SocrelNews

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Editor's Welcome and Farewell

Dear All,

Welcome to our latest issue of Socrel News. Usually, it is the Convenor, or sometimes the Chair, who writes this welcome note, but I'm doing the honours for this – my last issue of Socrel News. I will be completing my term on the Executive Committee, along with a few other colleagues, in July at our annual conference. Just about all of us extended our terms by one year in 2020, since so much of "business as usual" was thrown into disarray by the pandemic. At the least, it didn't look like a time to change leadership or to invite stressed-out scholars to take on new voluntary tasks.

Though we're not out of this pandemic yet, we're a little more on top of our duties, both with the study group and with our other work demands. And though we're still not meeting as a community in person, where so many relationships are built and strengthened and where curious members can see those of us on the committee in the throes of our jobs, we will be able to gather online in real time this summer, talking, listening, and sharing.

Something we started doing in 2021 was hosting regular online chat spaces. One of our exec members would take a turn in hosting an hour on Zoom for people to drop in and be present. I hosted one in February and really enjoyed it. Yes, we may be Zoomed out or feeling Teams fatigue, but as all sociologists know, humans are social creatures. If we can't have the quotidian contact we crave, something is better than nothing, and these technological tools give us means to be present with each other.

On my chat, we talked a fair bit about how those of us who teach were adjusting to the different tools – what was working for us and our students. That may sound like boring shop talk or look predictably like form dictating content – "Oh, you used a video conferencing software to discuss using video conferencing software, hmm?" – but shop talk itself has a social function, and the benefit of doing this with people up in Chester or over in Durham means that I am experiencing a wider horizon than my Cardiff experience alone will provide.

Oh, wow, do I remember clip art like this!

Tools change, but there is also continuity. When I was a teenager and editor of the newsletter for the British Columbia chapter of the Presbyterian Young People's Society, I used to put my desktop publishing skills to work pasting clip art, playing with fonts, and trimming sentences to ensure the columns all fit right. I would mock up *The Link*, as we called it, then print it off, corral friends from my local youth group to fold, stuff envelopes, stick on labels, and lick stamps. We had good chat being present in those spaces, but I felt the tedium and wondered at a better way.

Little did 16-year-old me know that 42-year-old me would be doing something *very* similar – perhaps even on a humbler scale, in terms of production values – for a community of professionals. My West Coast Canadian eco-activist self would like that we don't kill so many trees to spread word of Socrel's activities, though my media anthropologist self wonders what everyone's encounter really is with a pdf sent to your inboxes, or even circulated by sharing a link. How many of you read this through? Where are you when you read it? Do any of you print it off?

My bored teenager self would be glad not to be stuffing envelopes; my tech admin self wonders about the various member lists and wider lists through which this is circulated. We made the decision at a Socrel AGM three years ago (I think) to circulate the newsletter for free on our website rather than through the membership e-mail list. That means this is no longer a "perk of membership" but a way of advertising our activities. I like the open accessibility and transparency – I think it suits the wider cultural moment of sharing everything. It does mean we have to work harder to make membership in the study group worthwhile.

That's why we're glad this year's annual conference will go ahead, albeit virtually. Faced with a planet-wide disruption, Socrel followed many other scholarly organisations in suspending the usual summer activity: transitioning to online formats required a fair bit of thought and research, and in the meantime there is research disruption to manage, students needing answers about end-of-year assessments and teaching, oh and of course new pressures that have nothing to do with our academic work. Perhaps you had to manage learning at home for your children. Perhaps you were forced to invade the home space where your partner had established patterns, and you both had to adjust. Perhaps the home *was* your space, and you needed to adjust to an invasion. Perhaps you have been on your own and didn't get to see anyone. Perhaps you got ill. Perhaps someone you love got ill. Perhaps you lost them.

We've all had so much to carry. And as I said earlier, we're not through it yet. But I hope that many of you are in a space where you can look beyond your primary needs. I hope you can make time to join us in July for our annual conference, seeing familiar faces and hearing familiar voices. If you're new to the study group, they may not be so familiar, but we will work to ensure there are chances to meet each other and just be present alongside hearing about everyone's excellent research or discussing with our keynote speakers how we surpass the binaries in our field. If you're receiving this at the point of publication, then there's still time to register. Costs are very low this year, as we are relying on existing tools that are institutionally supported and our own time and effort as volunteers to run the thing. We hope, therefore, that there are as few barriers as possible. And we invite you to the presence of our community.

At our AGM, we will confirm new members for the Executive Committee, and we hope they have a good term with a better prospect of activity and sociality to maintain this community and help it grow.

I hope to see you there.

Michael Munnik (Publications and Communications Officer)
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Letter of Support for Colleagues at the University of Chester

In our April meeting, the executive committee of Socrel agreed to write a letter to the leadership of the University of Chester expressing our concern about planned redundancies. Our letter joins statements from other study groups and professional organisations such as the British Association for the Study of Religions and an open letter drafted by Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education and signed by over 800 scholars in the field.

The text of our letter is printed here.

Dr Gyles Brandreth
Chancellor, University of Chester

Prof. Eunice Simmons
Vice-Chancellor, University of Chester

The Right Revd Mark Tanner
Lord Bishop of Chester and Foundation Member of the University Council

Dear Chancellor Brandreth, Vice-Chancellor Simmons, and Lord Bishop Tanner,

I am writing on behalf of the executive committee of the Socrel, the Sociology of Religion Study Group of the British Sociological Association, representing our members in the field of the sociology of religion here in the UK and internationally. We are very concerned about the stated risk of redundancies to staff in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Chester and we urge you to reconsider the decision.

We understand the pressures that higher education institutions are under at the moment, as indeed are many institutions in society. We are sure you recognise that those pressures are shared by individual workers who have endured through disruption and uncertainty since last March's lockdown and carried the work of colleagues, administrators, and students through everything that has been asked of them. The decision to remove their positions will hurt those individuals and their families at a time when pressures remain and alternative work arrangements are precarious and uncertain.

It is a poor form of stewardship of your employees and also your students – those currently studying with you, whom these employees have supported, and those whom you hope to attract in the coming years. A depleted department cannot serve those students to the standard they expect from a department of such excellence as we know TRS Chester to be.

By all the metrics devised to measure the success of academic departments, TRS Chester is a success. This is seen in the teaching, the student experience, and the quality and character of the graduates you produce. It is seen in the research activity, the grant capture and publications that mark research prowess. And it is seen in the integral role these staff play in the wider work of scholarship. Staff at TRS Chester are active and key figures in the sociological understanding of religion with our study group: we have awarded our competitive seed corn funding to staff from the department, and members of your staff have helped develop our mentorship programme. Moreover, staff and students have provided us with insights and spurred on our own research work through their

publications and presentations. This is not a new story for you: you have heard from other associations and groups in which your staff and students have made an impact.

This impact surpasses academia. The understanding that staff bring through their teaching and their research benefits all of society, as we struggle with questions of community cohesion and the values that underpin our social relations. At a time when these relations are fractured through political disagreement, the disorientation of technology, and the harsh restrictions imposed by a global pandemic, the work of scholars in TRS Chester is providing answers and solutions. It would be shortsighted to cut off these workers at such a moment of need.

Your staff – at TRS Chester and across the faculty and the university – have shown their loyalty in their heroic commitment to the mission of higher education at a strained, challenging moment in history. We urge you to honour the students who benefit from the excellence and range of their teaching; to honour the subject of religion, which is so necessary for understanding and improving society and which is enhanced by their contribution; and to honour the employees whose work is imperilled by this decision.

Yours sincerely,

Sophie Gilliat-Ray (Chair)
gilliat-rays@cardiff.ac.uk

Mentoring from Both Sides, Now

From Caroline Starkey:

When I first saw the advert for the Socrel Mentorship Scheme in late 2014, I was 8 months pregnant with my second child, and just about to hand in my PhD thesis. The child that I was going to give birth to had a rocky start in utero, and I had spent much of the previous few months in and out of hospital, or being sick in the University library toilets. I was in a sort of denial state, underprepared for the child (only one photograph exists of me pregnant) and alongside my PhD, I was teaching as well as working as a Research Assistant on an externally funded heritage project, both of which I loved.

When I thought about what post-PhD life was going to look like for me, I felt a bit dazed although certain I wanted an academic career. The Mentoring Scheme was appealing because I was struck by the gender inequalities highlighted in the Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education report by Guest, Sharma and Song (2013) and felt very keenly that I would benefit from some guidance as to how I might carve out a career, alongside balancing caring responsibilities. Academia wasn't my first career (I had spent a decade in social work), but unlike in my previous job, there didn't seem to be any unequivocally clear career pathways where permanent employment was guaranteed. Should I focus on teaching? Publish more? Try to get postdoc funding? Some other magic? More than anything, though, I think I wanted someone else to talk to, other than my PhD supervisors, who might be able to guide me in the right direction. I also wanted someone to calmly tell me everything was going to be alright.

When I was matched with my mentor, Grace Davie, I was a bit anxious. I have a special gift for saying really inappropriate things when nervous, but right from the start, Grace made me feel comfortable, reassured, and listened to. She provided a calm voice at a challenging time, and I will be forever grateful. We met, mostly via Skype, every few months, and talked through how I was getting on, what plans I had for my career, how my kids were doing and how I was doing. She guided me through job applications (and rejections - there were many!), post-doc and funding applications, but more than this, she was a sounding-board for the concerns and worries that I had, as well as someone really nice to talk to - something which shouldn't be underestimated.

About a year into our mentoring relationship, Grace asked me if I would be involved in a research project with her. A few months earlier, the Bishop of Grantham announced he was gay and in a relationship - the first Church of England Bishop to do so. Following his media engagement, he received hundreds of letters, and it was going to be our job to analyse these. I remember feeling absolutely thrilled as I drove to Lincoln to pick up the large cardboard box of letters, with my kids in tow (before I forced them to 'enjoy' an educational visit to see the Magna Carta). So began a fascinating six months, where Grace and I poured over these beautiful, heart-wrenching letters, the vast majority of which were highly supportive of the Bishop. One of our most memorable meetings took place in Birmingham John Lewis cafe, a part-way point between us, involving lots of tea, cake and research discussion. The analysis of the letters became an article, as well as a report for the Church of England and a couple of blog posts (see here and here).

Working with Grace on this project was deeply formative for me as a researcher, as she taught me what it is to pay close and careful attention to data, and how to deal with the ups and downs of academic writing and publishing. Although we no longer have regular mentoring meetings, we connect over email at the moment, and Grace still takes the time to link me in to projects or opportunities as they arise. I feel so very fortunate that I decided to apply for a Socrel mentor, and that I was matched with Grace.

About a year ago, the chance arose for me to be a Socrel mentor myself. I was initially a bit sceptical that I would be able to mentor well- I was only about 4 years into my career, and although I had secured a permanent academic contract, I wasn't sure what pearls of wisdom I had to offer. Although I still don't feel I have all (any?) of the answers, I was keen to give back to a scheme that had offered me so much. I was matched with my mentee, Gillian Chu, a PhD student working on the fascinating topic of civil action in post-Umbrella movement Hong Kong. We meet about once a month, and talk through ethnography, sociology, the trials and tribulations of completing a PhD in a pandemic, and career choices and options. At the start of our mentoring relationship, we completed a goal setting exercise, and for Gillian, she wanted some guidance on engaging with the social scientific discipline, career planning, and monograph advice. We talk about these goals, as well as other things as they arise naturally. What I hadn't realised, when I started out as a mentor, was how much I would enjoy the process. I love talking to Gillian, finding out how she is getting on and what her plans are. I hope that she finds the relationship as beneficial as I did, and that I am some help in guiding her through turbulent times. If you have the chance to sign up (either as a mentor or a mentee) I would highly recommend it.

From Ann Gillian Chu:

I have always enjoyed a good conversation and valued the guidance from wise women. That is why, when Socrel advertised their mentoring scheme for female early career researchers, I jumped at the chance. Socrel paired me up with Dr Caroline Starkey from the University of Leeds, who has been my mentor since October 2019. In our initial conversation, I was surprised and excited to learn that she grew up in Hong Kong, since I am from Hong Kong and conducted my field research in this city. Caroline has since been a dear friend and confidante, and I look forward to our monthly conversation. In particular, she supported me through my Fellow of the Higher Education Academy application and gave me precious opportunities to present and write for the Centre for Religion and Public Life at the University of Leeds: as Researcher of the Month, and as part of their Faith and Activism Series (Part 1 and Part 2). I have immensely benefited from this mentoring relationship, and I consider Caroline to be a stellar representative of Socrel. I hope to mirror her enthusiasm in representing Socrel and contributing to the area of sociology of religion.

Apply to be a mentor or be matched with one:

Our mentoring scheme is still going and available for applicants. If you want to know more or apply to be a mentor or to be matched with one, details and forms are on our website:

https://britsoc.co.uk/groups/study-groups/sociology-of-religion-study-group/mentoring/

On the Blog

As mentioned in the last newsletter, Socrel has moved the blog to a new home on the publishing platform Medium. The blog can now be found at https://socrel.medium.com/ I want to share highlights from our recent posts and invite you to share your work with us.

Dead and gone: Does embodied storytelling have a post-pandemic future?

Vaughan Roberts presented at Socrel's 2019 annual conference on a knitted poppy campaign as a way of using objects and stories to memorialise significant events – in this case, the hundredth anniversary of the end of the First World War. Since then, we have been living through another significant global event: the Covid-19 pandemic. Roberts reflects on the blog on how narratives and materiality – this time, physical presence in a place – help us make sense of death in new ways.

As I continue to take and watch funerals during the pandemic that are from both religious and humanist perspectives and which have mourners both in buildings and watching online, I am struck by how this could be the way forward. The marking of death in the future will not be either physical or virtual but, rather, it will both/and. Storytelling around death and remembrance has embraced the online world (Bassett 2018) but it would appear that its embodied forms will continue to be needed in our post-pandemic existence.

Read his post in full at this link:

https://socrel.medium.com/dead-and-gone-does-embodied-storytelling-have-a-post-pandemic-future-9b016acd7723

A new approach to public understanding of religion

The news media are one important site for constructing narratives. It's the focus of Dr Ahmed Topkev's research with Cardiff University's School for Journalism, Media and Culture. Topkev develops four dimensions of the coverage of religion in British and Turkish newspapers: spiritual, world life, political, and conflict. As Topkev writes,

Whereas these four dimensions certainly allow the news media to legitimately criticise religions and their followers, they also ensure that the so-called secular mainstream newspapers recognise religion as part of civil society and its important role for religious citizens — no matter how big or small the number of these people is — and inform the rest about it.

Read how he constructs these categories and how they relate to the role of media in democratic society.

https://socrel.medium.com/a-new-approach-to-public-understanding-of-religion-f225504f1240

Influencing practice through doctoral research: Opportunities and challenges

Dr Lucy Peacock, of Coventry University's Faith and Peaceful Relations Research Group, part of the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, conducted research with the charity The Faith & Belief Forum (FBF), formerly the Three Faiths Foundation, to study their School Linking programme as a tool to foster peaceful relations in school settings. Part of her research problem was considering the balance between independent analysis and research that would help the charity's own objectives.

Undertaking doctoral research with the purpose of influencing practice, however, came with its own challenges. I appreciated that F&BF entered the partnership with specific expectations, including quantifiable outcomes that could used to market School Linking and enhance its positive reputation. This raised a number of questions. How would F&BF respond to a research design that inherently challenged oversimplified definitions of success? How could I best communicate findings to F&BF that were on the surface 'negative'?

Peacock managed this by incorporating "double reflexivity", which she describes in more detail on the blog.

https://socrel.medium.com/influencing-practice-through-doctoral-research-opportunities-and-challenges-6da95abc17e7

If you would like to make a contribution to socrel.medium.com, please email Kim Harding, our Internet Officer, with an outline for your proposed blog post. They can be from 500 to 1,000 words and can be about any aspect of your current research and/or research practice. Kim can be reached at khard001@gold.ac.uk

Socrel Member Interviews

David Voas
Professor of Social Science
Head of Department
University College London Institute of Education

We've just passed another census in England and Wales - the third to have a question on religion. What will it mean for your quantitative work to have three comparable sets of census data?

It's always great to have more data, but there are a few things to bear in mind about the census. First, there's only a single question on religion. We learn something about self-described affiliation, but nothing about belief, practice, intensity, importance, values, and so on, or even denominational identity (except in Scotland and Northern Ireland). Secondly, the census questionnaire is focused on socio-demographic characteristics, so we can't connect the answers on religion to social attitudes. Thirdly, the questionnaire is often completed by one person for the whole household, so we can't even be sure whether it's you or your Mum saying what religion you are. Fourthly, the data are released in aggregated form, so analyses at individual level are only possible with samples of anonymised records. There are other problems as well, but I don't want to sound grumpy! For some purposes, such as studying small areas or small social groups, the census is unbeatable.

I belong to the Religious Group Assurance Panel for the Office for National Statistics, so I'm able to stay in touch with developments related to data collection and outputs. The first results won't be released until spring 2022, but by contrast with previous rounds – when it took years for all of the tables to emerge – the aim is to publish everything in a period of 12 months. Data users will be able to create custom tables rather than relying on pre-packaged standard tables, which is a helpful innovation.

What is your appraisal of the public conversation around religion in Britain at the moment?

Is there a public conversation around religion in Britain at the moment? Go to Google News and type 'religion' and 'Britain' into the Search box. There's nothing that looks much like a real discussion to me. The stories range from "A word about Prince Philip and religion" (Charles Moore in *The Spectator*) to "Sexy vegan leather trousers are Chapel's religion" (British *Vogue*, accompanied by a photo of a model wearing a diaphanous top and

plastic from the waist down). There are a few reports on academic research into secularisation or voting behaviour. Mostly it's a haphazard list of disconnected topics; even sensitivities about Muslims barely feature. Or go to the website of the think-tank Theos, which declares that "Religion is a major factor in national and international news". What do they offer to justify the 'national' part of that claim? "Placing the notion of 'worldviews' at the heart of Religious Education will ensure the subject remains relevant for an increasingly non–religious generation of students, argues new Theos report, Worldviews in Religious Education." Very worthy, but excuse me while I yawn.

Meanwhile, you're among the scholars working to strengthen our understanding and our measurement of non-religion. How do you see this category developing?

My main interest has been in how secularization happens. For about two decades now I've argued that people in the West are becoming more secular not because adults are losing their religion but because old people who are at least somewhat religious are gradually being replaced in the population by younger people who aren't. Religious decline is generational.

But the secular population is changing in an interesting direction. As it becomes more acceptable to say that you have no religion, we might expect to find the average level of belief among the 'nones' to be higher than before. In fact, the nones are increasingly secular, whether we look over time or across generations. In 1998, just over a quarter of British Social Attitudes survey respondents with no religion described themselves as very or extremely unreligious. In 2018, a clear majority did so, and the proportion is nearly two-thirds among those aged less than 45.

Survey data show that secularisation continues past the point where people stop identifying with a religion or going to church regularly. The non-religious carry on becoming less and less religious. As a corollary, the idea that what we observe is "transformation of religion, not decline" seems inconsistent with the evidence.

Gladys Ganiel
Reader, School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast

Your research examines the roles of religious institutions in the conflict of Northern Ireland. The conflict has recently become more visible to the rest of Britain. How does it look to you, as a scholar living in Belfast with long-term investment in the issue?

In the short term, I think we are in for a bumpy ride. The fall-out from the 2016 Brexit referendum has revealed already simmering discontents at the grassroots, illustrated by loyalist street violence in April 2021. The summer months have traditionally been periods of unrest, often triggered by Orange Order parades. So, it could be a long, hard summer. On top of this, Northern Ireland has not dealt effectively with its past. Unlike other post-conflict societies, there has been no truth and reconciliation commission, or prosecution of high-profile perpetrators. Little has been done to acknowledge and honour the suffering of victims. In May 2021, the Secretary of State committed to what looks like an amnesty for British soldiers, while ignoring other provisions for dealing with the past that were outlined in the 2014 Stormont House Agreement. These included a Historical Investigations Unit, an Independent Commission on Information Retrieval, an Oral History Archive, and an Implementation and Reconciliation Group.

But there are reasons for hope. When the Troubles began in the late 1960s, there were significant political, economic and social inequalities between unionists and nationalists. There is not full equality now, but these gaps have narrowed considerably. This makes it less likely that we will return to Troubles-levels of violence. There also are now more people in Northern Ireland who identify as 'neither' nationalist or unionist, than identify with either of these two communities. In 1998, 40 per cent identified as unionist, 25 per cent as nationalist and 33 per cent as neither. In 2019, 39 per cent identified as neither, 33 per cent as unionist and 23 per cent as nationalist. These figures hint that overall, Northern Ireland is becoming less polarised.

These current conflicts are set within two bigger stresses on the region – Brexit, as you've mentioned, and the pandemic. What role do faith leaders play in these stories?

Faith leaders' responses to these current challenges can only be understood in light of the role of the churches during the Troubles. Individual clerics and faith-based organisations contributed the most to peacebuilding, in contrast to the rather timid efforts of the largest denominations. The leaders of the four largest churches made a lot of joint statements condemning violence. But rather than inspiring faith-based peacebuilding, these statements may have taken the focus off churches' responsibilities to engage in more radical grassroots initiatives. So, there is a nagging feeling that the so-called 'institutional' churches didn't do enough, which has meant church leaders have lost some legitimacy. On the other hand, faith leaders still have a higher public profile in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK, and they have responded with some energy to the challenges of Brexit and the pandemic.

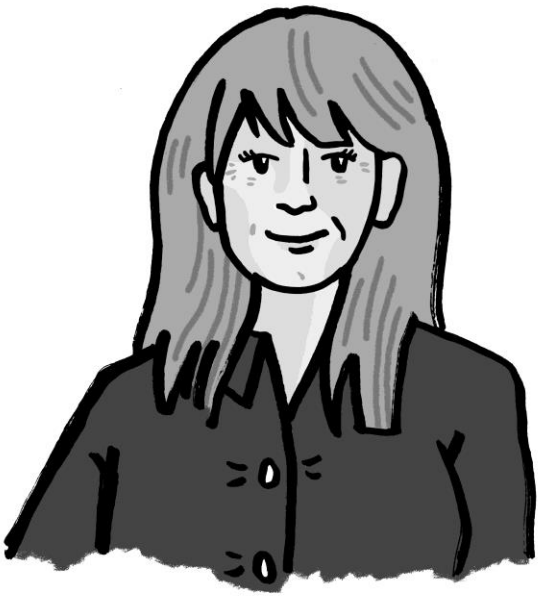
In 2019, alarmed by tensions over Brexit, the Church Leaders Group, which consists of the Catholic and Church of Ireland Archbishops of Armagh, the Presbyterian Moderator, the Methodist President, and the President of the Irish Council of Churches, initiated talks among Northern Ireland's political parties. These facilitated dialogues helped jump-start the process that led to the return of the Northern Ireland Assembly, which had been suspended between 2017 and 2020. During the pandemic, the Church Leaders Group met more frequently than ever before, crafting united responses to the closure and then the re-opening of church buildings, and other issues. I argued in a recent report that the pandemic has helped create a situation in which national-level inter-church relationships are at a historic high. At local level, the churches also responded quickly and decisively to the pandemic: my research found that 75 per cent of parishes or congregations were providing services to the wider community during the pandemic; while provision of online worship opportunities had increased from 56 per cent to 87 per cent.

The Church Leaders Group's public profile also has risen through a number of statements, and television and radio services, in which they've emphasised the need to deal with the past. The Group's 2021 St Patrick's Day statement about dealing with the past included what is, at least to my knowledge, the most comprehensive confession ever for the churches' historic contributions to division and violence. I've long argued that the churches' efforts to deal with the past could not be taken seriously without apologising for their own failures. So, this statement is potentially very important in modelling a way forward.

I also have been involved as a researcher on a project about dealing with the past, initiated by the Presbyterian Church. It was inspired by the Stormont House Agreement's proposed Oral History Archive and involved collecting the stories of 120 Presbyterians and 'critical friends' with a variety of experiences of the Troubles. This has resulted in a book for a general audience, *Considering Grace: Presbyterians and the Troubles*. It not only tells those stories but includes plenty of reflections on the Presbyterian Church's failures – itself a type of confession.

How do you balance the analytical task of the sociologist of religion with your more prescriptive and theological work on the church and on conflict resolution?

I locate myself in the action research tradition, which means it's important to me that faith-based practitioners can learn something from my work. I owe it to them – as well as other social scientists – to remain true to the data. I also see myself as part of the reflexive tradition that sees value in reflecting on the impact of our own subjectivities on our work, rather than striving for a pristine objectivity that is probably unattainable. I trust that the wider community of sociologists of religion, with all its rich and varied perspectives on the analytical and the prescriptive, helps me strike a balance.



Yvonne Bennett
PhD candidate
Canterbury Christ Church University

What's the focus of your PhD?

I was relatively late in joining the world of academia. I did both my BA and my MA with the Open University when I was in my forties. Prior to this I had been a nurse, a pre-school teacher and a volunteer teacher with the now defunct charity Kids Co.

The focus of my PhD is conservative Presbyterianism on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland. Lewis is the most northerly and largest of the Outer Hebridean islands. The island is predominantly Presbyterian and religion effects those who live and visit the island. My research began by examining the link between cultural identity and religiosity. Following a series of events on the island, and as I was analysing the data, my focus shifted to gender inequality.

The conservative Scottish Presbyterian churches are patriarchal in doctrine and structure. Women hold no roles of authority in the church. When discussing this during interviews I was informed, by women across the generations, that this was not because they were inferior to men or subordinate, but because it is decreed in the Bible. For those who worship in these churches, the Bible holds ultimate authority.

As I have mentioned, religion has an effect on those who live and visit the island, be they religious or not. The island is one of the last British bastions of Sabbatarianism although this is slowly being eroded. Those who wish to see Sabbatarianism upheld include those who are non-religious. For this section of the community, the Sabbath as a day of rest is as much a cultural tradition as a religious one. Similarly, the rituals surrounding funerals have their roots in cultural tradition. The coffin does not enter the church and there is no eulogy. Women do not attend the burial and remain at the church whilst the men carry the coffin in procession a few hundred meters down the middle of the road to a waiting hearse. In times gone past they would have carried the coffin many miles to the cemetery with the men taking it in turns to be coffin bearers.

The majority of churches hold three services on the Sabbath. Two in the morning, one in English and one in Gaelic, and a third service in the evening. At the services I attended there were around 200 at the morning services and around 100 returning in the evening.

There are also two fellowship meetings a week as well as Bible study and prayer groups. The services do not have music and only the psalms are sung in worship. The singing of unmetered psalms, especially when sung in Gaelic, is a haunting sound.

What led you to this topic?

I am an atheist. However, after reading an interview by Phillip Pullman, I have appropriated his phrase of Christian atheist. I enjoy the rituals of the Presbyterian churches but have no personal faith. I was drawn to sociology of religion when a friend relocated to the Isle of Skye and his tales of Sabbatarianism sparked an interest. My MA research question asked if people became more conservative in their religious belief and practice as a way of maintaining their cultural identity when faced with a changing demographic. As with other Scottish islands, many young people leave for further education or work and retired people move to the area, thanks to the scenery and cheaper cost of living. As with much research the question went unanswered as my research changed direction. My PhD journey began with that unanswered question.

What projects have been keeping you busy alongside your PhD?

I have been very busy during lockdown. Not only have I been working on my PhD but I have been vaccinating at a local mass vaccination centre, putting my nursing skills to good use. For many years, I have been involved with a group of mums who live in vulnerable households in Bermondsey, London. Pre-Covid, the group, known as Mummies Republic, met weekly in a Methodist church hall. At the beginning of the pandemic, I wrote a short, non-academic, book giving them a voice, telling their stories of the difficulties they face with Universal Credit and life under lockdown. From this, the founder, Winnie Baffoe, and I have started a food company which will employ some of the women. We will be selling cook-at-home boxes with a Zimbabwean/ Scottish fusion. We are drawing on our own food cultures and are called Plantain and Potato.

Socrel Committee

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