



SocrelNews

Spring 2022

Issue 15

Convenor's Welcome

2021 Chair's Response Day

Socrel Blog

Announcements

Peter B. Clarke Memorial Essay Prize

Socrel Annual Conference 2022

Socrel ECR/PGR Workshop 2022

Socrel Member Interviews

Katie Gaddini

Chloë Gott

Titus Hjelm

Welcome

Over the last five years, I have had the privilege to write many 'Welcome' sections for SocrelNews. This one feels particularly special, as it is my last. As I am about to step down as Socrel Convenor, I reflect on how much we have done over the past few years, and it is so inspiring to see how much the study group keeps evolving and adapting year after year.

Thanks to you, Socrel is a community that constantly engages in new activities and developments. Whether it was launching initiatives to **support PG/ECR colleagues, women in academia**, or adopt a **code of conduct** to ensure everyone feels safe during conferences – you've always been there to provide feedback and help us ensure Socrel adheres to **its vision and values**. We, as a committee, are ever so grateful to you, Socrel members, for your ongoing support.

Following recent conversations, we are now working with **M2M** to launch a mentoring café, which is based on what your needs and priorities are – watch this space! We would like to thank all of you who have filled in the questionnaire on mentoring, and who contributed in discussions during our AGM and our last virtual coffee chat. We recognise that there is much more Socrel can do to demonstrate its commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion. We would like to share ideas that go beyond mentoring, and have honest conversations about how we can champion diverse voices within our discipline when we meet at our AGM on 5 July 2022 – make sure you join us!

Our **annual conference** this year will be held online between 4-6 July. We will explore the themes of Disruption, Crisis and Continuity in Religion. Remember **to book your place!** On 7 July, we will hold a free online workshop for PG/ECR to start conversations about encountering disruption, crisis and continuity in our academic careers, listening to speakers who will be reflecting on their own post-doctoral careers. If you would like to attend, please email **Gillian**, our PG/ECR Officer.

You will find more information about our events and forthcoming essay competition in this newsletter, as well as interviews from three of our esteemed colleagues.

I hope you enjoy reading our newsletter.

Céline Benoit (Convenor)

c.benoit@aston.ac.uk

NB: It is with great sadness that we learned, just prior to publishing this newsletter, that our colleague James A. Beckford has passed away. We will be writing about his outstanding contributions to the sociology of religion in a future issue.

2021 Chair's Response Day

In November 2021, the Socrel study group was delighted to be able to hold our first in-person conference in over two years at the University of Nottingham. As our annual Chair's Response Day, the theme was 'Teaching Religion,' and sought to gather ideas, experiences, and critiques of the state of teaching of religion in the UK today – across all stages of education. This was co-ordinated alongside our new approach to interact more intentionally with teachers of religion and sociology of religion at every level, including offering a new reduced rate membership option for teachers. As a result, we were pleased to be able to host not only academics based in universities presenting new research and reflecting on their own teaching practice, but also both primary and secondary teachers to share their reflections and experiences.

Across the 12 papers presented during the panel sessions, we explored the impact of race, class, and creed of students and teachers on the practice of teaching religion; interactive and multi-sensory approaches, in particular when working with students with additional needs; the ongoing discussion around the concept of 'worldviews' in religious education; and how we can use innovative approaches to better communicate key ideas at every level. Our keynote speaker, Dr Dawn Llewellyn from the University of Chester, led us digitally through an interactive workshop inspired by the work of bell hooks exploring our own practice around building learning communities in the study of religion. This was a great success, and again further encouraged the mutual benefits of discussions between educators at different levels.

At the end of the day, we were also able to host a public, online discussion on the topic of Teaching Religion and Worldviews in the RE Classroom, with contributions from both academic and secondary educators and over 90 attendees online in addition to those at the conference in person. This is an element we will be looking to repeat at future conferences in order to engage and learn from secondary teachers, including at our upcoming 2022 Annual Conference. This will explore the theme of 'Disruption, Crisis, and Continuity' in religion, and will be hosted online between July 4th-6th, with a Post-Graduate and Early Career Day taking place on July 7th.

Written by Rob Barward-Symmons.

The Socrel Blog

Here's a round-up of the latest posts from the **Socrel Blog**. If you're a Socrel member and would like to contribute a blog, please do get in touch by emailing **Kim Harding**, Socrel Internet Officer.

Zoom-Sphere and the Re-Working of Social Space: A Conceptualisation

In **this blog post**, Christopher Steed responds to the Socrel Conference 2021 theme of 'beyond binaries' to think about our experience of social space and time, via Zoom and Georg Simmel.

The Yoga Field as a Training Camp: A Practice-Based Understanding of 'Religion' and 'Spirituality' in Modern Forms of Yoga

Matteo Di Placido argues for a practice-based approach to the study of religion/spirituality and discusses his research on the pedagogies of modern forms of yoga. Read this piece **here**.

Forget Worldviews: Manifesto for a Postmodern Religious Studies

In **this piece**, Paul-Francois Tremlett offers an alternative to the Worldviews paradigm in the form of a manifesto for a postmodern religious studies that conceives religion in terms of relations and assemblages.

Religion and the World of Work: The Organisational Quest for Coherence

Mark Read writes on the ways in which British Quakers negotiate the workplace and how organisations define the scope and limitations of their religiosity. This blog post can be read **here**.

Sociology of Religion and Critical Posthumanities: Blurring the Boundaries of and in Knowledge Production

In **this blog post**, Ilaria Bianco writes on the role of binary oppositions in understanding the potentialities of the relation between sociology of religion and posthumanism

Announcements

SocRel Annual Conference 2022

July 4th-6th, 2022 – Online

Religion in some form has been a near constant in human history, with some traditions stretching back millennia into the 21st century, but this is a history cut through with crisis and disruption. These echo into the modern day, along with newly emerging conflicts and ruptures in society alongside rapidly shifting perceptions of religious life and institutions, including both a decline of religious engagement in the West alongside the ongoing impact of religious fanaticism on the global landscape. Religion has been described as distinct by virtue of providing a ‘chain of memory’ and tradition that links the believer to a global and historic community through shared ideology, symbolism and practice, yet many religious traditions emphasise the importance of rupture and *discontinuity* in the lives of (particularly new) believers. In amongst this, religion has long been seen as something to which people turn in times of crisis (are there really ‘no atheists in foxholes’?) or cling to as the point of stability and hope in a period of disruption, while religious groups are often at the heart of crisis response, whether in offering immediate support or long-term campaigning. Yet religious belief can also trigger a ‘spiritual crisis’ as sacred meaning systems are disrupted and begin to collapse, while institutional responses have at times led to the emergence of new crises in the lives of individuals and communities. With the events of the past two years and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic not only causing large-scale social disruption and loss but also unparalleled institutional change, we may also ask how religious communities have responded to this new, global upheaval. Meanwhile, the discipline of the study of religion itself is potentially going through a period of disruption and even crisis, with faculties and funding being cut across the country as its popularity among younger generations continues to decline.

Keynote Speakers

Dr Gladys Ganiel (Queen’s University, Belfast)
Professor John Holmwood (University of Nottingham)
Professor Phillip Jenkins (Baylor University)
Professor Nasar Meer (University of Edinburgh)

Registration closes: 30 June 2022

Any questions, please contact our events officer **Robert Barward-Symmons**.

Socrel ECR/PGR Workshop 2022



British Sociological Association
Sociology of Religion Study Group

ECR/PGR Workshop 2022

Disruption, Crisis and Continuity in Academia

Thursday, 7 July 2022

13:00-16:30 (BST)

Online

Guest Speakers

Yinxuan Huang, London School of Theology
Saleema Burney, University of Birmingham
Shanon Shah, King's College London
Renasha Khan, King's College London

...and Panel Discussion Facilitated by Rachael Shillitoe, University of Birmingham

This half-day online workshop will explore how early career academics experience disruption, crisis, and continuity in their research, as well as in their academic journeys and careers. After our guest speakers present their journeys and respond to the Q&As, there will be an interactive panel discussion reflecting on a variety of post-doctoral careers.

Schedule

13:00-13:20 Networking Lunch
13:20-13:30 Break
13:30-13:45 Opening Remarks
13:45-15:45 Presentations and Q&A
15:45-15:55 Coffee Break
15:55-16:30 Panel Discussion

Details and Registration

Please email **Gillian Chu** with any questions and to book your place for free. Booking is essential.

Please note: This event is only open to SocRel and BSA Members.

Peter B. Clarke Memorial Essay Prize

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

Final Deadline: 29 May 2022

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 2022 Annual Virtual 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 Member Interviews

Katie Gaddini

*Lecturer in Sociology, UCL and
Associate Researcher, University of
Johannesburg*

What drew you to the Sociology of Religion and to the particular questions that you have explored to date?

I grew up a pastor's daughter in the Baptist tradition in the United States, so religion has been a big part of my life for most of my life. I also come from a family of pastors – of varying Protestant denominations – and growing up holidays were spent debating theological interpretations and referencing evangelical culture. I was always interested in the social aspects of religion – especially the treatment of women – and wanted to explore this through a sociological lens, so as to take into account the social embedment of religion as well as an analysis of power.



My doctoral research focused on single evangelical women in the US and the UK and examined the multi-faceted ways faith impacts their everyday lives. During fieldwork for that project, in summer 2016, the UK had just voted to leave the European Union and Trump had just been declared the Republican candidate for presidency. So, I took a little research detour in order to look into evangelicals' views on these momentous political events to see how their religious beliefs impacted their political beliefs – if at all. I ended up collecting a bit of data that summer, and then returning to my doctoral study. However, the questions that this research stint raised came back to me in summer 2020 as the US was gearing up for the next presidential election. At the same time, George Floyd had just been murdered at the hands of police officers, and my rage over the ongoing racial injustice in the US, and puzzlement over white evangelicals' continued support for Trump prompted me to tweak my fledgling research questions so that I was not only looking at *religion* but also at *race*. This formed the basis of my current research: a five-year ethnographic study of white evangelicals and politics in the US.

Please tell us about your new book, *The Struggle to Stay: Why Single Evangelical Women Are Leaving the Church* (Columbia University Press, 2022).

This book draws on a four-year study with single evangelical women as well as my own personal story of growing up in, and then leaving, evangelical Christianity. *The Struggle to Stay* expands my original ethnography to include a chapter on evangelical social media influencers and a more sustained meditation on what it means to stay – or leave – a religion.

I started writing it in Italy, where some of my family live, right after my PhD. I'd spend hours every day in an old stained-glass library, which used to be a church, drawing out the book structure on large sheets of art paper. I knew the overall story I wanted to tell, and that a narrative non-fiction style was the right format for the material; the stories of these women needed room to breathe, and a strictly academic book might not afford this.

I also was very clear that I wanted to incorporate my own story, to braid it together with those of my interlocutors, a practice of feminist reflexivity and a way to make the writing more appealing to non-academic readers. Many people discouraged me from this approach. Throughout the writing process, I was told that incorporating the self, and writing in a more creative style would be frowned upon by academics. But I was never writing *just* for academics; I was writing for other single Christian women who felt marginalized and alone. This audience was also very clearly in my mind from those early days of writing in Italy.

What was your experience of conducting fieldwork for your book? What challenges or surprises did you encounter in this process?

I am a big supporter of ethnography as a research method for studying religion, and from the start of this research I knew that this is the method that I wanted to use to really delve into the religious experiences of single evangelical women. However, I was also terrified of the immersion and intensity that ethnography requires, given my own background in evangelicalism. It took several months before I took the plunge and began attending church services, Bible study groups, and other social encounters with women. A lot of fieldwork was 'hanging out' – going to coffee, or a run in the park, a birthday party, or the cinema – with my interlocutors. This continued engagement, over four years, gave me a keen insight into the challenges single Christian women face. It also meant that the lines between friendship and research necessarily became blurred, and it was a challenge to maintain a demarcation between the two. This is a methodological quandary I'm still working through in my current research; I don't have any simple answers yet!

In terms of surprises, the greatest one was that the research question I went into the field with was the wrong question. Originally, I wanted to investigate how sexual purity norms impacted single women. Sexual purity culture was very big in American evangelicalism in the 1990s and 2000s, and I had noticed anecdotally that it affected women in the UK too. However, once I started my ethnography I saw that sexuality, and purity moreover, might be an issue for some women – but not for most. Especially as Christian women grow older and remain single, there are far more pressing issues for them in the church.

At the time, this realization felt deeply demoralizing and caused me to question the whole study. I had two choices: either plow ahead with the question I thought was important, or switch gears and allow the right questions to arise from the data. I chose the latter, and my study is all the better for it.

Chloë Gott
Research Associate
University of Leeds



What is your background in the Sociology of Religion? How did you come to work in this field?

As a child, I was raised in a very non-religious, atheist household, but ended up going to a fairly intensely religious secondary school. Existing in this high Anglican environment, going to chapel once a week, taking part in the full range of religious rituals and traditions – as someone who had previously not really thought much about religion – was a strange experience! It fostered a real curiosity about religion, about how different people engaged with it, what it meant to them, and how it's mediated through schools and families.

This early environment influenced my desire to study theology and religious studies at undergraduate level, and I continued this into my MA as well. This is when I began to focus much more on the sociology of religion. I think it was whilst researching my MA thesis that I began to really fall in love with the discipline. I conducted interviews with an LGBTQ Catholic group in London, thinking through how the various aspects of their identity intersected and overlapped. This was an incredibly rewarding process for me – I felt so engaged with the people, and the work, and I knew I wanted to continue in this field.

Can you tell us about your new book, *Experience, Identity & Epistemic Injustice within Ireland's Magdalene Laundries* (Bloomsbury, 2022)?

Publishing a book has been a long-held dream of mine, and so after finishing my PhD and completing my Viva in late February 2020, the idea of using some of the research I had done for my thesis for a book was high on my list of priorities. As I'm sure everyone can imagine, this fell a little by the wayside after March 2020. For about six months after the lockdown started, I was heavily involved in a large nationwide mutual aid project and trying to find the time and headspace to work on a book proposal was often difficult. However, I was lucky to have a wonderful network of people encouraging me, from both my personal life and academic connections, who supported me in finally submitting a proposal to Bloomsbury.

This book represents the first large-scale secondary analysis to be conducted of eighty-one oral history interviews recorded as part of the Government of Ireland Collaborative Research Project, 'Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Archival and Oral History'. These were taken with women formerly incarcerated in these institutions, as well as others associated with this history. Grounded in qualitative analysis of this archive, the book is structured around the voices and words of survivors themselves. With a strong focus on how the experience of being incarcerated in a Magdalene laundry impacted on the gendered religious selves of the women, my work tracks the process of entering, working in, and leaving a laundry, explored through the lens of epistemic injustice. I think about how the identities of the women shaped

by religious disciplinary processes, how are these resisted, and how do they re-engage with their sense of self after leaving the institution? This book situates these questions within the current cultural climate in which the institutions now sit, considering how they fit into Ireland's present as well as its past.

How did you find the process of writing the book? What advice do you have for others who consider pursuing a book project?

Writing a book during a pandemic was definitely not the easiest of processes. Not being able to go to a library whenever I wanted or needed to, being limited in spaces I could work from – as well as the mental load of just living through such a strange and stressful experience – meant I sometimes struggled to just sit down and focus. As an early career academic catapulted into an already precarious job market and a pandemic, it was also tricky to find time to work on this project alongside searching for a job.

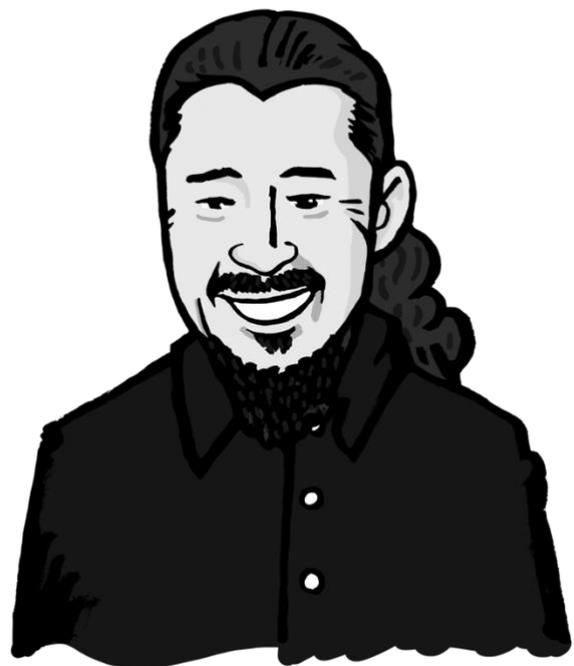
However, when I did make time for this, I really enjoyed the writing process. It felt fantastic to be working towards something to concrete, to see chapters and ideas emerging. Each step forwards was exciting, and when I eventually received the page proofs, and then the finished book, it was a real thrill to see my words in print.

My advice to anyone considering pursuing a book project would be, firstly, try and avoid doing so over multiple national lockdowns. However, above all, surround yourself with people who want to support you, who are happy to listen to you complain, to read your work over and over, to proof for typos when you just cannot face it. I really mean it when I say this book would not have existed without my friends and loved ones, and I'm forever grateful to them for their care, compassion, and support!

Titus Hjelm
Professor in the Study of Religion
University of Helsinki

What are you working on currently?

At the moment, I'm involved in two research projects as PI and have several other things in the pipeline. The first project, funded by the Academy of Finland, is about religion and politics in Finland, where we're mapping everything that we call 'religion-talk' in the Finnish parliament between 2010 and 2020. We're looking at patterns in the distribution of discussion about religion and religious language among parties and along conservative-progressive lines. We're also digging deeper qualitatively into particular plenary debates on FGM, same-sex marriage, and other 'hot topics' where religion-talk



appears. That project is about halfway through, and we'll be seeing first publications in the autumn.

The second project, funded by the Kone Foundation (the people who make the lifts and escalators at Heathrow), is about religious literacy. There's a lot of buzz around religious literacy, but it is almost exclusively based on hopeful assumptions. The point of the project is to conduct a quasi-experiment where we assess whether there are cognitive and attitudinal changes after learning about religion, and whether the level of secularisation affects the magnitude of these changes, as the literature claims. The project starts next year, so we're still in the planning stages.

In addition, I'm trying to finish two books. The first is about Peter Berger for the Routledge series 'Key Thinkers in Religion'. I already edited a book on Berger in 2018, but this is a perhaps more focused look at his oeuvre and a critical assessment of it. I'm also working on a book on research design for Policy Press. I've devised a system for my MA seminar, which I think works well and for once decided to apply those ideas about synergy between teaching and writing and put my practice on the page. It is not a discipline-specific approach, although obviously there are quite a few examples from the sociology of religion in the book. I'm excited about the book, but there just doesn't seem to be enough hours in a day to finish it in time!

You have written extensively on Peter Berger's legacy. What inspired you to do that? What role do you see Berger's body of scholarship play in the Sociology of Religion in the next few decades?

Most sociologists probably have a couple of foundational names who inspired them to become what they are today. Mine would include Eileen Barker and Jim Beckford, who sadly passed away just recently. But the biggest inspiration was always Berger, whose work provided me not only with a perspective on religion, but a broader framework for thinking about society. That's why my first English-language monograph was on the varieties of social constructionism. I was lucky enough to meet Berger once in London years ago, although I was so star struck that my comments probably made no sense. I've since attained some critical distance from his work, and as a critical sociologist of religion would probably be disowned by orthodox Bergerians. The beauty of his work is – as with most classics – that it leaves lots of room to reinterpret and add to the basic ideas. For me the important Berger is the constructionist sociologist of religion, who looks at how people make their (religious) worlds in interaction and through language. Unfortunately, this is not the side he himself foregrounded. One point of the book I mentioned above is to draw attention to that part of his work. It will be interesting to see whether Berger will be considered relevant after my generation retires. I think, and hope, that the constructionist approach to the sociology of religion will become and/or remain relevant, but it's difficult to say how many will go to the source for that in the future.

Having worked as a sociologist of religion in both the UK and Finland, what would you say are main differences between the two contexts?

The context is most obviously different. When Finnish friends asked what's it like to live in the UK, I often said that I don't know, I live in London, at Kings Cross. The diversity is of a completely different magnitude, for sure. I'm happy to say, though, that in the 13 years that I was away, Helsinki has also become more cosmopolitan and an increasing number of my University of Helsinki colleagues are from around the world. This of course has an effect of what is considered relevant sociology of religion. In Finland, much of it revolves around the majority (Lutheran) church. Although that is still a big part of the scene in the UK as well, it

is clear that it cannot be the only focus of interest. That said, in terms of the professional structure, the two countries are becoming more similar. In Finland, sociologists working at sociology departments started ignoring religion in the 1970s, so now we all work – like myself – at departments for the study of religion, practical theology, or possibly anthropology. In the UK, despite all the public interest in religion, sociology departments have often not hired sociologists of religion for new posts or to replace retired ones. There are some positive exceptions of course, like Aberdeen, Aston, and York, but otherwise much of the sociology of religion in the UK is now conducted, as in Finland, somewhere else than in sociology departments. I may sound hypocritical, working at a religion department myself, but I do think it directs the field in particular ways less conducive to dialogue with broader sociology – despite the admirable job Socrel is doing within the BSA (I'm biased, of course, as old conference officer). I would be happy to be corrected, but we were not really having that conversation in the 2010s or earlier and we're not having it now. We keep moaning about the marginality of our sub-discipline within sociology, but perhaps it is not just the other sociologists' ignorance that is at stake. That said, I'm very happy to see that in both countries, the sociological study of religion is very much alive and well, wherever it is conducted. I look forward to being able to attend conferences live after the depressing break. It is, after all, the chats over drinks and the friendships forged at such events that are more important than the paper presentations.

Socrel Committee

Chair: Mathew Guest

Convenor: Céline Benoit

Membership Officer: Caroline Starkey

Events Officer: Robert Barward-Symmons

Publications and Communications Officer: Isabella Kasselstrand

Internet Officer: Kim Harding

Postgraduate Representative: Ann Gillian Chu

Socrel © 2022

Editor/Isabella Kasselstrand

isabella.kasselstrand@abdn.ac.uk

Illustrations/Hugo Yoshikawa

www.hugoyoshikawa.com