SocrelNews

2019
Issue 10

Convenor's Welcome

Dear Members,

In our last edition of SocrelNews, we were delighted to share with you the itinerary for our annual conference, which took place at Cardiff University. It was an absolute pleasure to see so many of you. Though we also missed all our members who traditionally join us but could not be with us this year, due to other events happening at the same time. Please be assured that we are doing our utmost as a Committee to ensure that our events do not clash with other conferences and symposia that would normally be of interest to our members.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Organising Committee at Cardiff University for their hard work behind the scenes, together with our Events Officer, our PG/ECR Officer, and BSA officers, and who made us feel very welcome. I am sure everyone will remember our delightful evening at Cardiff Castle, as well as the many thought-provoking and extremely interesting papers that were presented throughout the conference.

At our last AGM, we welcomed new members to the Committee: Caroline Starkey as Membership Officer, Ruth Dowson as Events Officer, and Joanna Malone and Emily Lynn as PG/ECR co-officers. As Socrel wishes them a warm welcome, sadly it also meant saying goodbye to Peter Gee (membership), Josh Bullock (PG/ECR) and Rachael Shillitoe (Events), who did so much to support Socrel over the last few years. Unfortunately, Ruth resigned within a few weeks, but thankfully Rachael accepted to re-join the Committee for one more year while we are looking for a new Events Officer to start in July 2020 (applications for expressions of interest will open in Spring 2020). I am sure you will all join me in thanking Rachael for joining the Committee for a fifth year!

In this newsletter, you will find out about our upcoming events (the Chair's Response Day, to be held in Nottingham in March, and our BSA stream to be held in April at Aston University in Birmingham) and competitions (Peter B. Clarke Essay Prize, and Seed Corn Competition). You will also have a chance to get to know three of our members a bit more as you read their interviews.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue of SocrelNews.

Céline Benoit, Convenor
c.benoit@aston.ac.uk

Communicating Religion: The Socrel Annual Conference 2019

Article by Kim Harding

This year's conference was on the theme of "Communicating Religion" and commenced with a keynote from Uppsala University's Mia Lövheim on the theme of "Communicating Religion in Mediatised Society". Drawing on Stig Hjarvard's work in mediatisation theory — how religion is mediated through secular media institutions — Lövheim contended that this theory can be a useful framework for addressing the complexity of communicating religion, for example by asking what kind of religion is communicated and what religion becomes when it is communicated. Drawing on her reflections in interdisciplinary research, Lövheim urged scholars to engage with the theoretical issues of definitions and to be knowledgeable about the various forms of mediatisation of religion.

A number of parallel sessions follows throughout the first day. In "Religion and the Secular: Institutions" Alp Arat communicated the findings of the Leverhulme Trust-funded mappingmindfulness.net project, the first "large-scale social study of the mindfulness milieu in the UK". The project has focused on the work and attitudes of mindfulness teachers across the UK, finding that the majority (70%) are women; most are educated to a high standard (61% are postgraduates); and that politically, mindfulness teachers tend to be strongly left-learning and centre-left with a pro-remain stance (only 5% voted to leave the European Union). One of the conclusions from the study is that mindfulness is a "coming of age spirituality"; indeed, the majority of respondents consider themselves SBNR (Spiritual But Not Religious).

Jo Bryant from Cardiff University also presented her research into how chaplaincy legitimates itself in a secular public setting. Drawing on Bourdieusian accounts of capital, especially linguistic capital, Bryant contended these theories can help explain key inequalities between faith groups in chaplaincy. She noted that while Anglican chaplains are usually senior and paid, minority-faith chaplains are often unpaid and therefore less secure. Different processes of socialisation means that Anglican chaplains have more cultural and linguistic capital, said Bryant, calling on sociologists of religion to draw on political science in their work.

The second and final parallel session of the first day was on the topic of "Non-religion and Non-Abrahamic Religion". Alongside Rachael Shillitoe from the University of Birmingham, who presented her research with Anna Strhan on "The Stickiness of Non-Religion: Intergenerational Transmission and the Formation of Non-Religious Identities", Joanna Malone from the University of Kent talked about her life-history interviews with non-religious older adults and the difficulties of communicating non-

religious beliefs with these individuals. Speaking with she called “everyday non-believers”, Malone asked participants what they believe in, while also examining their alternative beliefs. Malone noted that “there wasn’t always a ready-made category for participants to express their non-religious beliefs” and that it was somewhat easier for participants to articulate life meaning — such as children or marriage — rather than notions of belief.

Day two commenced with a panel session on “Religious and Modest Fashion”. Reina Lewis from the London College of Fashion, UAL, spoke on the theme of modest workwear as a communication of religious values, presenting the findings of a new research project on UK women wearing abayas to work in Saudi Arabia. Following this, Kristin Aune from Coventry University presented on modest fashion at work, tracing the employee experience in UK faith-based organisations, asking if women’s workwear could be considered a form of lived religion. Aune noted that modest fashion can be used as a tool for interfaith dialogue, but sometimes at the expense to women making clothing choices in the religious workplace. Lewis added that there is an “aesthetic labour” regarding the embodied practices of modest workwear, with women being required to adjust the way they dress and behave to meet religious norms that they may not share.

The next keynote of the conference was from Jolyon Mitchell of the University of Edinburgh, with the title “In Search of Postsecular Theatre: the Mysterious Revivals of Religious Drama”. Putting a question mark over claims that theatre is in an age dominated by secular drama, Mitchell located religion in contemporary British theatre — from David Hare’s Racing Demon to satires and comedies such as The Book of Mormon and Jerry Springer: The Opera — including the resurgence of Mystery plays. Mitchell suggested that the revival in religious drama rests on the appeal of enacted suffering; the draw of performative communities; the magnetism of communal memories; the communication of passionate beliefs; the translation of tradition; the embodiment of devotional action; and the passion for performance.

Following this was a parallel session on the theme of “Religion and Discourse”. Liam Metcalf-White from the University of Chester presented on his work with people in recovery from addiction, which explores how participants utilise the category of spirituality alongside other categories as secular, religious and non-religious. He posed the question of how implicit these terms are for those in recovery and suggested that religion and related taxonomies can be conceived of as socially constructed discourses. In the same session, Sarah Lawther from the University of Nottingham presented her research, which explored how to research, describe and disseminate verbal and non-verbal communications about religion and belief. Lawther used postcards with the statement “I find meaning when…” with her participants, aged between 19 and 24. These postcards, sent back to the researcher

anonymously, helped participants to 'say' things that were difficult to put into words. The individualised nature of meaning-making was reflected in participants' language; they used their own definitions and interpretations of meaning, what Lawther described as "using their own words in their own way".

The last day of the conference started with a parallel session on the theme of "Religion, Representation and Image". Carl Morris from the University of Central Lancashire gave an overview of Islamic media in Britain. Before 2010, he said, there was underrepresentation and typecasting was rife on British screens. Now there is a new wave of Muslim writers, actors and producers, motivated by a desire to represent a range of identities relating to religion, class and gender. Following this, Icram Serroukh from Middlesex University presented her research, which concerns the experience of British-born or British-raised women who have joined or left Islam. The gendered aspect of conversion has been significant in her study. Serroukh found with her participants that media played a prominent role in converts' experience of becoming Muslim, using as one example the BBC show Bodyguard to demonstrate how Muslim women are portrayed in the media and to show how negative stereotypes are reproduced in TV programming.

The final keynote of the conference was delivered by Charles Hirschkind from the University of California, Berkeley, who used his research on Spain in the 21st century and the memory of al-Andalus — medieval Islamic Iberia — to think about historical memory as a medium of religious communication. The keynote's title, "What a 12th Century Muslim Says to a 21st Century Christian in Andalusia", suggested religious communication from the distant past. Using the archive of *andalucismo*, which can be understood as localised nationalism, Hirschkind considered religion not as belief or practice but as a "heritable quality", exploring that we are historically subjects of religion, even if this is not how we describe ourselves.

Kim Harding is a PhD researcher at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her article first appeared as a blog post on Socrel's blog socrelstudygroup.blogspot.com/
If you have an idea you'd like to contribute to the blog, please get in touch with our Internet Officer Liam Metcalfe-White at liammw37@gmail.com

Upcoming Events

Socrel's calendar does not begin and end with its annual conference in the summer. We will be devoting our annual Chair's Response Day to the subject of education and pedagogy: hosted at the University of Nottingham, we intend this as a useful crossover between academics in religious studies and teachers in UK secondary schools. How do our approaches, methodologies, and empirical discoveries feed back to teachers? And what is happening and could be happening in schools to excite students and prepare them for further study in the subject? Dr Dawn Llewellyn from the University of Chester is scheduled as our keynote for **6 March 2020**. The call for papers and registration details will be coming soon.

Our study group will also contribute a plenary session to the annual conference of the British Sociological Association (BSA), held this year at Aston University in Birmingham. Their topic is 'Reimagining Social Bodies: Self, Institutions and Societies', and Professor Reina Lewis and Dr Lina Molokotos-Liederman, both of the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London, will deliver a session. Their title 'Modest Workwear as Aesthetic Labour: Learning to Wear Religion' fits superbly with the theme and also picks up ideas present in their panel session from the 2019 Socrel Annual Conference. The BSA has sent out its decision on abstracts, but whether you're speaking or not, you're welcome to register and attend. Details are at britsoc.co.uk

Finally, we are now accepting abstracts for next year's Socrel Annual Conference. The theme is 'Breaking Binaries in the Sociology of Religion', and we will have keynote addresses from Dr Sarah-Jane Page of Aston University and Professor Sam Perry of the University of Oklahoma. We will also feature a special 45th Anniversary panel with professors Eileen Barker (London School of Economics), Jim Beckford (Warwick University), Grace Davie (Exeter University), and Linda Woodhead (Lancaster University). Join us in York from 14-16 July 2020. You'll find details here.

Funding Opportunities

We continue to find ways of developing and investing in our members – researchers looking to begin projects that can seed more research and postgraduate students who can capitalise on their research and writing, garnering some prestige, a bit of cash, and the opportunity for publication.

On our website, you'll find details of the latest call for our Seed Corn Funding. The deadline is close – get your proposal in by **15 January 2020**. The fund is worth up to £5000. Researchers at all career stages are welcome to apply, but you must be a member of the BSA and based at a UK university. We are open to all sorts of activities, so long as it is clear these activities are designed to develop further work.

Postgraduates can submit an essay to our annual Peter B. Clarke Memorial Essay Prize. The prize includes cash, books, a subscription, and the possibility of publication in *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. Details and the cover sheet are on our website, and the deadline is **15 April 2020**.

Socrel Member Interviews

Denise Cush
Emeritus Professor of Religion and Education
Bath Spa University

With so much state and public interest in religion and education, what is the effect on you as a scholar of this subject?

It's quite mixed really. Religion is constantly in the news which means people can at least sometimes see the relevance of studying religion(s) in schools and universities. For example, I was delighted to see in the Labour 'Race & Faith' manifesto launched last month a commitment to support 'religious education about all faiths in all schools'. 'All faiths' might be a wee bit ambitious, and some have already criticised this clause as excluding non-religious worldviews, but as inclusive, non-confessional, multi-faith RE is so rarely high or even anywhere on the agenda of politicians, I felt pathetically grateful for a mention. I've been contributing chapters on religion and education to successive editions of a book for undergraduates called A Student's Guide to Education Studies. In the first 2004 edition, I had to sneak the 'R' word in under 'Cultural and Religious Pluralism in Education'. In the 2008 and 2013 editions I felt confident enough to reverse the terms, and in the forthcoming 2020 edition the title is out and proud: 'Religion and Worldviews in Education'. This was the suggested new name for the subject that we came up with on the Commission on RE which took up a lot of my time in 2016-18. The term 'religious education' is the common title in English internationally, but it is ambiguous as it can cover both faith development within traditions and the impartial study of religion(s) referred to by the European Court of Human Rights as 'objective, critical and pluralistic'. The scholarly community – especially we feminists - may express reservations about 'objective', but let that pass for now. Even after half a century of non-confessional, multifaith RE in England and Sweden, it is hard to get people to understand that 'religious education' – or even 'religious studies' at university - is not about making people religious, and that those who teach or choose to study this subject are not necessarily 'religious' themselves. It doesn't help that in many faith-based educational settings these assumptions may be justified.

On the one hand it is significant for the subject that religion (and to some extent RE) are in the news, and that more people (especially young people, according to the

research) are interested. However, as fewer people have direct personal experience of religious traditions, and if their religious education in school has been suboptimal or completely lacking, their knowledge of religion is increasingly second-hand from the various media. The news is often negative, and as Linda Woodhead claims, 'religion' has become 'a toxic brand'. As the CORAB report (2015) and our colleagues such as Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw tell us, the level of 'religious literacy' is poor just when it is needed.

I wish I could say that the public interest in religion and education had already led to increased funding for research, or increased support for the subject from people in power either in government or university managements, or that young people's interest has led to them taking their study further. Recruitment to TRS at university level currently is down as is take up of Religious Studies at GCSE and A level. Teachers report a difficult struggle. Government education policies for some years have negatively impacted on RE. RE nationally runs on the support of charities and the unpaid work of volunteers. Nevertheless, the 'RE community' is very committed, research is continuing whether funded or not, we have hopes that initiatives such as those of the RE Council will shortly bear fruit, and that the higher profile of religion and religion in education will eventually pay dividends for RE in schools and RS in universities.

You have recently been running courses with secondary school teachers on subject-specific knowledge - in this case, Buddhism. To what extent are teachers making use of scholarship on these topics?

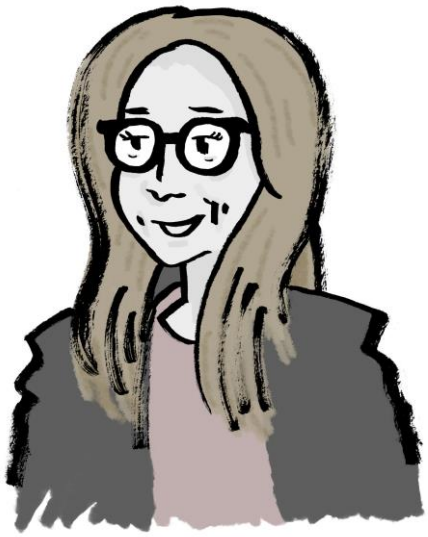
These are courses supporting teachers of the new A level specifications on Buddhism, and I have been focusing on Mahayana and on gender as less supported by existing resources. I have been very impressed by the teachers' desire to access scholarship and the way in which they are doing what they can to do so. This includes strong supportive on-line networks for sharing the learning and resources discovered. Some are completely self-taught on Buddhism. I have met some amazing teachers. However, this is a self-selected sample of committed teachers, from schools and sixth-form colleges where they actually support A level RS, so it would be hard to generalise from this about the extent to which secondary teachers access scholarship. Given the pressure on RE, and the fact that it is still taught by unqualified teachers more than any other subject, I fear that my experience is not the norm. Even primary children told us during the Commission that 'bad RE is when the teacher doesn't know the subject'.

[Editor's note: Socrel's Chair's Response Day for spring 2020 will focus on teaching and the study of religion – highly relevant to these issues. It will be 6 March 2020 - see this newsletter for more details!]

What is the state of interest in what you term alternative spiritualities among teachers and students?

'Alternative spiritualities' is really just my shorthand for what I might also call 'new paradigm religiosity'. My main focus has been on contemporary Paganism, including Druidry, Wicca, and Goddess spirituality, as well as my 'teenage witches'. It overlaps with research on the 'spiritual but not religious' and the 'spiritual revolution' thesis, as well as the increasing number of people who are 'existentially interfaith', drawing

upon a variety of traditions for their individual worldview. There are also many parallels to be drawn with the research on the actual beliefs, values, practice and identity of the 'nones', in the stress on personal experience and rejection of institutional religion, propositional truth claims and illiberal ethics. My experience has been that many students, both at school and university, are interested in these phenomena and other new movements, or smaller indigenous traditions, often more so than in the so-called 'world religions'. I've also found interest from teachers, both in studying and teaching these forms of religiosity and in recognising what I'm discussing as relevant to their own experience. The concerns of the environmentally aware, women and girls, and those who identify as LGBTI emerge as important in this context. Again, it is difficult to generalise from my particular experience, but both my research findings and interactions with university students, school pupils and RE teachers would suggest a significant interest in 'alternative spiritualities' both as topics for study and as contributing elements to their personal worldviews.



Line Nyhagen
Reader in Sociology
Loughborough University

Feminism plays a big part in your research. How do contemporary social discourses about feminism affect your research questions?

Feminism must be an inclusive project that embraces all people regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, age and disability; in short, the feminist project is intersectional. Much of my research is about how women mobilise for equal opportunities and rights in different arenas, and about the inclusion and exclusion of different groups of women from political claims-making about women. It is important to have a wide academic lens on women's activism; otherwise we risk privileging white, Western, middle-class, secular, heterosexual women's activism. Contemporary academic and wider social discourses about feminism tend to marginalise and silence the role of religious women in struggles for women's rights and gender equality, be it locally, nationally or globally. It is as if religious faith on the one hand, and belief in feminism and gender equality on the other, are incompatible; there is wide-held assumption that feminism and gender equality go hand-in-hand with secularism. In fact, religious women have mobilised alongside secular women, as illustrated by the (now defunct) UK-based organisation Women Against Fundamentalism. A current example is the American Black woman Tarana Burke, founder of the MeToo movement, whose activism against sexual harassment and violence is grounded in her Christian faith.

I have been interested in the relationship between religion, gender and feminism since I embarked on my PhD in the mid-1990s, which explored intersections between gender, race and class in the activities and discourses of the nineteenth century evangelical missionary movement, focusing on the Norwegian Missionary Society in Norway and Madagascar. A key finding was that some of the missionary women in Norway were directly involved in feminist work and sought to promote a 'missionary feminism' within the National Council of Women, which was part of the International Council of Women. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their engagement with feminism proved controversial among men in the Norwegian Missionary Society. But their story inspired my continued research on women as religious and gendered subjects within patriarchal religious traditions, and led me to apply a feminist sociological lens on contemporary religious women's lived experiences. My research on women in mosques, for example, suggests that women are strategically using the notion of 'authentic Islam' in order to validate arguments for more gender equal practices. In my research on marginalised groups and voices in women's movement and feminist discourses I have also been interested in whether and how Black women's critiques of white women's feminist agendas (including the absence of racism on such agendas) have been received and acted upon by contemporary women's organisations. Although racism has yet to be mainstreamed onto feminist agendas, there are signs that intersectional thinking is gaining ground. For example, an organisation such as the Fawcett Society has begun looking at gender pay by ethnicity.

The agency of Muslim women remains a fixation for British society - I see the interest in my own students. For you, is this a tired question you'd like to move on from, or is it the conversation you think we need to be having?

Unfortunately, we can't move on from this question, because Muslim women in the UK are being objectified, stereotyped and discriminated against on an everyday basis, including in national news media, elite political discourse and social media. Muslim women continue to be portrayed as fundamentally subjugated by Muslim men and therefore as lacking in self-determination and agency. Through such discursive processes of Othering, Muslim women and men are constructed as a coherent and unified group of people who essentially differ from, and are deemed inferior to, a hegemonic, collective 'we' that is perceived as already emancipated and always free to make rational choices based on individual interests. Through collective acts of marginalisation and silencing of Muslim women's own voices, we fail to recognise diversity among Muslims and the capacity of Muslims to act as individuals.

With increasing rates of religious hate crimes and discrimination in the UK, including Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism in the country's two main political parties, we must hold news media and politicians to account when they perpetuate stereotypes which in turn may fuel racist discourses and behaviour. This is also important in the university classroom, which is why I organise an annual trip to Leicester Central Mosque for students on my Religion and Society module. The mosque visit engages students in self-reflexive work on commonly held media-informed, stereotypical views about British Muslims and Islam, and their reflective writing suggests that the visit is a transformational educational experience.

Alongside teaching and research, you've been very active in bringing your knowledge to social problems. What impact do you think you've had as a scholar?

My impact as a scholar is most clearly related to my pedagogical practice, but I also try to engage with politicians, voluntary organisations and the general public. A thread that runs through my research, teaching and public engagement is a focus on EDI – equality, diversity and inclusion, and at the moment EDI issues are moving upwards on many agendas. For example, in response to the black and ethnic minority student degree attainment gap at UK universities, I recently led a piece of research on Loughborough students' experiences inside and outside the classroom. The study, which was based on student-led focus group discussions with students from different ethnic backgrounds, found both similar and different experiences across black, other ethnic minority and white groups of students. Some students raised concerns about a lack of fair and equal treatment in terms of marking and feedback on coursework assignments. The research findings led to multiple changes at Loughborough, including the introduction of anonymous marking across the entire university to combat unconscious bias, from October 2019. As much as I would like to think that my research and wider public engagement has an impact, through giving research-based evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement and to Citizens UK's Citizens Commission in Islam, Participation and Public Life, or via the dissemination of research to a larger readership via blogposts on *The Conversation* website, I believe that the biggest impact I have as a scholar is through what and how I teach my students.

Abdul-Azim Ahmed
Research Associate
Cardiff University
Centre for the Study of Islam in the UK

Your doctoral research focused on mosques in Britain. What did you find about the way these spaces are used and the role they take on in the communities where they are located?

British Muslims often spoke about 'multipurpose mosques' or mosques becoming more like 'community centres'. I was keen to explore what this meant in practice. My findings, based on an extended year-long ethnography, focused on the way in which

the mosque was something of a ‘public sphere’ for Muslims. It was accessible by all, and activities were often led by the congregation. This being the case, I was also very interested in how activities that the wider public would see as ‘secular’ or not overtly religious, such as employment workshops or GCSE tuition, were incorporated into the mosque's everyday life. I used the ideas of Henri Lefebvre and ‘rhythmanalysis’ to describe how the mosque structured its activities around the prayer times of the ritual salah. Prayer times would turn the mosque into a silent, reflective space, whereas in between these times, the full gamut of human experience from social to education could be incorporated. This was achieved with considerable effort from the congregants, who would need to be socialised into the verbal, spatial, and temporal cues to operate within this diverse timescape.

You conceptualise mosques along congregational lines. How applicable are terms and models developed out of studies of Christianity for studying other religions in Britain?

The honest answer is I'm not yet sure. I developed some conceptualisations out of my ethnographic research, and I've been able to do some more research and thinking in my role as Research Associate at Cardiff University, but there is still a lot we don't know about how the British Muslim congregation operates. I think the easiest areas for comparison are where Muslims consciously or unconsciously emulate Christian congregations, or else where the model of operation is very starkly different from Christian congregations. It's the area in between that provides the most challenging area for comparison and cross-denominational application of terms. On one hand, you want to use the rich history of congregational studies of Christianity, but on the other hand, you don't want to obscure what is unique about Muslim congregations. The strongest area of similarity between Muslim congregations and Christian ones is where the loci of authority remains within the congregation. Almost all British mosques operate in this way, which is similar to independent or chapel Christianity. This presents interesting challenges to understanding how important or influential the imam is within a mosque. A significant area of difference however is that Muslims can belong to more than one congregation, and visit several mosques regularly (say one during the working week, and a different one on the weekends). I'd like to think comparison is possible, but doing so requires careful treading.

What's the next question you're planning to explore?

I'm very interested in how Muslim congregations (and mosques) are changing British civil society. Conversations about religion and civil society haven't really acknowledged that in the last fifty decades, Britain has gone from having a dozen or so mosques, to over 2000. How these new emerging institutions have transformed the role of religion and civil society is still unknown, but I'm keen to explore and understand it.

Socrel Committee

Chair: Sophie Gilliat-Ray
Convenor: Céline Benoit
Membership Officer: Carol Starkey
Events Officer: Rachael Shillitoe
Publications and Communications Officer: Michael Munnik
Internet Officer: Liam Metcalf-White
Postgraduate Representatives: Emily Lynn and Joanna Malone

Editor/Michael Munnik
munnikm@cardiff.ac.uk
Photographs/Michael Munnik
Illustrations/Hugo Yoshikawa
www.hugoyoshikawa.com