between the narrative that Shincheonji steals Protestants to the declining popularity of Protestantism in South Korea. I explained that this declining popularity of Protestantism is a cause of real sociopolitical anxiety, particularly when paired with the simultaneous growth of Shincheonji in the past two decades, given Protestantism's historic political and economic power in South Korea. Presenting this paper was an opportunity to present some of the core arguments and materials from one of my thesis chapters and I received such great questions and feedback from my fellow attendees, which made the panel presentation a truly rewarding experience.

Outside of my panel presentation, I found my entire experience of the 2023 annual Socrel conference to be immensely positive. The keynotes were all thought-provoking and varied, there were interesting events in the evenings, and the organisers built in a lot of extra support for graduate students. Aside from the conference's organisation and the strengths of the panels, what I would most like to highlight is the positive and supportive culture of the Socrel. I did not feel a sense of distance between the postgraduate students and professors, and it was so easy to strike up conversations with all of the attendees. Overall, I would characterise the Socrel conference as the friendliest one I have attended. As a postgraduate student, I really valued that aspect.

Michael Munnik
Senior Lecturer
Cardiff University

I understand that you worked in journalism before entering academia. Could you tell us more about this journey? How does your prior professional experience inform your academic research?

My first love was journalism, and that's what I did my first degree in, back in Canada. Even before I had graduated, I was already starting to work for CBC Radio (Canada's national public broadcaster) as a freelancer and casual employee – reporting, chase producing, all of it. And I loved the work, though the pace and speed of daily journalism got me down. My producer would be chivvying me to book a guest for the show when I still wanted to do more reading, more research so that I knew what to ask them about. When CBC had to cut hundreds of jobs in 2009 after the financial crisis, I was left with a few choices for what to do next and decided postgraduate study was the right thing. It might reward the longer scale and greater depth I was looking for.

The other thing was that all of my professional career as a journalist had been post-9/11 and to an extent contoured by that event. I was interested in the connection between a secular, pluralistic media and people with religious motivations, and studying that in terms of outreach to Muslim communities seemed like an urgent question. So I did an MA in Religion in Contemporary Society at King's College London and got introduced to the social sciences as an academic discipline. It worked for me, and I was able to continue to a PhD in Edinburgh and now my job at Cardiff.

My prior experience has helped me in lots of ways, but I'll highlight two. One, and probably most obvious, it informs the research that I do. My understanding of journalism and my identification of practice as something missing from the scholarship on Muslims and the media allowed me to find a niche and to produce credible insights. Secondly, and more subtly, it meant that I came to higher education a little later in life and with experience in other sectors. It's given me a sense of perspective that helps me ride out the challenges we're facing and also to draw on things outwith the field when seeking to address problems in my work.

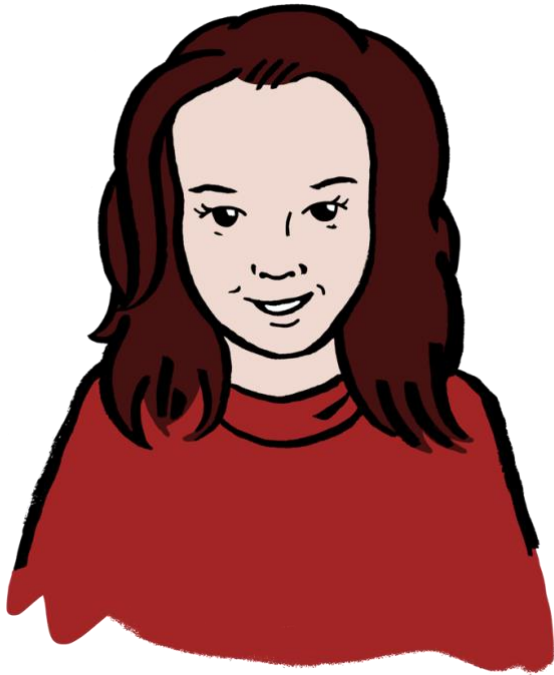


As life has mostly returned to 'normal' after the Covid-19 lockdowns, what are your reflections on how this period has affected our work as academics and as researchers of religion?

I've been really interested to travel to conferences in the last year and see all the research that has developed out of the pandemic – what the lockdown constraints meant for adapting research and also making those conditions the object of study. It's a rich field in all sorts of ways. The pandemic has also slowed me down, though, in terms of my own research. I was already doing a lot of things related to teaching and support, such as admissions tutor for my department. So when the lockdown hit, I really had to down tools on all other tasks and work to support our students. It was exhausting but really important, and it called for some creativity and flexibility within the system. I don't pretend we did it all as well as it could have been done, but I think taking some form of positive action was important. What I'm seeing this year from students is a sense of that time as an aberration. They are placing a renewed value on presence. Circling back to what it has meant for us as researchers of religion, I think values and connection are taking on more prominence in all sorts of fields, and though I don't think religion has the lock-seal on those things, I think we're well equipped as scholars to identify them and think them through in society. So our particular skills – our methods and our theories – are good ones for examining questions that are important right now.

At the 2023 Socrel Annual Conference, you presented a paper called 'Getting their foot in the door: Early findings on journalism diversity support schemes and their outreach to Muslims in Britain.' What are the main takeaways from this research?

Hah! Well, this paper was the result of research supported by the Socrel Seed Corn Fund, and I am preparing a blog post on the results. So you won't need to look far for more details. But the main takeaways are that there is a sustained set of schemes trying to support diverse applicants to train in journalism. This work is ongoing and not necessarily tied to religion in general or Muslims in particular. In fact, religion was not typically a metric that the schemes kept track of – they didn't have data to tell me x number of applicants or x number of successful awardees were Muslim. Nonetheless, they thought it was important to bring Muslims into the industry, so it was something they paid attention to. They were using informal measures to identify what we see described elsewhere as “Muslimness or perceived Muslimness”. And to that end, they did feel that Muslims were a part of the applicant pool and the set of successful candidates. Their concern, then, was about getting the word out effectively so that they got a good pool of applicants. The outlier to this was a scheme specifically aimed at British Muslim applicants. This scheme wasn't limited to journalism, though it is one of the key fields they recruit in and support. And this has worked well for training, but their challenge now is to help those who've received support and training to get jobs: the next step is elusive, and I think that speaks to the general challenge for the journalism industry right now. But it remains important for the providers of these schemes to have Muslims represented in journalism.



Krysia Waldock
PhD Candidate and Assistant Lecturer
University of Kent

Could you tell us a bit about your journey in academia? Were you always interested in studying religion or how did this interest develop?

My first degree was in Modern Foreign Languages (French and German), and I spent some time after graduating working in Berlin teaching English to children. My interest in studying and researching religion started from my own personal experience of exclusion in churches as an autistic person after I returned from

Germany, and during my MA where I did my dissertation on attitudes towards autistic people within churches. When I started looking at the literature, it surprised me how little of it takes a sociological perspective and how little listened to the views and experiences of autistic people in a non-tokenistic manner. I was encouraged to apply for a PhD during my MA, which is on autistic people's inclusion and belonging within religious groups.

Your work emphasises social inclusion of autistic people that have different belief systems. Could you tell us more about your research on this topic? What are some practical takeaways from this work for religious organisations?

Yes! My PhD is formed of four strands of exploration. I firstly did a systematic review on the inclusion and belonging of individuals with minority identities within religious and humanist groups. For my empirical studies, I completed focus groups with autistic people, and with Christians and Muslims exploring how they understand social inclusion, belonging and exclusion. One key finding from both of these studies is the influence of identity on how individuals understand inclusion and belonging, with identities often excluded (autistic, ethnic minority, being queer) or 'having a role associated with inclusion' (e.g., teacher, parent, healer, pastor, imam) as 'activated' during the discussions, rather than a religious identity per se. I am currently finishing analysis of 16 interviews with 8 autistic people who currently and have previously attended churches and mosques, and these findings build on the findings of my focus groups.

One practical takeaway for religious organisations is knowing how what we expect of people frames how we may include or exclude people from religious groups, and how this may (or may not) intersect with theological interpretations and understandings. For example within Christianity, *Imago Dei* is an important consideration – who is included in *Imago Dei* and who is not? The neurodiversity paradigm is useful to consider here, where

all types of brain and cognition are valued and valid, echoing how some may interpret *Imago Dei*.

Another practical takeaway from this PhD is the sorts of barriers autistic people may face within religious groups. Although there is no one type of religious organisation that fits perfectly (so an 'autistic church/mosque' wouldn't work for everyone!), all my participants spoke about the busyness of religious gatherings as difficult, and how attitudes to difference excluded them.

At the 2023 Socrel Annual Conference, you presented an interesting paper titled "Conceptualising belonging: The views of Christians and Muslims." What are the key findings from this paper?

The key finding from this paper is how the roles individuals within religious gatherings and organisations appear to shape how individuals respond to an 'outsider' more than their religious identity. When asked what inclusion and belonging means on a theoretical level, my participants quoted scriptures and ideas linked to their religious beliefs. However when faced with a vignette of an autistic person, other roles such as parent, woman, healer, leader appeared salient in their responses. This meant some of what was said in the discussion previously was 'counteracted' or negated. This 'disjoint' between theory and practice was really interesting and perhaps accounts for some of the difficulties in making religious gatherings fully inclusive.

Whilst undertaking the data collection for this paper and the focus groups with autistic people, I also noticed the staggering difference in recruitment patterns. I had to close the recruitment for the focus groups with autistic people only after 2 weeks, however I found finding Christians and Muslims who were willing and able to take part in this study quite difficult. I think there are multiple reasons for this, but autistic identity as 'salient' when discussing exclusion (unlike Christian or Muslim) could be part of this.

Recent Member Publications

The following books, articles, and book chapters have been published by Socrel members since Spring 2023. A call for new contributions to this list for the next newsletter will be sent out via email in Spring 2024.

Barker, Eileen. In the shadow of Russia: Jehovah's Witnesses and religious freedom in Central Asia. Some introductory considerations. *The Journal of CESNUR* 7 (1).

Burney, Saleema F. Shoaib Malik's "Islam and Evolution": Sociological reflections on the developing engagement of British Muslim leadership with science. *Theology and Science*.

Fry, Alex D. J. Religiosity and wellbeing in areas of socio-economic deprivation: The role of social capital and spiritual capital in enabling resources for subjective wellbeing. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*.

Fry, Alex D. J. *Gender Inequality in the Ordained Ministry of the Church of England: Examining Conservative Male Clergy Responses to Women Priests and Bishops* (Routledge).

Ganiel, Gladys. Clergy as first responders: Rethinking leadership in religion and peacebuilding. *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 21(2).

Hamid, Sadek and Stephen H. Jones (eds). *Contemporary British Muslim arts and cultural production: Identity, belonging and social change* (Routledge).

Jagger, Sharon and Alex D. J. Fry with Rebecca Tyndall. 'Let justice roll down like waters' Exploring the wellbeing of working-class clergy in the Church of England: A rally cry for change (The Church of England).

Jones, Stephen H. and Amy Unsworth. Two Islamophobias? Racism and religion as distinct but mutually supportive dimensions of anti-Muslim prejudice. *British Journal of Sociology*.

Munnik, Michael. What style guides tell secular journalists about Muslims and Islam. *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, 12(1).

Nesbitt, Eleanor and Elisabeth Arweck. Discovery, construction, disclosure: Some factors in the developing religious identity of children and young people from diverse faith backgrounds. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 33.

Nielsen, Jorgen S. and Stephen H. Jones (eds). *Islamic studies in European higher education: Navigating academic and confessional approaches* (Edinburgh University Press).

Slee, Nicola, Dawn Llewellyn, Kim Wasey, and Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz (eds). *Female faith practices: Qualitative research perspectives* (Routledge).

Smith, Greg. Children, religion and social capital: Bonding and bridging in multi-faith urban neighbourhoods. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* 33.

Starkey, Caroline. British Buddhism, secular mindfulness, and the politics of sustainability. *Religion*.

Tremlett, Paul-Francois. *Religion and Marxism: An introduction* (Equinox).

Tremlett, Paul-Francois. Transreligiosity and the messiness of religious and social worlds: Towards a Deleuzian methodological imagination for religious studies. *Religions* 14(4).

Tremlett, Paul-Francois, David G. Robertson, Graham Harvey, and Carole M. Cusack. The study of religion and the dawn of everything. *Journal of the British Society for the Study of Religion* 24.

Waldock, Krysia E. The impossible subject: Belonging as a neurodivergent in congregations. *Journal of Disability & Religion* 27(4).

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