



# SocrelNews

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# Welcome

Dear Colleagues,

We as long-time members of the BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group, are delighted to be taking on the role of Co-Convenor from Celine Benoit. The Study Group is indebted to Celine's contribution. As Convenor she went above and beyond with care, patience and consideration. In shifting to this new role, we have been grateful for her guidance and wealth of knowledge. We are honoured to be part of the team and the history of Socrel, which has been crucial to our own academic formation and development. With many of you we share fun memories of the famous Socrel Quiz at our annual conferences, lively debates and social gatherings at Socrel Response Days and the fruits of collaboration, scholarship and friendship that have been nurtured over the years. We are looking forward to contributing and hopefully seeing many of you at future events.

In this edition of the newsletter, Professor Eileen Barker pays tribute to Professor James (Jim) Beckford following his death in May this year. As a founding member of SocRel and its first convenor, Jim's pioneering scholarship, warmth and collegiality had profound influence on the sociology of religion.

Jim's life and work were remembered through a roundtable at the July 2022 SocRel online conference, and you can read more about the themes, papers, and keynotes in Rob Barward-Symmons' conference report on *Disruption, Crisis and Continuity in Religion*.

Our annual conference is the highlight of the Socrel year (!) and we are pleased to announce this year's theme is *Religion and Power*, July 5-7, University of Bristol. Do share the call for papers, details on pages 12-13 widely, and we are looking forward to seeing members at this in person event. We have some exciting speakers and as well as traditional papers, we'd really encourage delegates to consider alternative formats. Please do encourage your postgraduate students to come and participate and do draw their attention to the Peter B. Clarke Memorial Essay Prize (see page 12).

We hope you enjoy reading the interviews with our featured researchers, Dr Anna Strhan, Laura Wallace, and Cody Warta; 'meeting' new members of the committee; catching up on the Socrel blog; and hearing about recent publications from members, a new feature of the newsletter.

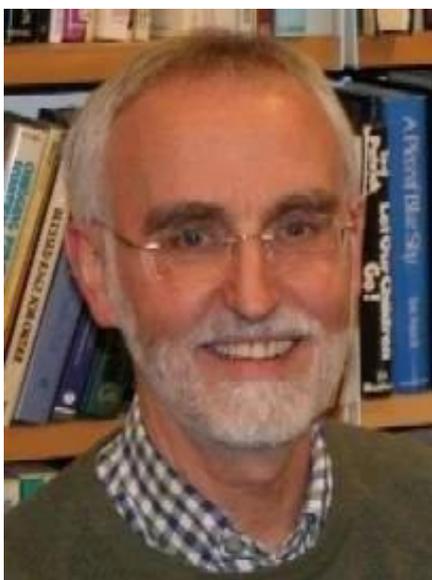
Wishing you a happy and peaceful festive season, however you celebrate it!

Warmly,

**Dawn Llewellyn and Sonya Sharma (Co-Convenors)**

## Professor James Arthur Beckford, PhD, DPhil, FBA 1 December 1942–10 May 2022

It was with great sadness that sociologists of religion, and many others, around the world learned of the untimely death of Jim Beckford after a short illness. For those of us who belong to the Socrel community, this is a particularly poignant loss for it was Jim who was responsible in 1975 for the foundation of the British Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion Study Group which later came to be known as Socrel. With David Martin as Chair, Jim served as the Group's first Convenor, organising the initial meeting at the University of Durham, where he was teaching at the time. Jim then took over as Chair between 1978 and 1983, and the Group went from strength to strength, with at least one meeting each year when sociologists of religion throughout the UK and, not infrequently, from other parts of the world, have been getting together to exchange ideas and information, catch up with old friends and make new ones.



Jim began his academic career with a First Class Honours degree in French at the University of Reading in 1965. He then switched to Reading's Sociology Department where he started his post-graduate career with a PhD on the Jehovah's Witnesses, arguably one of the most controversial of the religions to have emerged over the past two centuries. However, unlike most other literature about the Watch Tower Society, Beckford's analysis, informed by sociological theory, was grounded in meticulous empirical research. Published in 1975, *The Trumpet of Prophecy: A Sociological Study of Jehovah's Witnesses* continues to be regarded, by both by scholars and members of the movement itself, as one of the earliest and best academic studies of its kind.

Jim started to teach at Reading in 1966 and was soon a full-time Lecturer. In 1973, he moved to Durham University, where he was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1978. Ten years later, he left Durham for a one-year appointment as Professor of Sociology at Loyola University in Chicago, returning to England in 1989 to take up a Chair as Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick, where he remained until he officially retired in 2008. Being Jim, however, he continued to work until a few weeks before his death.

Back in the '70s, Jim's study of the Jehovah's Witnesses had fired an interest in sectarian religions and when, as a result of one of his students having been in the Unification Church, Jim found himself studying those who were opposing not only 'the Moonies' but also other new religious movements that were being targeted by the so-called anti-cult movement, almost entirely represented in Britain by FAIR (Family Advice, Information and Rescue) an organisation that had been founded in 1976 by a Member of Parliament, primarily in opposition to the Unification Church, but soon to any of the other new religions that came to its attention.

Jim was interested in minority movements and, even more, in social reactions to them by both the state and 'anti-cult' organisations not only in Britain, but also in France, what was then West Germany, and the United States. This research led to numerous articles, his book *Cult Controversies: Societal Responses to New Religious Movements* (Tavistock, 1985) and his edited volume, *New Religious Movements and Rapid Social Change* (Sage, 1986), the latter being published as the result of a UNESCO project, illustrated further the global facet of Jim's interests, with chapters on new religions in Western Europe, Japan, Islam, Korea, the Caribbean, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and India. Again, in a volume edited with Thomas Luckmann, *The Changing Face of Religion* (Sage, 1989), contributions featured new religions and change in a further variety of countries throughout the world.

But Jim's work extended well beyond the specialism of minority religions. He considered it necessary to attempt to integrate the sociology of religion more fully into the wider body of sociology and its many sub-disciplines at the theoretical level. In most, if not all, of his publications, he reiterated the argument that sociologists ignore religion at their peril, and that a comprehensive understanding of contemporary society cannot be acquired without an understanding of the complexities of religious expression. It was also necessary, he insisted, for the sociology of religion to become less insular. His introduction to *Religion and Advanced Industrial Societies* (Unwin Hyman, 1989) opens with the following statement:

The modern sociology of religion is remarkably self-contained. It has its own concepts, theories and general problematics...But its links with other fields of sociology are, at best, tenuous. As a result, it is rare for studies of religion to be based on, or to influence, broad ideas about the dynamics and problems of today's societies....Modern religion presents sociologists with *theoretical* problems. It challenges many taken-for-granted assumptions about their models of modernity. (*ibid.* xi, italics in the original)

Fourteen years later, in *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), he continued to press home this theme, maintaining that over the course of the twentieth century the study of religion had "moved into a marginal position ... [of] insulation against, and isolation from, the principal currents of social scientific thinking" (*ibid.* 1). Taking issue with the major thrust of traditional secularization theory and detailing evidence that countered any notion that religion was losing a role in human affairs, he contended that "Debates about secularization are a dialogue of the deaf. The antagonists talk past each other and cannot agree on ways to resolve their differences" (*ibid.* 68). And there are scores of other publications that illustrate the manner in which Jim himself combined meticulous research with clear and innovative theoretical analysis on a variety of subjects including the mass media, globalization, migration, and pluralism.

But then Jim started 'going to prison,' first in England and then in France and the USA. With Sophie Gilliat, he wrote *Religion in Prison: Equal Rites in a Multi-Faith Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), a study of the way that the religious experiences of prisoners in the UK are handled in a society that was becoming ever more religiously diverse. The

domination of the Church of England in the Prison Chaplaincy Service was examined, and the Church's role in 'brokering' the access of other religious representatives was criticized as being out of step with the changing social context.

This was followed by *Muslims in Prison: Challenge and Change in Britain and France* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) with Danièle Joly and Farhad Khosrokhavar. This compared how the disproportionately growing numbers of Muslim prisoners are treated in French and British prisons. The conclusions were that despite, or perhaps because of, France's laïcité, Muslim inmates were finding themselves discriminated against; because all were officially treated equally as part of a single, indivisible culture, they were unable to receive halal food and had few opportunities for collective worship. This study has had an impact not only in France and Britain, but elsewhere throughout Europe and North America.

In England, Jim's interests were extended to other mainstream minority religions when, as part of the Mercia Group (a consortium of academics from the Universities of Birmingham, Derby, Oxford, and Warwick), he undertook a review for the government that gave an overview of the demographic, socio-economic and cultural characteristics of faith communities, specifically the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh populations in England (Beckford et al *Review of the Evidence Base on Faith Communities*. London: The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2006)

Over the years he contributed to many professional associations, acquiring colleagues who were to remain life-long friends. Back in 1973, he attended the twelfth biannual meeting of the *Conférence Internationale de Sociologie Religieuse* (CISR) in Scheveningen, where he met with a dozen or so other early-career sociologists of religion for whom, like him, this was their first international meeting. The group became firm friends throughout the following years, celebrating their thirtieth anniversary in Turin, and Jim had been talking earlier this year about arranging a special fiftieth celebration at the conference to be held in Taiwan in 2023. Those of us who manage to attend the meeting in July shall certainly be raising a glass in his memory. Indeed, Jim had developed a special relationship with the CISR. Being a staunch sociologist of religion, rather than a religious sociologist, he was among those who were involved in changing the organisation's culture and its name to *Société Internationale de Sociologie des Religions* (SISR)/International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR). From 1981-87 he served as editor of the Society's journal, *Social Compass*; then, from 1999-2003, he was its President. It was, furthermore, through the SISR that Jim found himself fascinated by Japan and its religions as a result of meeting a number of Japanese scholars who were regular attenders. At various stages throughout his career, he visited Japan, both lecturing and conducting research, and diligently set about the task of mastering the language.

Jim was active in the International Sociological Association (ISA), being President of its Research Committee for the Sociology of Religion (RC22) from 1982 to 1986, and editor of the Programme for the 1986 World Congress of Sociology in New Delhi. He was, moreover, elected to official posts in the most prestigious American-based societies, being President of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR) from 2010 to 2011 and of the Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR) from 1988 to 1989. His international

reputation was further acknowledged in 2017 when the ASR presented him with its Lifetime Achievement Award for Contributions to the Sociology of Religion. Further honours included being given a D.Litt. by his Alma Mater, the University of Reading in 1985, and a *Docteur ès Sciences des Religions, honoris causa* by the University of Lausanne in 2014. In 2004, he was elected Fellow of the British Academy.

Jim was also an important contributor to the life of **Inform** (the Information Network Focus on Religious Movements), joining its Board of Governors in 1991 and serving as Chair of the Management Committee from 1999 to 2018. It was at an international Inform Conference in the year of his theoretical retirement, that he was presented with a festschrift, *The Centrality of Religion in Social Life. Essays in Honour of James A. Beckford* (Barker, E. ed., Ashgate, 2008). The esteem in which Jim was held is indicated with a glance at the contributions by some of the world's leading scholars of religion: Veronique Altglas; Grace Davie; Jay Demerath; Karel Dobbelaere; Sophie Gilliat-Ray; Danielle Hervieu-Léger; Thomas Luckmann; David Martin; Meredith McGuire; Enzo Pace; Jim Richardson; Susumu Shimazono; David Voas; Margit Warburg; Jean-Paul Willaime and Bryan Wilson. The breadth of his interests and contacts is also well illustrated in the mammoth volume he edited with Jay Demerath, *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Sage, 2007) in which 34 chapters covered well over 700 pages.

Jim was an exemplary teacher, with several of his students now holding Chairs in various countries around the world. In the words of one, "He was not just a supervisor, but a mentor of life." In the words of another, Dr Hossein Godazgar, "His manner, generosity, dignity, integrity, humility, and supervision were genuinely exemplary."

But there was another side to Jim that not everyone saw. He was an enthusiastic grower of gigantic prize leeks and miniature bonsai trees, a keen cyclist who could ride both a bicycle for miles and a unicycle for slightly less distances, an impressive juggler, and an expert cribbage player, to be found at many a conference fiercely competing with his long-time friend and colleague, Jim Richardson, a dram of Glenturret to the ready. He was also immensely proud of his family and loved to tell stories about the latest achievements of his marathon-running wife, his magnificent children, and his apparently uniquely talented grandchildren.

Jim Beckford will be remembered as a brilliant scholar, a wise counsellor, a perfect gentleman, and a wonderful friend with a delightful sense of humour.

**Written by Eileen Barker.**

## 2022 Socrel Annual Conference

In July, we gathered together virtually from around the world for the Socrel annual conference. The conference focused on the topic of *Disruption, Crisis and Continuity in Religion*. As ever, our community provided a vibrant and diverse range of explorations of the topic, including religious responses to COVID and the climate crisis, discontinuity of religion across generations and around the world, ethical crises, existential security, and abuse of power within institutions. We were also pleased to host a *Feminist Identities in the Field* panel discussion for the second year, as well as a panel discussion of the new work *Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization: Practical Tools for Improving Teaching, Research, and Scholarship*.

This year marked the first without the study group's founding convenor, inspirational colleague and mentor, and deeply valued friend Professor Jim Beckford, who died in May of this year. To honour his life, a special panel discussion, chaired by Dawn Llewellyn, was held with Eileen Barker, Sophie Gilliat Ray, and Hossein Godazgar. The panelists shared their own reflections and personal reminiscences of the life and work of Professor Beckford. Jim is deeply missed, and his legacy as a sociologist of religion will be felt for years to come.

We were delighted to welcome four keynote sessions across the conference, with Nasar Meer offering the first. His paper explored the relationship between Islam and modernity, identifying the traditional frame in which Christianity serves as a secularising reference point, epitomised through the work of Hegel, Weber, and Gellner. Looking beyond this, he argues, one may be pulled towards the opposing viewpoint in which the development of Islamic thought serves as the primary reference point for understanding Islam in modernity. This came with a warning, however, and was not an endeavour without its challenges – particularly for the Sociology of Religion.

Our second keynote took on a new format, as former Socrel committee member Michael Munnik shared the virtual stage with John Holmwood in an open conversation discussing the Birmingham Trojan Horse Affair and its consequences – including the introduction and implementation of the Prevent policy and the role of the British government in stirring the dubious claims, as well as the ongoing issues with representation of Islam in the British media. With the recent Serial/New York Times podcast bringing the issue back to public attention, including new issues and those that experts such as Holmwood have been emphasising for a number of years, this was a timely and fascinating session.

On Tuesday afternoon we were joined from Texas by Philip Jenkins, who guided us through a timeline of how climate disruption throughout human history have frequently effected significant religious change and upheaval, from revivals to scapegoating. Providing a global view of the current situation, he showed the importance of taking seriously this relationship in reflecting on contemporary religion and future religious transformation around the world, and how understanding the past can be invaluable in this reflection. Climate, he argued, cannot be underestimated as a factor in religious development – whether in the midst of crisis or stability.

Finally, Gladys Ganiel joined us from Belfast to discuss what sociologists of religion can learn from – and contribute towards – the study of religion, conflict, and peacebuilding. While this has been a vibrant subdiscipline for the past two decades, all too often the voices of sociologists of religion have been absent, to the detriment of both fields. Ganiel shared with us her experience in the area, including her extensive research on Northern Ireland, and closed with a consideration of what the future could hold for both fields as each learned from the other.

Following the conclusion of the main conference, we hosted our second online teachers' session in partnership with TRS-UK, following a hugely successful initial session at last year's Response Day. The panel included both academics and teachers, providing a valuable range of experiences on the topic of 'Diversifying the RE curricula and Disrupting the World Religions Paradigm'. Reform of Religious Education is desperately needed, and this roundtable discussion offered a fascinating insight into the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in this area. Yet again the session was popular with both SocRel members and RE teachers from across the country, with over 90 participants.

As ever, it was a joy to meet with, speak to, and learn from so many Socrel members at this year's conference, and plans are already well underway for Socrel 23. We can't wait to see everyone again in person after four long years!

**Written by Rob Barward-Symmons.**

## **Introducing the New Socrel Officers'**

Dawn Llewellyn, Sonya Sharma, and Saleema Burney joined the Socrel committee in the summer of 2022. The committee is also made up of returning officers Mathew Guest (Chair), Kim Harding (Internet Officer), Rob Barward-Symmons (Events), Ann Gillian Chu (Postgraduate and Early Careers) and Isabella Kasselstrand (Publications and Communications). Learn more about the new committee members from the short bios below.

### **Co-Convenor: Sonya Sharma**

I am very pleased to be joining the BSA's Sociology of Religion Study Group as co-Convenor with Dawn Llewellyn. Socrel has long been part of my life as a researcher. It was where I did one of my first conference presentations. Since then, it has offered a community of scholars whom I have enjoyed working with and knowing over the years. I am eager to continue this ethos, cultivating it as a space in which an array of researchers can flourish. My research has taken a feminist and interdisciplinary approach to studying religion in everyday life. I have a longstanding area of interest in women and religion – how women grapple with and make sense of religion and spirituality amid family, culture, and social worlds. I have also applied an intersectional approach to the numerous ways that religion and spirituality are negotiated and practiced in diverse healthcare settings with scholars and practitioners based in Britain and Canada. I'm looking forward to working with Socrel colleagues and learning from others who are curious about the various ways that religion is lived in a complex world. 😊

### **Co-Convenor: Dawn Llewellyn**

I echo Sonya's delight at joining the committee as co-Convenor! I have been a member of Socrel since 2006, when the annual meeting was held in Lancaster (where I was a PhD student) and it was on the theme of Religion and Gender (which I was researching). I've always been grateful to have met friends and colleagues through Socrel who have played a very significant part in my work and to those who have built our supportive academic community. My research examines contemporary Christianity and gender, particularly women's experiences. Using feminist approaches, I have published on women's religious reading practices, third wave feminism and religion, and methodology and methods in the study of religion. I have been working on motherhood and childlessness in Christianity through a qualitative project that considers women's religious reproductive agency, and through a women's group that has re-introduced 'Churching' to their parish (supported by Socrel seedcorn fund). I'm looking forward to contributing to the work of Socrel – thank you for this opportunity!

### **Membership: Saleema Burney**

I'm looking forward to my new role as Membership Officer for the Socrel Committee, and to working with an amazing group of people! I completed my PhD at SOAS, University of London during the pandemic in the summer of 2022 and have really missed connecting

with colleagues. My PhD focused on the contribution and lives of publicly active British Muslim women negotiating 'being religious' in a secular society. Since then, I have been working at the University of Birmingham as a Research Fellow on a project exploring the interaction of Science and Religion. As a scholar of religion, I find myself fascinated by, and drawn to, sociological methods of religious enquiry as a way of understanding our world. On this journey, I first came across Socrel two years ago at the 2020 'Beyond Binaries' conference and have never looked back. As a member of a religious minority myself, I hope to contribute to Socrel in a meaningful way and look forward to building a wider membership together.

# The Socrel Blog

The latest posts on the **Socrel blog** are based on presentations that were given at our annual conference in July, which dealt with the theme of disruption, crisis and continuity in religion.

If you're a Socrel member and would like to contribute a blog, on any theme relating to your research interests, please get in touch with **Kim Harding**, Socrel internet officer.

## **Navigating a portfolio career amid multiple crises**

Shanon Shah offers some valuable lessons for emerging scholars who are finding their feet amid multiple crises: "A lot can be said about labelling something a 'crisis'. A crisis can be personal — a breakup, bereavement, or terrible illness, for example — or it can describe something more structural or systemic, such as the crisis of climate change or the global Covid pandemic. It's important to acknowledge this complexity, but there are also lessons here." You can find this blog post **here**.

## **The messier the better: exploring the value of crisis**

In **this** blog post, Yinxuan Huang writes about how the Covid-19 pandemic enabled him to find an "unexpected breakthrough" in his career. He was about to come to the end of a contract and was "deeply haunted by a mindset of 'publish or perish'", which sabotaged his research passion. He discusses three ways in which PhD students and early career researchers may benefit from disruptions or crises.

## **Social inclusion and belonging of minority identities in Christian and Muslim spaces**

Kryisia Waldo reports on their research into social inclusion and belonging of people with a minority identity in Christian and Muslim spaces (LGBTQIA+, disabled, neurodivergent, ethnic), which found many barriers hindering full inclusion and belonging in these belief groups, including pejorative attitudes, physical barriers to accessing spaces and expectations to fit into group norms, leading to exclusion. This blog post can be read **here**.

# Announcements

## Member Response to the IRSA Report

Socrel member Wendy Dossett (University of Chester) has offered a personal response to the Independent Schools Religious Studies Association (ISRSA), calling for careful engagement with the vision of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) Religion and Worldviews report. On the Reforming RE blog, Dr Dossett sets out some difficulties perceived in the ISRSA report's characterisation of the Commission on Religious Education's proposals; its assessment of the stakes in the debate; and its anxiety about a possible detrimental effect on Higher Education Theology and Religious Studies recruitment, should the proposals be realised. You can read the blog in full [here](#).

## Peter B. Clarke Memorial Essay Prize

Socrel invites essay submissions from postgraduates or early career researchers on any aspect of contemporary religion addressed from a sociological perspective.

Final Deadline: 28 April 2023

The Winner of the Essay Prize will receive:

- a Full Pass for the Socrel Annual Conference – to be taken up by reimbursing fees for the 2023 Conference or applying the prize to the following year's event
- 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 process)

Application form and submission details are available from the [Socrel website](#).

## Socrel Annual Conference 2023 – Call for Papers

**5 – 7 July 2023, University of Bristol, UK**

This year will mark our first in-person SocRel conference since the COVID-19 pandemic. We are keen to receive you all – to reconnect with old friends and to welcome new ones.

This year's theme is *Religion and Power*. Religion and power are co-constitutive and affect institutional and group responses, national, and global events. This conference questions and explores how religion establishes strongholds, and how religion's power can sway, diminish, transform, be resisted, or become a force for public good. The variation of religion

and power can also raise dilemmas and issues when part of research, educational contexts, places of employment, and everyday communal and domestic spaces. Possible subject areas are but are not limited to:

- Religion, empire, and imperial histories
- Religion and social justice
- Gender, race, class, sexuality and religion – intersectional considerations
- Religion as forms of exclusions and inclusions
- Religion and collective forms of resistance
- Religion and power in everyday experiences and spaces
- Reading religion and power through new theoretical framings
- Teaching religion and power
- Methodological dilemmas of researching religion and power
- Religion and power in public and political spheres

In addition to accepting traditional papers, we would like to receive proposals for alternative formats such as but not limited to:

- Roundtable and panel discussions
- Teaching and methods workshops
- Sessions that discuss published work
- ‘In conversation with’ sessions
- Author(s) meets Critic(s) sessions
- PechaKuchas and short presentations
- Posters
- Sessions that involve visual and performing arts

There will be dedicated events for postgraduate research students throughout the conference, with more details to be released in due course.

#### Notes on Submissions and Key Dates

- Abstracts must be no longer than 250 words
- Please submit no later than **24 February 2023** to be considered
- We will notify you if your abstract has been accepted by **20 March 2023**
- Registration will open in January 2023\*

\*Bursaries and fee support will be available for postgraduates, early career researchers, and academics on precarious contracts, and more information on how to apply for this support will be available in Spring 2023.

If you have any questions, please contact the **BSA Events team** directly.

## Socrel Member Interviews

*Anna Strhan*

*Senior Lecturer in Sociology,  
University of York*

**Could you tell us a bit about your journey in academia? I understand that you became a sociologist of religion (and completed a second PhD) after having started out in a different discipline? How does your multidisciplinary expertise inform your work today?**

My undergraduate degree was in theology and religious studies. I think I was initially drawn to studying theology because I was interested in existential questions around meaning and purpose and felt that in theology and religious studies I'd be able to explore those kinds of issues in relation to particular cultures and histories. During the degree, I became more interested in continental philosophy, and decided to do a Masters degree in literature, philosophy and religion.



Following that, I worked as a secondary school teacher of Religious Education for a while. Working as a teacher sparked my interest in philosophical and theoretical questions related to education, and so, while working part-time as a school teacher, I completed a PhD in philosophy of education focusing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, a Jewish philosopher who was engaged with questions about ethics and meaning. My PhD was an examination and critique of how contemporary education discourses are often based on a particular understanding of the human subject, and how Levinas offers a potentially richer vision of human subjectivity, knowledge, and relationality.

During that PhD, I was based at the Institute of Education (now part of UCL), which is primarily a social sciences institution, and I often used to go to research seminars focusing on qualitative research and felt very at home in these and drawn towards the idea of studying lived experience. The opportunity came up to do a second PhD in sociology of religion, via an advertised doctoral studentship for a study of evangelical subjectivities. I was interested in the concept of subjectivity through my work on Levinas, and I was interested in evangelical cultures because I had a personal background in evangelicalism as a teenager, so I thought, why not? Since then, I've stuck with sociology of religion, and am now based in a

sociology department. But my approach is still quite interdisciplinary, and I enjoy drawing debates in sociology, anthropology, geography, and philosophy into conversation with each other.

**Your current book project (with Rachael Shillitoe) explores nonreligion among children in England. Given that a majority of research in our field utilise data on adults, your fieldwork approach is quite unique. What have been your experiences of interviewing children? How did you find that their perspectives and ways of engaging with this topic differed from the adults?**

The Nonreligious Childhoods project with Rachael was actually my second project that involved fieldwork with children. My first project was my postdoctoral study of evangelical childhoods in the UK, and I think for that project – which was my first experience working with children – I was definitely very conscious of things I needed to do differently compared with working with adults. This included using child-friendly research techniques (such as having play-doh, crayons and paper to hand during interviews), conducting paired interviews, navigating access through adult gatekeepers as well as children themselves, making information sheets as child-friendly and accessible as possible, and addressing power differentials. Now I've been involved with a few projects involving research with children, I'm aware that my own experience with that first project probably reflects a broader nervousness that people often feel around conducting research with children. Therefore, Rachael and I writing a very practically-oriented methods article in order to encourage future work in this area amongst religion scholars, as children's perspectives add such richness to understanding the lived textures of religion and non-religion, and to miss them out misses out a significant aspect of social reality.

In general, in each of the projects with children I've worked on, the children tend to challenge and question taken-for-granted beliefs and binaries in relation to (non-)religion and belief. This is, I think, because they usually have little investment in preserving the kinds of boundaries that are often defended by religious or political elites. Also, because they are usually not in positions of institutional power themselves, children often have to devise novel ways of challenging things they don't like or disagree with. For instance, a couple of children in the Nonreligious Childhoods project spoke about how they didn't like having to participate in prayers in school assemblies, so they subverted these by writing their prayers addressed to 'Dear Bob' rather than 'God'.

**In addition to the book project, what are you working on currently?**

Together with Peter Hemming, Sarah Neal, and Joanna Malone, I'm currently working on a three-year research project funded by the Leverhulme Trust which explores the role of religion in the work that schools do to foster notions of citizenship and national identity, how children and their parents experience these processes, and what this means for children's sense of belonging in wider society. I'm also working with Lois Lee on a research project on childhood atheism, funded by the Explaining Atheism research programme, which explores the interaction of causal mechanisms that sustain and strengthen non-belief in God(s) in middle childhood (7-11 years old). Finally, in relation to teaching, with my colleague Robin Wooffitt, I'm developing a new third year undergraduate option module on

the social organization of spiritual realities, which will examine how spirits, gods, and other spiritual entities become ‘real’ to people, and what kinds of ‘realness’ this means. I’ve been enjoying developing a new module collaboratively – the module feels like it will be a distinctively new contribution to our Sociology undergraduate degree, and I’m looking forward to teaching it.

*Laura Wallace*  
*PhD Researcher*  
*University of Leeds*

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

My PhD research looks at Irish Catholic women religious (who describe themselves as nuns and sisters) involved in anti-human trafficking and anti-sex work activism in the Republic of Ireland. Through narrative interviewing, I explored religious identity, class, justice, social tensions between religious and the Irish public, and the activism of the group overall. It’s been a tough project to do throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, but my participants and I persevered over Zoom.



My academic background is in Theology and Religious Studies and I have an MA in Religion and Public Life. I had a keen interest in the state, religion, and gender and I became quite enamoured with Irish studies of Catholicism during my undergraduate degree after reading a lot of work by Tom Inglis. More specific to my area of specialisation though, if I’m being honest, my life as a working-class person from Dublin has heavily influenced my interest in this topic. Like most Irish people my age, I went to Catholic schools, in my case a school run by the Presentation Sisters. Our discos, summer camps and parties were in the local church community centre. Overall, my childhood experiences, despite having a dad who really wanted nothing to do with the Catholic Church, were heavily formed within a religious terrain. I’m also from a community that experienced unimaginable losses because of heroin from the 1990s onwards. As a result, we had a lot of contact with religious and clergy who would try and provide support in the area. Later, a slew of scandals broke in Ireland involving religious and clergy and it threw our community into further chaos. So, alongside enjoying the work of academics like Tom Inglis and journalists like Fintan O’ Toole, reflecting on this part of my life in the wake of the public enquiry into religious abuse sparked my interest in my PhD topic. I also have ties to the research due to personal activism around sex work and human trafficking.

**The secularisation of Ireland has received quite a bit of scholarly attention in the past few years. To what extent is this reflected in your own qualitative data from Ireland?**

I love this topic! It fascinates me how depending on which part of Ireland you are from, or which class you identify with, it can really complicate much of the literature on secularisation. As an Irish citizen and a sociologist, despite there being key markers of secularisation, public life never felt very secular for me. I pay a lot of attention to this when foregrounding my work more generally through a class analysis and making sure there is a discourse between the two.

In terms of how this is reflected in my qualitative data, a key endeavour of my research was to preserve the narratives of a quickly dwindling part of Irish religious life that was once a pillar of Irish society. In respect of who experienced quite a dramatic shift around markers of secularisation, there is probably no group more fitting to speak to this than Irish religious. Within the data I have collected, when I have asked directly about secularisation, my participants reflected a lot on themes of loss, exclusion, public shame, scapegoating, and an idea of "letting go." Women religious no longer hold leadership roles within Irish society around education or healthcare and they told me about how this complicated their feelings around being "active" religious and their vocations more generally. I am hoping that as my analysis goes on these narratives will contribute to the discussions of lived religion and secularisation in Ireland.

**Your work is largely cross-disciplinary. What do you find are some of the key opportunities but also challenges in engaging in research across disciplines?**

I think being based within the humanities puts me into a really exciting position to dip in and out of other disciplines and experiment with how I use theory and methods. Researching across Religious Studies, Sociology, Gender and Sexuality, Justice and the state, and Irish Studies is sometimes difficult to package neatly. However, it has given me the opportunity to explore feminist-informed research methodology as a route to navigating cross-disciplinary research. Utilising feminist informed ideas, such as restorative justice or feminism and class, I can centralise a thread that runs through each discipline as it relates to the study of religion. One of the more challenging aspects I have found is navigating where my research fits in. I have presented at sex work research conferences, at more religiously focused conferences, and within political spaces and although I have found great support for my research in these areas, there sometimes has been an underlying feeling of being a bit of an outlier. I use outlier in that sense that sometimes there is a need to extra justification or explanatory work to demonstrate the value of taking such a mixed interdisciplinary approach. However overall, I've found it be very impactful and challenging in all the right sorts of ways.

*Cody Warta*  
*PhD Candidate*  
*University of St Andrews*

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

I grew up in a household where religion was essential. I attended a small, private Christian High School and went on to study Applied Linguistics and Bible for my undergraduate degree. During my college years, I began to appreciate more how much my religious background had shaped the way I thought and provided a critical developmental structure to my life from an early age. Even though I grew up in a “low-church” tradition, my weekly and annual calendar was fixed around Christian holy days, and my social gatherings were primarily tethered to my specific congregation. Through church involvement, I learned rhetoric, literature, and art—all of which are becoming increasingly less practised in the US school system.



Thus, as an undergraduate student, I began to appreciate my religious upbringing, which I have used to foster an interest in understanding it better. This desire has led me to explore the history and development of Christianity, the socio-political influences on Christian thinkers, and the philosophical developments that come out of this tradition.

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

I am interested in what is happening in Christian liturgy, especially those traditions that understand the Mass as a sacrifice. As I see it, should it be that Christians still engage in a sacrificial system, there would be tremendous implications at both a theological and social level. Indeed, this would emphasize a greater connection between the worlds of ancient and non-Western religions with practices in the present day. Certainly, this point directly contradicts a (now quite antiquated) view which understands sacrifice to be a practice only for “primal” worshippers whereby religion in its nascent form is unrecognizable from what we see in contemporary churches today. In sharp contrast to this thesis, I understand that broad connections unite contemporary liturgical practices to their ancient roots.

In my PhD, I make a two-part argument. First, I demonstrate that early Christians did not see the broad ecclesial sacrificial system to be in contrast with their soteriology—indeed, the two function harmoniously. Then, I use this reading to argue for the legitimacy of

transubstantiation (a process by which the bread and wine of Communion transform into the Body and Blood of Christ) both from a theological and philosophical perspective. Doing so requires connecting many disciplines, including Biblical and religious studies, to the worlds of philosophy and theology. As such, I try to maintain close connections to these relatively disparate worlds and encourage dialogue between these party lines.

**At the 2022 Socrel Annual Conference, you presented a timely paper titled “An Exploration of the Impact of COVID-19 on the Liturgical Camps of the Roman Catholic Church.” What are the main takeaways from this paper?**

Roman Catholicism has not been immune from some of the polarization we have seen in Western politics as of late. The pandemic served as a flashpoint in which many of these differences became increasingly more evident. One of the more explicit examples of this divide is between Catholics in the Latin Rite who practice the traditional Latin Mass (sometimes referred to as the extraordinary form) and those who practice the Novus Ordo (otherwise known as the ordinary form). I point to how, during the pandemic, the increased attendance in Latin Mass-practicing parishes rose considerably more than it was on track to do.

These trends appear to have continued even after Pope Francis issued his *Motu Proprio Traditiones Custodes*, which placed severe restrictions upon the practice of this form. Considering how much more theologically and politically conservative Latin Mass-practicing parishes tend to be, I suggest that these trends support the narrative that there is a growing polarity between “conservative” and “liberal” Catholics, especially in the US.

## Recent Member Publications

The following books, articles, and book chapters have been published by Socrel members since Spring 2022. A call for new contributions to this list for the next newsletter will be sent out via email in Spring 2023.

Arweck, Elisabeth. *Social and religious dimensions of mixed-faith families: The case of a Muslim-Christian family*, *Social Compass* 69(3).

Barker, Eileen. *New Religious Movements*. In Lester R. Kurtz (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, and Conflict* (Elsevier).

Barker, Eileen. *Protection or persecution? The state, the law, and minority religion*. In Joseph Marko, Maximilian Lakitsch, Wolfgang Weirer, Franz Winter, & Kerstin Wonisch (eds.), *Religious Diversity, State, and Law: National, Transnational and International Challenges* (Brill).

Barker, Eileen. *What do they do about it? A sociological perspective on reactions to child abuse in three new religions*. In Beth Singler & Eileen Barker (eds.), *Radical Changes in Minority Religions* (Routledge).

Chu, Ann Gillian. *Digital Research and COVID-19: An Argument for using both Primary and Qualitative Secondary Data in a Hong Kong Ethnography*, *Ethnographic Encounters* 11 (1).

Clements, Ben and Stephen Bullivant. *Catholics in Contemporary Britain: Faith, Society, Politics* (Oxford University Press).

Davies, Douglas and Ricky Whitefield. *The National Memorial Arboretum: An ecology of remembrance*, *Mausolus*. Summer 2022.

Day, Abby. *Why Baby Boomers Turned from Religion: Shaping Belief and Belonging, 1945-2021* (Oxford University Press).

Day, Abby, Lois Lee, David Thomas and James Spickard (eds.). *Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonisation: Practical Tools for Improving Teaching, Research and Scholarship* (Bristol University Press).

Field, Clive. *Counting Religion in Britain, 1970–2020: Secularization in Statistical Context* (Oxford University Press).

Guest, Mathew. *From Protestant ethic to neoliberal logic: Evangelicals at the interface of culture and politics*, *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 32: *Lesser Heard Voices in Studies of Religion* (Brill).

Guest, Mathew. *Neoliberal Religion: Faith and Power in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Bloomsbury).

Henig, David, Anna Strhan, and Joel Robbins (eds.). *Where is the Good in the World? Ethical Life between Social Theory and Philosophy* (Berghahn).

Jacobs, Naomi L. *A story like mine*, *Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health and Disability*, 2(2).

Jacobs, Naomi L. and Emily Richardson. *At the Gates: Disability, Justice and the Churches* (Darton, Longman and Todd).

Kasselstrand, Isabella. *Secularization or alternative faith? Trends and conceptions of spirituality in northern Europe*, *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 14.

Kasselstrand, Isabella. *What are the most atheistic societies?* In Teemu Taira (ed.), *Atheism in Five Minutes* (Equinox).

Kasselstrand, Isabella. *Why do some atheists remain members of religious groups?* In Teemu Taira (ed.), *Atheism in Five Minutes* (Equinox).

Lowe, Pam and Sarah-Jane Page. *Anti-Abortion Activism in the UK: Ultra-sacrificial Motherhood, Religion and Reproductive Rights in the Public Sphere* (Emerald).

McKinnon, Andrew. *The sociology of conversion narratives: a conundrum, a theory, and an opportunity*, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 37(1).

Modood, Tariq and Thomas Sealy. *Beyond Euro-American centric forms of racism and anti-racism*, *The Political Quarterly*, 93(3).

Modood, Tariq and Thomas Sealy. *Developing a framework for a global comparative analysis of the governance of religious diversity*, *Religion, State & Society*.

Morrison, Ian A. *Desiring the secular: Capital, cohesion, and the fantasy of secularization*, *Religions* 12(6).

Schweizer, Bernard and Lina Molokotos-Liederman (eds.). *Muslims and Humour: Essays on Comedy, Joking, and Mirth in Contemporary Islamic Contexts*, with Yasmin Amin (Bristol University Press).

Shaw, Martha. *Worldview literacy as educational praxis*, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 34(5).

Singler, Beth, & Barker, Eileen (eds.). *Radical Transformations in Minority Religions* (Routledge).

Strhan, Anna. *'God isn't a communist': Conservative evangelicals, morality and money in London*, In David Henig, Anna Strhan and Joel Robbins (eds), *Where is the Good in the World? Ethical Life between Social Theory and Philosophy*. (Berghahn)

Strhan, Anna and Rachael Shillitoe. *The experiences of non-religious children in religious education*. *Journal of Religious Education*.

Thomas, Kathrin and Isabella Kasselstrand. *A long way to liberalization, or is it? Public perceptions of women empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa*, *Frontiers in Political Science*, 13.

Watts, Galen. *The Spiritual Turn: The Religion of the Heart and the Making of Romantic Liberal Modernity* (Oxford University Press).

## **Socrel Committee**

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