



# SocrelNews

2015  
Issue 1

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*Linda Woodhead, Sonya Sharma, and Timothy Stacey*

## Welcome

Welcome to a new year and the new-look Socrel newsletter created by our Communications Officer Alp Arat.

2014 was a great year for Socrel with a strong stream at the BSA in April and a successful annual conference in its new July slot. We said goodbye and thank you to Titus Hjelm, Jo McKenzie, and Giselle Vincett and welcomed our new committee members Alp, PG/ECS Liaison Officer Katie Aston, and Conference and Events Officer Tim Hutchings.

The first Socrel Response event of 2014 was chaired by Abby Day and focused on censuses and surveys and their role in religious identification. Abby also organised and presented at two other panels on the same subject a few months later, including the EASR (co-chaired with Belinda Schmidt) and the SSSR. As a result of those panels and subsequent discussions with experts in the field, she co-edited with Lois Lee a special issue of the journal *Religion* ('Making sense of surveys and censuses: Issues in religious self-identification' *Religion*, 44:3, 345-356). The Introduction by Abby and Lois is freely available to download. The second Socrel Response event 'Achieving Gender Equality in the Academy' organised by Abby Day and Sonya Sharma in October saw the launch of our new Mentoring Scheme for women (see Sonya's interview below for more details).

Regarding our finances, the Study Group's balance for the year was very healthy and we have now grown to over 200 members. Thank you to everyone for renewing your membership and to Membership Officer Peter Gee for all his hard work overseeing this. This year on January 8th we also launched the annual dedicated day for Postgraduates and Early Career Scholars (see Katie's full report below for more details). This is set to be held every January, with an additional lunch planned for PG/ECS delegates at the annual conference.

The committee is working on reinvesting income for the membership. Please keep a look out for further news posted on the Socrel site and our jiscmail lists maintained by Internet Officer Carl Morris. We look forward to engaging with you at events and via initiatives throughout 2015.

Rebecca Catto (Convenor)

## **Announcements**

[- Registration now open for the Socrel 2015 Annual Conference](#)

[- Registration now open for the BSA 2015 Annual Conference](#)

[- Socrel Mentoring Scheme accepting Mentor and Mentee applications](#)

[- New Publication Sociological Theory and the Question of Religion \(Eds Andrew McKinnon and Marta Trzebiatowska\) Out Now](#)

## **Note on Committee Member Elections**

Following three years of piloting an election process, the committee has decided it is not worth continuing. Under the BSA guidelines the Study Group Convenor is solely responsible for the Study Group and may, or may not, appoint others to help by forming a committee. Since its inception 40 years ago Socrel has had a committee created through the Convenor, and subsequently the Chair and other committee members, looking for volunteers to fill posts. People joined because they were asked to and sometimes it was difficult to find enough volunteers.

In 2010 it was suggested at the AGM that the committee review how members were selected. Accordingly, we decided to create elections. This required exploring how to do so in consultation with the BSA main office and then creating the protocol - a new initiative as other Study Groups don't have elections. All committee members were required to create detailed overviews of their roles and to brief prospective new members who needed to be nominated and seconded by other Socrel members. In case of more than one contender, a full election would be held.

In practice, during the last three years there was only one case where we had more than one contender for a post. And yet, significant time was invested by the committee, most particularly the Chair and Convenor.

We have therefore concluded that the amount of time invested by the committee, all of whom are volunteers, could not be justified. We will therefore return to usual BSA practice and the Convenor will ask for volunteers when posts become available. In the event of competition for a post, we will seek to find activities for interested parties. Committee membership provides a great opportunity to develop new skills and networks and we do hope people will continue to volunteer.

## Report from the Postgraduate and Early Career Scholars Study Day

The impetus for this year's PG and ECS study day titled *Ethics of Representation* emerged from conversations with PG and ECS Socrel members at the 2014 Socrel Conference where many expressed anxieties about representing their participants in research findings and managing tricky research relationships.

Dr Fiona Bowie, anthropologist of religion at King's College London, has written and spoken in a number of settings about the ethics of researching. Dr Bowie kicked off the session with a presentation and then ran interactive sessions followed by an afternoon of peer-to-peer discussion of personal research dilemmas. The workshop focused on topics such as our relationship with participants, issues of power and consent, legality and morality.

In her opening session, Dr Bowie introduced the ethical guidelines of the Association of Social Anthropologists. She also peppered the talk with lively stories from anthropologists who have written about their own trials and tribulations 'in the field'. Throughout her talk, Bowie presented us with case studies and asked us to consider the ethics in a number of research scenarios, including: participants' assumptions about researcher openness to conversion; plagiarism from supervisors; and the tricky boundaries of working with activist organisations where one quickly becomes an insider.

Dr Abby Day, Chair of the Socrel committee, also kindly attended and was able to give valuable input on the topic of studying 'at home'. I personally valued her point that 'the field' is not 'a place'. When we recognise this we are faced with a number of dilemmas – especially when working 'at home' - as to when we are 'on duty' and what counts as research. Drawing on her own experiences as a researcher with Christians in the UK, Day noted that negotiating public social spaces was particularly tricky for her. This was a salient message for the group since confidentiality is paramount and came up as a regular concern in the final peer-to-peer sessions. This also tapped into Dr Bowie's suggestions that research participants should be understood in a multi-dimensional and relational way within their networks, friendships and social setting, and not only as informants or mines of data.

In the end, Dr Bowie's key point was that research is essentially about relationships. Research ethics go beyond our immediate encounter and our physical presence in the field. Our experiences with participants and the relationships we build remain with us throughout our professional lives. Sensitivity to this is a necessary ongoing practice, especially as we present the lives of others to our peers. This workshop, dealing with the ethics of representing religion, was therefore as much an endeavour to prevent future harm as it was to learn how to manage and maintain ethical boundaries amongst colleagues. This was a rich and insightful workshop and gave new perspectives on extremely promising ongoing and future research.

On that note, I would like to extend a very warm thanks to Dr Fiona Bowie for helping organise the event and offering such engaging presentations and activities. Feedback for the event was glowing. It was also excellent to meet so many of my PG and ECS peers.

Katie Aston (PG/ECS Officer)

## Socrel Member Interviews



*Prof Linda Woodhead*

*Lecturer at Lancaster University*

*Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion*

*Co-founder of Westminster Faith Debates*

*Keynote Speaker at 2015 Annual Conference and former Socrel Chair*

### **As a sociologist of religion, what would you say keeps you up at night these days?**

What's on my mind as a sociologist of religion? (I have always done most work late at night!) I think there are two things I would emphasise which I think are exciting and very fruitful areas where sociology of religion can go, and where some people are already pushing us. Let me call the first one secularisation after secularisation, and the second, religion after religion. Regarding secularisation after secularisation, what I mean is that the sociological study of religion has been so dominated by the theory or the paradigm of secularisation -- that religion inevitably declines in modern societies and so forth -- that it's blinded itself to many avenues of enquiry. I think that John Brewer is quite right when he says that for several decades what we've been doing was not so much of the sociology of religion but the sociology of secularisation. And, worse, we've been doing it in a narrow way. Secularisation was often viewed not as a unilinear, inevitable process – as something that was happening inexorably, somehow apart from the choices, decisions, actions of individuals, of religious leaders, of religious institutions, and their fates and relationships to different parts of society. None of these things were really attended to. It was as if people felt: well, there is no point in studying these things, because it is just “happening”. Individuals, even institutions were passively swept along. All structure, no human agency.

### **So how do you reappraise “sociology of secularisation”?**

There's no need to abandon the insights of secularisation theory. It's obviously very true that in many parts of the world, not just the West, some religious institutions are doing very badly. In much of Europe, for example, the historical churches are doing badly or are in decline, and that's true elsewhere as well. The Catholic Church for example is losing numbers in many places, sometimes to Pentecostals, as in Brazil recently. So we need to ask sophisticated questions about why some forms of religion are declining while others are growing. And in relation to the decline, we need to look much more closely. There's a vital agenda still waiting -- to investigate why certain churches have failed, why their decline has been steady now for decade after decade, even over a century (like the Church of England, for example). Much more work still needs to be done on that. In Britain there is so little work on the mainline churches and what's gone wrong with them in terms of the paths they could have taken, the failures of leadership, failures of recruitment, what could have been done differently, changing relationships with the state, the market and so on. And what, if anything, has taken its place. I think this is a fascinating and important topic – this decline of one of our major cultural institutions has not been taken very seriously by sociology yet, despite its focus on the bare fact of religious decline (historians have done more). Secularisation after secularisation – I'm calling for a much more nuanced approach.

### **Is this related to your work on religion and the global market?**

Yes. I'd love to see more work on secularisation and sacralisation – decline and growth – in relation to global interconnection. Religions are no longer islands. What happens in one

part of the world has immediate impacts on other parts. To go back to the Church of England as an example – it is a global communion, and that is increasingly important. So we've seen the views taken about homosexuality in, say, Uganda immediately – or even, in anticipation -- influencing the policies of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Church back in England. Being aware of global interconnectedness will broaden our study of secularisation, growth and change.

Another example: we can observe the growth of a new global middle class with many similarities across the world, as affluence has risen and education has become more normal for more people. What does this mean for religion and how does religion cater to these new middle classes? I'm also very interested in how very traditional models, well not traditional actually, but nuclear models of family, characterised by very separate gender roles for men and women, fathers and mothers, are taking new, resurgent forms within the framework of resurgent forms of religion, including Islam, including charismatic Christianity right across the globe.

Historically, sociology of religion has been very concerned with religions' relationship to politics and the state. Now we have to pay much more attention to how religion relates to the market in the broadest sense, to the rise of consumer capitalism, to new forms of opportunity and deprivation that come with that, and alongside that, to the new forms of mediation and entertainment bound up with the kind of capitalist societies we live in today.

### **And what about “religion after religion”?**

As sociologists, we always see religion in relation to society. But society now, in which capitalism and the market are so prominent, offers many new opportunities for religion and new spiritual needs that people are looking for. And it means that providers – both religious and secular – are actively marketing religion to various niches, and in the process strengthening new religious identities (there's some fascinating stuff coming out of business schools on Islamic marketing, for example).

And so religion also gets intertwined with prosperity and personal development – that's another interesting transnational, cross-cultural theme. It too can enrich our understanding of why some kinds of religions are growing and flourishing while others are declining.

All my work, in one way or another, has been concerned with how religion is changing shape. How what was once viewed as “real” religion, worthy of sociological consideration, was actually just one historical form of religion. And now other forms are now taking shape in the sort of late capitalist global world we live in. The whole area of “spirituality” has always interested me, because this word draws us into this area. Its very breadth and amorphousness is part of its power -- thought that doesn't necessarily mean that that which appropriate the label is amorphous. It's often very concrete, very empirical and, thank God, is at last starting to be taken more serious by social scientists, not just dismissed as shallow and commercial and unworthy of our attention. And it's being linked back to wider global trends.

Sociology of religion has a natural capacity to think globally: it's not as narrowly focused on European and America as other parts of sociology, nor is it as tied by its origins to a European paradigm of endless secular progress. This is partly because of its subject matter (it's hard to be parochial about religion, and hard to be just Anglophone), and partly because of its nice fuzzy edges. It rubs shoulders with history, anthropology, religious studies, geography etc. It's more open to other disciplines than much mainstream sociology. So I think it's an exciting time for sociology of religion – in which this Cinderella figure starts to take a lead within the social sciences which are finding it harder to push beyond the old secular, Western framework of thinking.



*Dr Sonya Sharma  
Lecturer at Kingston University  
School of Psychology, Criminology and Sociology  
Socrel Mentoring Scheme Leader and Co-Organiser of Socrel  
2015 Annual Conference*

### **I know it's still early days but could you tell us a little about how things are shaping up with the Mentoring Scheme?**

In October the Mentoring Scheme was launched and so far it's been positive and gratifying for both mentees and mentors taking part. The formation of the Socrel Mentoring Scheme comes out of research that Mathew Guest, Robert Song and I did on issues of gender and career progression in Theology and Religious Studies. We found that among our women participants one of the things that had been most helpful to them and their careers was mentoring. Many of them, including myself would be in very different places had it not been for a senior colleague's encouragement and timely advice. And when I think about my own life, just staying the course when times have been hard or uncertain was made easier by the support I received from them.

### **Moving on to your own research, what are you working on at the moment?**

My research continues to focus on religion in the everyday, especially as it occurs within family life and healthcare. With colleagues Eleanor Nesbitt and Elisabeth Arweck, I am investigating religion's impact on how families cope in times of austerity and how austerity shapes families' religious engagement. Families have always been essential, providing emotional, financial and practical support during times of need, and hence we're interested in finding out if and how religion intersects to sustain individuals during such times. We're in the midst of data collection and are looking forward to what emerges. I've also just begun a small study on prayer in residential healthcare settings in British Columbia, Canada with Sheryl Reimer-Kirkham. We're interested in understanding how acts of prayer transgress and transform these seemingly secular institutional spaces. This builds on previous research we have done together, which has explored the negotiation of religious, spiritual and cultural plurality in the provision of home healthcare. We hope this small project leads to further study.

### **Could you tell us a little more about current research on religion being undertaken at Kingston University?**

I'm very fortunate to be in the Sociology Department at Kingston University London where a number of my colleagues are engaged in research on religion. For example, Cecilia Cappel has done interesting work on the responses of Black majority churches' to domestic abuse; Sylvie Collins-Mayo, known for her work on religion and youth, has been exploring the impact and experiences of Street Pastors who volunteer to enhance the safety and wellbeing of the public as they engage with the night-time economy; David Herbert is conducting research on religion, media and conflict in Scandinavian contexts; and Vron Ware whose important work within the field of critical whiteness studies, has recently been engaged in a study of equality and diversity inside the British Army and how religion as a marker of difference is negotiated within this context. I think the number of us, and I haven't mentioned us all, who have a strand of religion in our areas of sociological research, demonstrates the importance that religion continues to have on shaping and being shaped by various aspects of social life.



*Timothy Stacey*  
*PhD Candidate and Research Assistant at Faiths and Civil*  
*Society Unit*  
*Goldsmiths University*

### **What is your PhD about?**

My PhD explores religious and cultural strategies for social solidarity in a pluralist setting. I moved from Nottingham, where I was studying Political Theology, to Goldsmiths, where I'm doing social science. I think this move is significant now, because global figures like Jurgen Habermas are recognising that liberal democracies are going to have to connect up with religious insights. But these insights often come with a lot of baggage: metaphysical, historical and sociological baggage in terms of assumptions that really need to be empirically explored. So I start with post-liberal critiques of modernity, which basically claim that intermediary institutions have been squeezed from above by the twin dominance of state and market, and from below by the ever more self-enclosed individual, and I sociologically explore the way various social movements respond to these phenomena in the real world: How do they work with and against the state and the market? How do they develop imagined communities and ideas of the person that resonate with potential workers and volunteers?

### **What has been the biggest stumbling block in your research to date?**

The hardest thing for me, moving from political theology to social science, is how to take deep philosophical and theological concepts and do justice to their complexity whilst operationalising them so that they can be explored empirically. That was incredibly tough for me to begin with. A student of John Milbank's and a keen reader of *Theology and Social Theory*, I came in thinking theology had one up on social science, and simply paid lip-service to social science. But my new supervisor showed me the problems with stepping straight from theology into politics, and I quickly realised that there is a real idealism, with a small "I", to social science, in that it demands that ideas have to be explored, and perhaps even have to resonate with people before they can be imposed politically. The work of people like Peter Berger, Gordon Lynch, Kim Knott, Maurice Bloch and Christian Smith demonstrated that such exploration could simultaneously be both theoretically challenging and empirically relevant.

I also really struggled with methodology. Coming from theology, I was very confused by empirical research generally. If theology in some sense had a truth of its own, then if a political theology did not resonate with people, it did not make it wrong, it simply meant that people were not ready for the truth, so the question just became: how do we get them there? But reading Charles Taylor helped me recognise that empirical research does not have to follow a correspondence model of truth, does not have to prove that a theory matches the reality; instead, it can recognise that language in some sense creates truth. So my questions changed from "is the world post-liberal" to "how do people respond to post-liberal ideas?" Once I became comfortable with this epistemology, I was able to read social constructionism and theories of action research in a new light.

### **What does your typical working day look like?**

Unfortunately I don't have the time to be guided by inspiration – though that is how I once wanted to be. As well as doing my PhD, I am co-running FaithXChange with my colleague Panagiotis Pentaris; I am a Research Assistant at the Faiths and Civil Society Unit, Goldsmiths; I am a Teaching Assistant in Political Science and Religion at King's College London; and I lecture at Richmond, the American International University in London. And so if I want to fit everything in, and still have a girlfriend and a social life at the end of it, then I have to be incredibly savvy with my time. I often joke that I write my PhD on the Underground – though that's less and less of a joke these days! The MA student drinking beer while writing a poem is long gone, unfortunately.

### **Could you tell us a little more about FaithXChange?**

Thanks for offering the plug. FaithXChange is an international, interdisciplinary network for exploring research on religion. We run a reading group at Goldsmiths, to which all are welcome, as well as others at Leicester, Ottawa and, as of January, Harvard. All of these will soon be recorded and placed on our website [www.gold.ac.uk/faithsunit/network](http://www.gold.ac.uk/faithsunit/network). We are also hosting our 2nd Annual Symposium in January, Faith and Formation, which explores what beliefs and values are appropriate for politics, policy and practice in the post-secular, post-political world we currently inhabit.

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