



SocrelNews

Spring 2024
Issue 19

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Welcome

Dear all,

Three years ago, I joined the Socrel committee as Publications Officer, a role that involves serving as newsletter editor. Time has flown by and this is now the sixth and final newsletter that I am editing before my term on the Socrel committee comes to an end next month.

At the time that I took over, I had recently moved (back) to Scotland from California for a post at the University of Aberdeen. As newly arrived, I was looking to make connections with fellow sociologists of religion here in the UK, and Socrel was the ideal community to get involved in to accomplish this. Although the Pandemic did make networking a bit harder at the start, during the past three years, I have had opportunities to get to know so many great colleagues.

From interviewing fellow members for the newsletter (20 interviews over the past three years) and from talking at conferences, I have been inspired by all the fascinating research that this community engages in on such a wide range of topics. I have also learned just how diverse our backgrounds are and how different the paths are that we have taken to become sociologists of religion. Indeed, if someone had told me 20 years ago that this secular Swede would end up with a career studying religion, I would not have believed it for a second. But here we are – and I wouldn't have it any other way.

My only regret was not joining Socrel earlier. When I was a PhD student back in the early 2010s, the prospect of joining a group like Socrel was intimidating to say the least. Imposter syndrome was real, and I was questioning whether my academic record was on par with members of a professional academic association, which was of course a silly and unhelpful way of thinking. I wish I would have made contact with the Socrel committee while I was a postgraduate student, that I would have attended one of the conferences, and that I would have had a chance to get to know all these great people earlier than I did. My point is, if there is anyone reading this who is feeling like I did, know that you will most certainly fit in! Similarly, if someone knows a postgraduate student or an early career researcher whose research fits within the scope of Socrel, encourage them to join or to reach out for more information. It really is the most welcoming group!

Next month, we are gathering at the University of Northumbria in Newcastle for our annual conference, where we will also welcome new members on the committee following our AGM. Please see more information about the conference in the announcement section of this newsletter. It will be a great few days!

With warm wishes,

Isabella Kasselstrand (Publications Officer, Socrel)

Seed Corn Funding Recipient: Ben Pink Dandelion

Socrel has awarded £5000 in Seed Corn funding to Professor Ben Pink Dandelion, for a project on Quakerism. In the piece below, Ben discusses his academic background and the plans for the project.

I first started attending Socrel in 1990 and there have been very few conferences that I have missed. I was just starting my PhD at the University of Brighton with Roger Homan and Eileen Barker as my supervisors but without any other postgraduates in sociology there and certainly not in the sociology of religion. Socrel was a very welcoming and supportive academic home, and senior academics were very generous with their time and help. My work then was on how British Quakers held together as a faith community in spite of a very broad spectrum of belief. I conducted a survey of Quakers in 32 different locations and followed this up with a large number of interviews. I found that the group held a permissive attitude to belief which was largely individual and private but maintained a conservative and conformist attitude to the form of 'Quaker time', the time spent together as Quakers. They operated a 'behavioural creed' rather than one based in doctrine. Over time I have developed the idea of their attitude to belief as an 'orthocredence' in which there is a dogmatic insistence on theological uncertainty, what I have termed 'the absolute perhaps.' Most recently in *The Cultivation of Conformity* (Routledge 2019), I have used Quakers as a case study to reflect on the way religious groups conform to wider society, particularly linguistically, and in so doing can undergo internal secularisation.

My 1990 survey was followed up by another by a PhD student that I was supervising in 2003 and we (at the Centre for Research in Quaker Studies) conducted a survey of British Quakers again in 2013 and 2023. Quakerism however is a global phenomenon with one third of all Quakers living in Kenya. I began to imagine a global survey to complement the British ones. The challenge is survey distribution and also the number of languages the survey would need to be translated into. These are not insurmountable, but a pilot study seemed to be a sensible first step. In August 2024, 93 different Quaker constituencies will meet at a World Gathering in South Africa, normally held every five years, to work together in just three languages. Permission has been given to run a survey amongst the participants and I applied for seed corn funding to use this opportunity as a pilot study for a bigger survey region by region over the next years.



The biggest academic challenge is to devise a survey form which could accommodate a very broad spectrum of belief from evangelical Christian to non-theist Liberal and that also took account of different worship styles and practices. Seed corn funding was crucial, especially as I am not a salaried member of a university. Much of the nearly £5000 awarded was spent on a three-day design meeting to get the survey to a point we could translate it and pilot it. Other costs are translation, re-translation post pilot testing, and printing. Shena Deuchars is the PhD student conducting the analysis of the survey and Shena and I will be at Socrel this year to share some of the British survey findings from 2023 and, we hope, in 2025, to share the World Survey analysis.

Nothing like this has been attempted before within the academic study of Quakerism. We have been helped by looking at Pew surveys on Islam and Pentecostalism globally and by the generous engagement of David Voas at UCL. This will give us a clear sense of the range of belief patterns and worship practice globally as well as be a robust test of our survey instrument. The process will also, we hope, generate interest amongst Quakers worldwide to continue with a more systematic survey of belief and practice. It is all very exciting, and I am very grateful to the Socrel committee for the seed corn funding, without which we could not have moved forward on this so easily.

‘Ben’ Pink Dandelion

Centre for Research in Quaker Studies at Woodbrooke

Honorary Professor of Quaker Studies, University of Birmingham

Announcements

Socrel Annual Conference 2024

8 – 10 July 2024, University of Northumbria, UK

After the success of our 2023 conference in Bristol, we are now counting down the days to the 2024 Socrel Annual Conference! In early July 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 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 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? The conference will explore these dynamics, and religions' role in creating and hindering opportunities for response and action as well as the critiques they conjure.

Our full programme is available now **online**, and here you can see the contributions from across our Socrel community.

We are joined by two brilliant keynotes, as well as a panel to be announced shortly:

Professor Nandini Deo will be joining us from Lehigh University, Pennsylvania. Professor Deo is an Associate Professor of Political Science, exploring South Asian politics, civil society, gender, and religion/secularism, including the relationship between gender, religion, and activism in India. She is currently undertaking a year at the SNDT Women's University in Mumbai as a Fulbright Scholar.





Professor Peter Hopkins will be making the shorter commute from Newcastle University to speak with us. He is a Leverhulme Major Research Fellow and Professor of Social Geography at Newcastle, and explores issues around social inequality and justice, in particular Islamophobia, refugee experiences, and intersectionality and oppression.

You can still register [here](#) – though time is running out, so book your place now!

Socrel Member Interviews

Peter Hemming
Senior Lecturer in Sociology
University of Surrey

Could you tell us a bit about your background and where you are now? How did you end up studying religion?

Religion has always maintained an important place in my life, although its role has changed considerably over time. I was raised in Derby in the East Midlands, in a family where religion was a frequent talking point given that my mum was a devout Christian while my dad was non-religious. At age six, I was given singing lessons by a member of my mum's church congregation who arranged for me to perform a hymn on BBC Radio Derby, and I continued to attend church, Sunday school, or Christian youth groups until I was a teenager. It was not until I went to university that I started to approach religion from a more academic viewpoint, by which time I considered myself non-religious. I elected to study a final year undergraduate module on contemporary religion offered by the Department for Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield. However, it was my experiences as a primary teacher trainee at the University of Brighton that really got me interested in the sociology of religion.



During my PGCE, I was required to undertake teacher training placements in England's only state-funded Quaker school in the village of Coolham near Horsham in West Sussex, and then at a Roman Catholic school in Eastbourne on the East Sussex coast. Having applied to a recruitment 'pool' for newly qualified teachers, I was then selected to work at a Church of England school in Lewes, East Sussex, where I taught for two years. During my time as a teacher trainee and qualified teacher working in 'faith schools', I became completely fascinated with the role that religion plays in our education system. This includes the 37 percent of state maintained primary schools in England that possess a religious character, the legally required act of daily worship that should be 'wholly or mainly of a Christian nature', the role of religious education in the school curriculum and the expectation that schools should promote the spiritual development of pupils. My interest was piqued by various incidents that occurred in the three schools, including a pair of pupils who refused to pray in an assembly due to their non-religious beliefs, and a headteacher who warned me to keep my ideas about inclusive collective worship to myself if I wanted to progress in my teaching career.

These experiences led me to apply to study a PhD at the University of Leeds, in the School of Social Policy and School of Geography, focusing on the social role of religion in primary schools located in multifaith neighbourhoods. This was followed by a research fellow role

at Brunel University, working on a project investigating young people's religious identities in multifaith urban localities, funded by the AHRC-ESRC Religion and Society Programme. Since then, I have held posts at Cardiff University, University of Brighton and University of Surrey, where I've been involved in several other projects concerning religion and spirituality. These have included studies on the role of church schools in rural communities, understanding mindfulness provision in the UK, providing for diversity of religion and belief in schools, and most recently, on exploring religion, citizenship and belonging in primary schools in Britain (see below). Concepts and theories from sociology of religion have been essential resources for making sense of research findings from all of these projects and, along with sociology of education, have helped to situate my work within the wider discipline of sociology.

At the 2023 Socrel Conference, you and your colleagues presented a paper titled “Becoming Citizens of 'Postsecular' Britain: Religion in Primary School Life,” which was based on research conducted for a larger project. Could you tell us a bit about the key takeaways of this project?

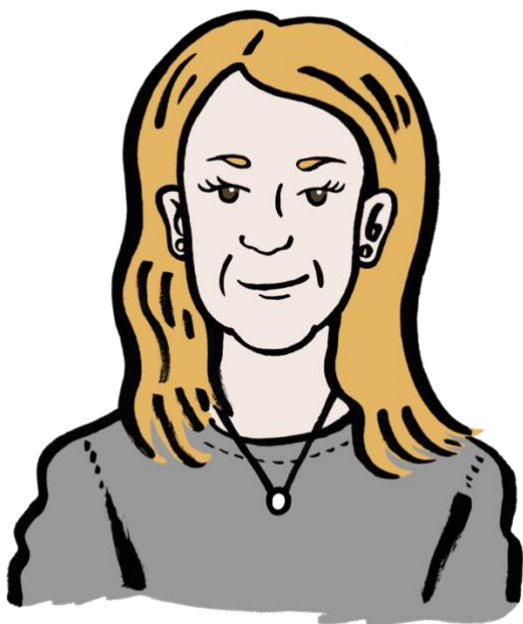
This is a project I've been involved with for the last three years, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, and led by Anna Strhan with Joanna Malone and Sarah Neal. The study builds on previous research conducted by members of the team to investigate how ideas about religion, citizenship and national identity become interrelated through everyday practices in schools, and what this means for children's sense of belonging in wider society. The research has included ethnographic and child-centred participatory methods with children, teachers and parents within four in-depth case studies of primary schools in Britain (two in England, one in Scotland and one in Wales). We have explored the significance of religion, beliefs, and values in how schools foster ideas of community and being a good citizen, as well as children's views on these issues.

We have now completed all fieldwork and a substantial amount of data analysis and have recently been focusing on the preparation of dissemination materials for participants and stakeholders, including some short, animated video clips. The team has begun to draft academic publications, and we aim to develop a set of journal articles and a monograph reporting the project findings. We hope to make some interesting arguments about the differences between the place of religion in education policy and the experiences and expectations of school stakeholders, the role of religion in children's everyday friendship dynamics, some of the ways in which non-religion expresses itself within institutional contexts, and the developing relationship between religion and therapeutic education. It has been a real privilege to be part of this project and I am excited to see the final stages come to fruition.

What do you consider to be some of the main challenges and opportunities of working in the field of Sociology of Religion today?

Both of my main fields of study – sociology of religion and sociology of education – are quite similar in terms of their positioning in the wider discipline. Despite being key components in the development of the sociological tradition, in recent decades they have maintained more of a peripheral role, with many scholars working in religious studies or

education departments respectively. At times, I have felt this can result in some fragmentation and a certain amount of siloing, making it more difficult to ensure a strong dialogue with mainstream debates in sociology. For sociologists of religion in the UK context, it can be a struggle to convince sociology colleagues of the relevance of the subject, despite the increasing diversity in the beliefs and values base of the British population, and the fact that 84% of the world's population in 2017 was affiliated to a religious group (according to Pew Research Centre). However, I think this positioning can also offer many opportunities for interdisciplinary thinking and working, essential for addressing the pressing global challenges we face in contemporary times, and ultimately significant for the development and renewal of sociology as a subject discipline. It therefore feels important for sociologists of religion to continue to make our presence felt in the discipline of sociology and beyond, to ensure that important themes of inquiry remain on the wider research agenda for many years to come.



*Jennie Riley
Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow
University of Aberdeen*

What is your background in the Sociology of Religion? How did you come to work in this field?

I turned up at Durham as a fresh-faced theology undergraduate in 2013 absolutely determined that I was there to explore church history, biblical studies, and as much Greek as possible. But after two terms, I had fallen unexpectedly but wholly and rapturously in love with the study of religion. I was – and remain – captivated by its relevance, its wide-ranging

scope, its interdisciplinarity and its potential to enact change. I picked a second-year module that let me conduct my first piece of independent empirical research under the wise guidance of a certain Mathew Guest, and the deal was sealed: I was determined to stick around studying contemporary religion as long as I could. I then did my MA at Lancaster, focusing particularly on British Christianity, before moving back to Durham for my PhD, which explored the relationship between work, faith, and medicine in the lived experiences of evangelical Christian healthcare practitioners. I started as a postdoc at the University of Aberdeen in 2021, and I have been there ever since, working in Divinity, the Health Services Research Unit, and, briefly, Epidemiology.

Nowadays, I tend to blend sociology of religion with death studies – another unexpected love discovered during my undergraduate years under Douglas Davies' tutelage, which I went on to teach as a PhD student. In recent years, that combination has meant exploring

funerals during COVID-19, death materiality in contemporary Britain, and intersections between theology, ecclesiology, and dementia.

At the 2023 Socrel Conference, you presented a paper titled “‘The thing is that there are so many things:’ Power and powerlessness in designing UK ordination training.” Could you tell us a bit more about this paper and its findings?

My paper last year was part of a broader project I worked on with John Swinton at Aberdeen, as well as colleagues based at a non-denominational Christian aged care charity in Australia. The *Educating for Inclusive, Caring Communities* project explores how dementia is – and isn’t – understood and accommodated in church communities, with the aim of playing some part in helping churches do better. We hosted interviews with people living with dementia, their carers, and theological educators in the UK and Australia.

With this paper, the rubber of theological ideal hits the road of reality: In the already-crowded confines of curricula at Theological Education Institutes (TEIs) is there any practical, feasible way of equipping prospective church leaders to care for people living with dementia and their supporters? Because while there was a great sense of urgency and importance attached to dementia in churches and TEIs alike, there was also a sense of frustration at the sheer amount that both ministers (and, therefore, trainee ministers) are expected to cover. To that end, our project report, which you can read [here](#), makes some precise “starting point” recommendations that we would love to see TEI staff explore.

What are you working on currently?

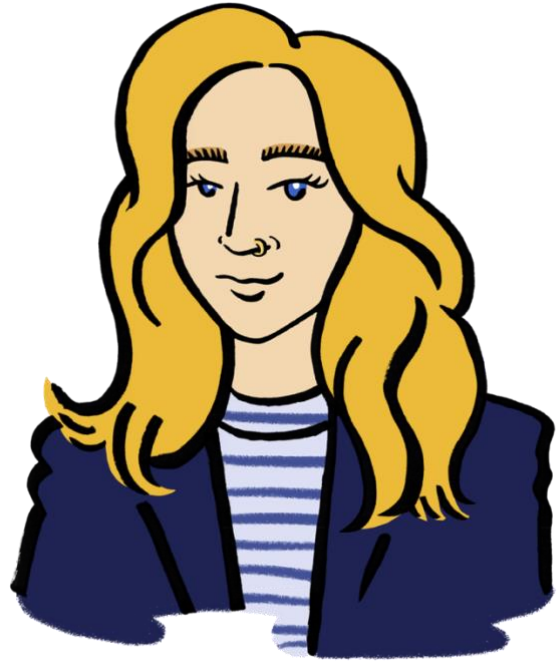
I was delighted to be awarded a Leverhulme Early Career fellowship which will see me spend three years working on a project called ‘Baggage for the Beyond? Contemporary UK grave goods practices and their meanings.’ It’s going to be a mixed methods study of what people choose to put in people’s graves and coffins (including their own) and why. I’m paying particular attention to two things: first, what impact – if any – living in a climate crisis is having on people’s decisions about grave goods; and second, what that can tell us about contemporary British attitudes to and understandings of death, and especially the afterlife. Afterlife beliefs are notoriously hard to pin down and study: just as you think you’ve got a grip on them, they slip through your fingers yet again. So I’m currently trying to understand them from interdisciplinary angles, in the hope of designing interviews and a survey that can generate fresh insights on them, as well as on the kinds of objects people pick to parcel off with their loved ones when they pass.

You can listen to a 7 minute Pecha Kucha presentation on my [university profile](#) where I explain a bit more about some of the twists and turns I’m expecting this project to take.

Lucy Potter
PhD Student in Sociological Studies
University of Sheffield

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

My PhD research explores individuals' journeys of leaving religion, also known as 'apostasy' and how in some cases this label can lead to the discrimination and persecution of the non-religious. I then examine how this forms a basis for an asylum claim in the UK, and I investigate how the Home Office handle and assess such claims.



I've always been interested in religion in my studies and have explored it from different disciplinary perspectives such as through philosophy, which was my undergraduate degree, and then more recently as a sociologist. It was only during my search for PhD scholarships I came across 'non-religion' as a field of study and the opportunities for research within this area. I find researching non-religion extremely exciting and as a relatively new field there is so much more to explore, and I am excited to fill my small gap in the wider knowledge of these types of identities.

In terms of the migration research side of things, I became interested in asylum regimes during my MA through my lecturer (now supervisor, Lucy Mayblin). I find the political arena of realising refugee rights to be extremely restrictive, and I have developed a passion to try and resist exclusionary practices where asylum-seekers and refugees can tend to get caught up in. I am a firm believer in inclusivity of all belief systems, and I'd like to raise awareness for a group of people that are often read as being homogenous, especially through UK conceptions.

My PhD project came about through a collaborative partnership with an NGO who had identified a stark gap in knowledge of non-religious asylum claims. I applied for the scholarship and was over the moon when I received it in 2022. No one has done (to the best of my knowledge) an in-depth exploration of how people construct and negotiate non-religious identities in areas of the world where persecution exists for such beliefs. And an understanding of how the asylum system handles these claims is also behind, in comparison to the literature on religious conversion and sexuality-based claims, for example.

You are Socrel's new Postgraduate and Early Careers officer. Why did you decide to apply for this role?

I recently started as SocRel's PGR and ECR officer at the start of this year. I applied for this role because I'm keen to facilitate networks between those who are just starting out in their academic careers and would like to establish opportunities to support each other as we navigate this complex world of doing novel research, writing a thesis, and entering the job market. I have found peer support to be the most valuable tool to get through this PhD journey, and being united with others going through the same experience has been motivating and comforting.

There are likely PGRs and ECRs 'out there' who are considering getting involved in Socrel and our activities, but who aren't sure where to begin or whether it is 'for them.' What is your message to them?

I would encourage PGRs and ECRs far and wide to become involved with this lively community if you are at all interested in the field of religion (broadly conceived). If you are brand new to the scene, or a more experienced researcher, we welcome those from all backgrounds and stages of their career. Ways to do this are to **join** Socrel, stay in touch with us by joining the mailing list, and keep an eye on the events page.

If you have any ideas or would like to organise an event for the PGR and ECR community, please do get in touch with me and we can work together. I can be contacted through my **email**.

Recent Member Publications

The following books, articles, and book chapters have been published by Socrel members since Autumn 2023.

Azzouz, F. Islamic ADR in Britain: Diversity, hybridity, and women's experiences of community justice. *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*.

Azzouz, Fouzia. Unregistered Muslim marriages in Britain: Avenues for regulation. In *Islam and the institution of marriage: Legal and sociological approaches*. AMI Press.

Chu, Ann Gillian. #deltaδmovement: Hong Kong's lay theologies in the making (digitally). *Asian American Theological Forum*.

DeHanas, D. N. (2023). Afterword: Populism, religion, and media in the Nordic countries. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*.

DeHanas, D. N. The spirit of populism: Sacred, charismatic, redemptive, and apocalyptic dimensions. *Democratization*.

Field, C. D. Churchgoing in Glasgow, 1836–2016: The statistical record. *Scottish Church History*.

Fry, A. Wellbeing and religious community participation: Exploring resources for wellbeing in areas of socio-economic deprivation in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*.

Godazgar, H., & Mirzaei, H. Styles of "religion," "non-religion" and "spirituality" in post-revolutionary Iran: The "ironic" impact of "Islam" on People's "religiosity." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*.

Page, S., & Lowe, P. *Abortion and Catholicism in Britain: Attitudes, Lived Religion and Complexity*. Palgrave.

Strhan, A., Lee, L., & Shillitoe, R. Becoming humanist: Worldview formation and the emergence of atheist Britain. *Sociology of Religion*.

Tebaldi, C., & Gaddini, K. Socialism sucks: Campus conservatives, digital media, and the rebranding of Christian nationalism. *Information, Communication & Society*.

Topkev, A. *A democratic approach to religion news: Christianity and Islam in the British and Turkish press*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Tremlett, P. Transnational affect and the making of a moral public: The war on drugs in the Philippines. *Sociological Research Online*.

Socrel Committee

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EDI Committee: Ruth Sheldon, Krysia Waldock, Lois Lee, and Renasha Khan

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