



SocrelNews

2016
Issue 4

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- [Socrel Postgraduate and Early Career Scholar Study Day – Religion and the Media – Registration Open – 2nd November 2016 – BSA Meeting Room](#)
- [Socrel Seed Corn Funding Competition – Call for Applications – Deadline 10th November 2016](#)
- [Peter B. Clarke Memorial Prize 2017 – Submissions Open – Deadline 31st January 2017](#)
- [Socrel Mentoring Scheme – Mentor and Mentee applications](#)
- [BSA Annual Conference 2017 – Recovering the Social: Personal Troubles and Public Issues – Save the Date – 4th-6th April 2017 – Manchester University](#)
- [Socrel Annual Conference 2017 – Save the Date – 12th-14th July 2016 – Leeds University \(updates coming soon\)](#)

Welcome

Socrel has had another full and productive year. We hosted several stimulating and engaging events, including our plenary during the BSA Conference at Aston University in April 2016 chaired by Dr Sarah-Jane Page and featuring Professors Grace Davie and Yvette Taylor. The Chair's Response Day, on the future of teaching and learning about religion and belief, dovetailed with a real spike in public debate about school RE, religious literacy in workplaces, and the place of religion and belief in the public sphere. Our annual conference the following July was also an immense success, featuring stimulating plenaries from Professors Lori Beaman, Gordon Lynch, Robert Beckford, Linda Woodhead and Dr Abby Day.

Our members have also been making waves, and it was a pleasure at the Socrel conference to congratulate Dr Anna Strhan, whose book *Aliens and Strangers? The Struggles for Coherence in the Everyday Lives of Evangelicals* was shortlisted for BBC Radio 4's Thinking Allowed Ethnography Award, and Dr Lois Lee, whose book *Recognizing the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular* was shortlisted for the BSA Philip Abrams Memorial Prize.

We also extend our thanks and congratulations to our outgoing Convenor Dr Rebecca Catto, now Assistant Professor in the Sociology department at Kent State University, and to Dr Sarah-Jane Page, whose interim convening for part of the year was invaluable to the whole Socrel community. We are delighted to welcome Dr Shanon Shah as the new Convenor, as of July 2016. Our thanks and congratulations as well to our outgoing Postgraduate/Early Career Scholar Liaison Officer Dr Katie Aston and we warmly welcome Alison Robertson in her place. Last but not least, we would also like to extend our thanks to Dr Sonya Sharma for her inspirational work in setting up and running the Socrel Mentoring Scheme over the years, and a warm welcome to Dr Jody Mellor as the new leader of the programme.

As highlighted at the AGM, Socrel finances continue to be healthy – a testament to our extraordinary run of amazing events and the energies and commitments of our members – and the committee continues to discuss with members innovative and fruitful ways to invest in the sociology of religion community.

The public role of religion and belief seems to be an ever-more pressing issue in public debate, as well as within sociology and the related disciplines we engage. 2016-17 looks set to be as thoughtful – and noisy – as ever.

Dr Shanon Shah (Convenor) and Professor Adam Dinham (Chair)

2016 Annual Conference

'Construction and Disruption'



Organisers:

Roger Haydon Mitchell, Emily Winter, Tim Stacey, Rachael Shillitoe, Anderson Jeremiah

Keynote Recordings



Religion, the Public Sphere, and Law: Construction, Disruption, and Reconstitution

Lois Beaman
Professor of Religious Studies
University of Ottawa



Sacred Wounds and Sacred Rituals of Public Memory: Remembering Historical Institutional Abuse of Children

Gordon Lynch
Michael Ramsey Professor of Modern
Theology
University of Kent



Conjuring Culture: Resisting Representation

Robert Beckford
Professor of Theology and Culture in
the African Diaspora
Canterbury Christ Church University



The End of 'Protestant Britain'?

Linda Woodhead
Professor of Sociology of Religion
Lancaster University



Generational Disruption in the Anglican Communion: So What?*

Abby Day
Reader in Race, Faith and Culture
Goldsmiths University

*At the speaker's request, this keynote was not recorded because of copyright of the material on which it was substantively based, which appears in Day, A (2016) *The Religious Lives of Older Laywomen: the Last Active Anglican Generation*, Oxford University Press - forthcoming February 2017, available for pre-ordering now.

Socrel Member Interviews



*Grace Davie
Professor Emeritus of Sociology
University of Exeter
Former Convenor of Socrel and Keynote Speaker at
Socrel stream of BSA Annual Conference 2016*

You have mentioned in the past that you're not too confident about the mainstreams of social science in engaging with religion. Please could you elaborate on this in light of Jim Beckford's earlier remarks (issue 2) about 'insulation and isolation' vis a vis sociology as a whole?

I wonder if I may take these two questions together. I would also like to link them to the work that I have been doing on the religious situation in modern Europe – and within this modern Britain. Central to the latter is an appreciation that two things are happening at once. On the one hand Britain is becoming steadily more secular. This is a generational shift that sees the number of ‘nones’ expanding decade by decade, largely at the expense of the nominally religious. The same thing is happening in many, if not all, parts of Europe though at different speeds and in different ways depending on the specificities of the country in question. At the same time, the significance of religion as a topic of public debate is increasing rather than declining, a situation provoked very largely by growing religious diversity. It isn't easy to accommodate a range of religious minorities in a part of the world which has been Christian for more than a millennium.

More – indeed much more – could be said about both these trends. The point here, however, is to note that mainstream sociology has tended to emphasise the first of these (the continuing secularisation of Britain/Europe), whereas the sociology of religion has responded more readily to the second (the rising significance of religion in public debate).

To argue such is, of course, an oversimplification, but it helps us to understand the continuing vibrancy of the sociology of religion Study Group and the new fields of interest that are emerging in this and parallel organisations: for example, law and religion, welfare and religion, and innovative approaches to healthcare. A glance at the interests of Socrel members is enough to justify this statement. Conversely, departments of sociology (with one or two notable exceptions) are not keeping pace in this respect. There is growth in the sub-discipline, but more often than not, this is found in departments of theology and religious studies who are broadening their

base to include social-scientific approaches to the study of religion, rather than in the sociological mainstream. Interestingly, departments of politics and international relations are doing 'better'.

To extrapolate from the British case to other European societies requires a little care. The disciplinary 'location' of the sociology of religion is different in different places. In the Nordic countries for example, it has been housed almost exclusively in faculties of theology – that said there are increasing signs of change in this respect. In France, however, faculties of theology do not exist in public universities for ideological reasons leading to an entirely different evolution. As ever we see the continuing significance of historical deposits as all European societies rethink the resources that they have at their disposal to understand better the sometimes troubling place of religion in modern Europe.

Please could you tell us more about your current work?

I'd like to take this opportunity to introduce the International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP) with which I have been working as a Coordinating Lead Author (CLA) for the past 18 months. You can find more about the IPSP and its ways of working here: <https://www.ipsp.org/>. You will see that it exists to 'harness the competence of hundreds of experts about social issues' and to 'deliver a report addressed to all social actors, movements, organisations, politicians and decision-makers, in order to provide them with the best expertise on questions that bear on social change'.

I, together with Nancy Ammerman (from Boston University and a good friend of the Study Group), are the CLAs for the chapter on religion entitled 'Religions and Social Progress: Critical Assessments and Creative Partnerships'. Altogether we are a team of twelve. Here is our abstract:

This chapter starts from the premise that some 80 percent of the world's population affirms some kind of religious identification, a proportion that is growing rather than declining. Emphasising the significance of belief and practice in everyday lives and local contexts, we analyse the impact of religion and its relevance to social progress in a wide variety of fields. These include the family, gender and sexuality; differences and diversity; democratic governance; violence and peace-making; health and economic well-being; and care for the earth. We argue that researchers and policy makers pursuing social progress will benefit from careful attention to the power of religious ideas to motivate, of religious practices to shape ways of life, of religious communities to mobilise and extend the reach of social change, and of religious leaders and symbols to legitimate calls to action. All of that, however, can be put to either good or ill, for which reason assessment of particular religions in specific contexts is essential.

Running through the chapter are five interconnected themes: the persistence of religion in the twenty-first century; the importance of context in discerning outcomes; the need for cultural competence relative to religion; the significance of religion in initiating change; and the benefits of well-judged partnerships. The continuing need for critical but appreciative assessment and the demonstrable benefits of creative partnerships are our standout findings.

The IPSP process – see <https://www.ipsp.org/process> – mirrors that of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and includes a period of public comment in the autumn of 2016. The ‘commenting platform’ is now open – see comment.ipsp.org. It would be hugely helpful if members of Socrel could take part in this. The IPSP website will indicate how you access our chapter and how you make your comments. Or if you prefer you can simply send me (and Nancy) an e-mail (g.r.c.davie@exeter.ac.uk; nta@bu.edu).

In many ways the two sections of this short contribution reflect the same point. Just as the mainstreams of sociology have difficulty in engaging the growing significance of religion in the public debate of British (and European) societies, so also did the organisers of the IPSP have difficulty in envisaging the connections between religion and social progress. A major aim of our chapter is to overcome such hesitations.



*Abby Day
Reader in Race, Faith and Culture
Goldsmiths University
Former Chair of Socrel and Keynote Speaker at
Socrel Annual Conference 2016*

What are you currently working on?

I’m poised for what I find to be the most awkward and embarrassing moment in publishing a monograph: the book is done, in this case – *The Religious Lives of Older Laywomen: the Last Active Anglican Generation* - the reviewers and editors are happy, the manuscript is in the Oxford University Press production system and all but one task is complete. Copy-editor comments and queries! It’s now I really begin to feel stupid...but I really am very grateful for the kind and constructive feedback of the highly-skilled and congenial copy-editors (sorry about those missing references).

It’s the end of a long project that has occupied me for the past six years and I’m both sad and relieved to see the end of it. I hope I’ll contribute to the sociology of religion by showing why the oldest female generation of Anglican laywomen has been so important to the church and deserved in-depth study instead of being lightly laughed off as the ‘flower arrangers’ and ‘brass polishers’. They are holy women. And, they’re responsible for the ‘church family’ continuing as long as it has. When they’re all gone within the next five to ten years, the slow decline of Anglicanism will accelerate once again. I also hope the work reaches more widely to counter some worn-out tropes, like women being more religious than men (they’re not), or that churches can be

revived by injecting more youth into the congregations (they can't), or 'spirituality' is taking over from 'religion' (nope).

Please could you tell us more about the methodology you've adopted in your research?

I'm fascinated by the subject position in ethnography. I know the term 'ethnography' itself has many interpretations, from people doing interviews and some observations, to long-term, embedded research. But, I think the most interesting turn within sociology of religion has been to the 'everyday' and therefore the long-term, embedded nature of ethnography becomes the ideal research method. I spoke about this in my keynote at the last Socrel conference, where I told the story of becoming so 'embedded' within the congregations I was studying that I couldn't actually leave! There are some anthropologists or sociologists who might see that as a disgrace, a case of 'going native', but I eventually welcomed and tried to theorise it, and I'm still, to some extent, working that out. When we do ethnographic research we know that we are a research instrument, and we learn to be 'reflexive', but I have tried to go further than that by incorporating subjective reflection on my emotions, body, mind and spirit to inform the process of data gathering and interpretation.

Please tell us more about your experiences so far of trying to make more room for religion within the discipline of sociology.

I'm working in the sociology department at Goldsmiths, University of London, in New Cross. And New Cross is an interesting place to be. South-east London is so vibrant and cosmopolitan. It's where Christianity is really growing, despite overall UK decline, alongside other growing religions, too. The academic discipline of sociology in general in the UK ditched religion some time ago when they thought it was all over. It was one of my goals as Chair of Socrel (2011-2015) to reposition religion in the academy as a sociological issue requiring social scientific analysis. In a way it's unsurprising that when it re-emerged for academic sociological attention, that it would do so at Goldsmiths, always creative, innovative, cutting edge, critical. I'm grateful for the leadership of people like David Oswell, Adam Dinham and Bev Skeggs who have all been instrumental in getting religion onto Goldsmiths' sociological teaching and research agenda.

My undergraduate courses and MA lectures - sociology of religion, religion and gender, religion and social justice, religion and crime - have been hugely popular with students, demonstrating that, done properly, courses on religion have a real future. Religion lurks in all sorts of uncanny places within sociology and I'm being constantly informed by my colleagues' research and teaching, from, for example, food practices (and panics!), values, popular culture, urban life, big data, social media, politics, the body, economy, cultural studies, migration, ethnicities, gender, sexuality, and that's just in sociology!

I'm also very excited about our new BA Religion – an inter-departmental programme with Anthropology, Politics and International Relations, and Media & Communications. In an increasingly globalised, more religious world, we need to understand religion as one of the most important social forces shaping contemporary societies. Shifts towards more religious, neoliberal and conservative societies are driving changes in domestic and international relations. This requires a sociological

imagination, not something best left to theologians. Religious people and groups play an increasingly complex social role in diverse communities, particularly in the wake of the diminishing role of governments in health, education and social welfare. These situations raise difficult and urgent questions which demand sophisticated analysis, informed by both classical theories and contemporary research.

Even further afield, I am involved in advising a newly-created [All Party Parliamentary Group on religion](#) in the media, led by Bolton MP Yasmin Qureshi. This resulted from a two-year [investigation](#) into the role of religion in public life that reported that virtually everyone involved expressed disquiet about how religion and belief is portrayed by the media. The APPG objectives are: 'to work for greater religious literacy in both media and politics; to foster a better understanding and representation of religion in media coverage of news and culture, noting the priority of religion as a prime motivator of individuals and communities; to encourage more diversity in media representation of religion; to work towards a Seventh Public Purpose for the BBC in Charter Renewal: to promote religious literacy'. I think the objectives are great, although I have also written a [blog post](#) recently about how I believe some of the Christian anxiety about the media reflects deeper, perhaps more ontological, concerns about the nature of truth, causality and legitimacy.



*Josh Bullock
PhD Candidate in Sociology of Religion and
Irreligion
Kingston University*

What is your PhD about?

I am currently in the third year of my PhD, studying full time. I am transitioning to my write up year October 2016. My thesis will be completed in 2017. My primary research question has been to find out why the Sunday Assembly has flourished since 2013.

The Sunday Assembly is a secular community, formerly self-described as a Godless congregation and an atheist church. Established in January 2013 by two comedians, Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans, the first service was held in a deconsecrated church in North London and attracted 200 people. Fast-forward 3 years later, the Sunday Assembly now has 70 franchised congregations in 8 different countries. The Sunday Assembly regularly attracts up to 500 people meeting in the Conway Hall,

Holborn, London. With the motto, live better, help often and wonder more; the Sunday Assembly attempts to provide community to the religiously unaffiliated market.

My main interest is to find out what the formation of the Sunday Assembly can tell us about the changing nature of belief, belonging, community and the current religious and non-religious landscape. To answer this question, I conducted a 15 month ethnographic study attending the Sunday Assembly London as well as conducting 35 in-depth semi structured interviews with attendees. Throughout the ethnography I attended several small groups the Sunday Assembly London facilitates, including wonder club, article club and theatre/dance club. I also visited Brighton, Bristol and Guildford SA. Additionally, I attended the Sunday Assembly's 2016 annual conference in Utrecht, Holland, to gain an international perspective of how the social movement operates. Briefly, my main findings thus far have highlighted the majority of attendees growing up with some degree of religious background, most notably ex-evangelical, who have lost their faith. Attending the Sunday Assembly, they are seeking to replace this sense of lost community through 'belonging without believing.'

To what extent would you say that the Sunday Assembly is representative of contemporary atheism as a whole?

I feel the discourse surrounding atheism has changed since the rise and dominance of the new atheists in 2004. If there was a new atheism, that worked to raise the consciousness of atheism; perhaps, in 2016 we can speak of a new-new atheism, where a small but growing population of the non-religious seek to congregate and create secular communities. However, is this representative of atheism as a whole? Not entirely. For the majority of atheists the thought of congregating, specifically to a secular church-like format that includes rituals, liturgies and meeting on a Sunday is a bewildering concept. I would argue, what is representative is the Sunday Assembly's attitude to religion being aligned with contemporary atheism, rather than ridiculing or attacking they have positive relationships with other London churches and embraces a less anti-theistic perspective than their new atheist predecessors.

In that case, would you say its ideological position is closer to humanism or new atheism?

The Sunday Assembly's ideological position is polar-opposite to new-atheism. Despite the original marketing ploy of an 'atheist church' it is certainly more aligned with humanism than new atheism and is better described as a secular community. Within the UK context, religion is not mentioned during an assembly and it is never criticised. Likewise, humanism is never mentioned either, yet they share similar beliefs and values for example living this one life we know we have as fully as possible. However, thus far the Sunday Assembly have adopted a rather apolitical stance, although, they have participated in LGBT and anti-trident marches as well as supporting refugee charities. Yet, they 'won't tell you how to live' and thus their ideological position is not as strong as humanism or new atheism.

How do you see it evolving in the future?

The London Sunday Assembly London is home to a fairly homogenous demographic of attendees and attracts people predominantly in their late 20's to early 40's who are mainly church-leavers (generation X-Y). We know that non-religion is a 'sticky' category and consequently, the Sunday Assembly London struggles to attract teenagers and early 20's (Millennials and Generation Z). I suspect with their current demographic, the Sunday Assembly will need to deploy vast marketing strategies to attract future generations who will be less likely to be church-leavers. Having said this, the Sunday Assembly will now feature in the GCSE Religious Studies Curriculum as a source of dialogue between religious and secular practices and this could provide a national platform for future generations.

The theoretical framework anchoring my research is that the Sunday Assembly is born from a post-Christian culture. This offers one explanation as to why it is currently thriving particularly in the U.K and America. Location, culture and the religious landscape are crucial in the evolution of the Sunday Assembly and where it will find popularity. Furthermore, as the Sunday Assembly does not revolve around a doctrine or supernatural beliefs, creating a long-lasting binding community is challenging. However, it continues to borrow from religious influences to create community, but applying a secular twist. The Sunday Assembly is in the process of launching a Holy Trinity Brompton style alpha course.

One further interesting insight I would like to share is how my research has focused primarily on the growth of the Sunday Assembly and what this can tell us about the changing (non)religious landscape. However, with focusing on growth, an equally captivating question neglected is why does a chapter of the Sunday Assembly fail? Paris and Crystal Palace have burned out and other franchises like Berlin for example are in talks on how best to close their doors due to low attendance.

Lastly, as the Sunday Assembly becomes increasingly bureaucratic in how it is branded, rigid structure, appointing board members, accreditations of new assemblies, the training for new start-ups and annual general meetings. What may come to be, even more so, is a Weberian routinisation by which a charismatic authority is replaced and succeeded by bureaucratic control. The routinisation of charisma is a noticeable shift I have witnessed since researching the Sunday Assembly from its 'grassroots' from 2013-2016 where the dynamism of Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans (more so in the beginning) leadership has been converted into the stability of a global franchised bureaucratic organisation. The Sunday Assembly has not compromised its original message, yet, routinisation ripples have been observed in the changing nature of the Sunday Assembly brand in a three year period.

PETER B. CLARKE Memorial Essay Prize 2017

Call for Essay Submissions

The BSA (British Sociological Association) Sociology of Religion Study Group (Socrel) invites essay submissions on any aspect of contemporary religion addressed from a sociological perspective.

Final Deadline: 31 January, 2017

The Winner of the Essay Prize will receive:

- a Free Full Pass for the Annual Socrel Conference 12-14 July 2017, Leeds University
- a cheque for £100 (sponsored by Taylor & Francis)
- a £50 voucher for books from Taylor & Francis (sponsored by Routledge)
- a year's subscription to the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*
- an opportunity to get published in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (the winning essay is subject to JCR's normal peer review)
- for the runner-up essay, a cheque for £50, if the judges decide that there is a runner-up (sponsored by Taylor & Francis)

Submission Details:

- The essay should be between 5000 and 7000 words, including footnotes and bibliography, and must not be available in print/electronic format or submitted for publication elsewhere.
- The essay should be single authored, written in English and submitted as a single MS Word document attachment, including bibliography and cover sheet. (Failure to incorporate the cover sheet will render disqualification.)
- Submitting authors must follow the JCR style guide.
- The winning essay must be submitted to JCR within 3 months of the prize having been awarded.
- Submitting authors must be postgraduates and be/become a members of Socrel to enter.
- Application forms and further details are available from the Socrel website: www.socrel.org.uk
- Electronic submissions with cover sheet downloaded from the Study Group website need to be sent to Dr Alp Arat (aratalp@gmail.com).

Traditional Peter J. Gee Quiz Award



2016 Winning Team:

'The 48%'



Abby Day, Mathew Guest, Heather Buckingham, Kristin Aune, Emily Winter, Dawn Llewellyn



Socrel Committee

Shanon Shah, Rachael Shillitoe, Carl Morris, Adam Dinham, Peter Gee, Alison Robertson, Alp Arat

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