



# SocrelNews

2017  
Issue 5

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## **Announcements**

- BSA Annual Conference, Manchester University, April 3-5 2017 - Recovering the Social: Personal Troubles and Public Issues – Registration Now Open
- Socrel Annual Conference, Leeds University, July 12-14 2017 – On the Edge? Centres and Margins in the Sociology of Religion – Registration Now Open
- Socrel Mentoring Scheme - Mentor and Mentee applications

## Welcome

The Chinese curse, 'May you live in interesting times', will give sociologists of religion particular pause for thought. Intense diversity alongside growing inequality look set to play out in an unsettled near future. The predictive power of sociology will be much tested. Its interpretive power too will be much in demand, especially in relation to religion and belief, as migration and globalisation are reshaped under powerful movements of resistance to the 'other'. These same forces are playing out in their own ways nearer to home, in our own university sector, as in every other. Marketisation and consumerisation are changing us. Nationalism and populism may be emerging social forces, but education and research remain strong too. How will the clashes that are underway affect our discipline and its scholars? What conceptual preoccupations and practical impacts will continue and emerge? After the twists and turns of 2016, how will sociology of religion respond? We look forward to seeing them emerge.

Shanon Shah's thought provoking piece (below) as outgoing convenor reflects many of the issues, and we're so grateful to him for his excellent contributions - here and in his short time with us as convenor.

In the meantime our activities continue apace. The Socrel Response Day "Connecting for change: emerging research and policy on religion and belief in the public sphere" was held in October 2016 at the BSA Meeting Room in Imperial Wharf. Speakers including Professor Tariq Modood (University of Bristol), Dr Erica Howard (Middlesex University), Sandra Maurer (Goldsmiths University), Celine Benoit (Aston University), Katie Gaddini (University of Cambridge), Dr Andrew Orton (Durham University), Professor Hazel Bryan (University of Gloucestershire), Dr Lynn Revel (Canterbury Christ Church University), and Jo Bryant (Cardiff University) together explored the opportunities and challenges faced in furthering our understanding of the intersections of policy and religion in the UK today.

November 2016 also saw the Postgraduate and Early Career Scholar study day exploring developments in the relationship between religion and the media, including recent research and ethical conduct in the field as well as ways of acquiring practical skills for media engagement as a scholar. Speakers included Professor Reina Lewis (London College of Fashion) and Michael Wakelin (University of Cambridge).

The Socrel stream plenaries at this year's BSA Annual Conference at Manchester University will be delivered by Professor Jolyon Mitchell (University of Edinburgh), Dr Abby Day (Goldsmiths University), and Dr Jasjit Singh (University of Leeds).

Moreover, this year's Socrel Annual Conference titled "On the Edge? Centres and Margins in the Sociology of Religion" will be held on 12<sup>th</sup>- 14<sup>th</sup> July 2017 at the University of Leeds. Keynotes will be delivered by Professor Bryan Turner (City University of New York), Professor Kim Knott (University of Lancaster), Professor Philip Mellor (University of Leeds), Professor Sarah Bracke (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), and Professor Nasar Meer (Strathclyde University).

The group's Mentoring Scheme continues to lead the way in promoting gender equality in the academy. The scheme remains open to women who are studying and researching religion, from first-year PhD level onwards to Reader level. For more details of the group's work, please visit: [www.socrel.org.uk](http://www.socrel.org.uk).

**Adam Dinham (Chair)**

## Letter from our Convenor

It is with great regret that I announce my resignation as Socrel Convenor, with immediate effect. I realise that this might come as a surprise to many given that I took over this post barely six months ago, in July 2016. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to explain my decision.

When I accepted this position, I was still relatively fresh out of my PhD – I was awarded my doctorate in August 2015 and graduated in January 2016. It was like I had emerged out of living in a cave for three years into bright sunlight, dazzled by everything in sight. “Trees! I’ve missed them! And yoga, novels, music, shopping and – oh my God, what is this – Netflix!” OK, so one shouldn’t push an analogy too far. It wasn’t exactly like that – also because I did a lot of other things before embarking on the PhD. In my native Malaysia, I was already an award-winning singer-songwriter, playwright, journalist and human rights advocate. Fresh out of my doctorate, I believed that I was going to consolidate these different elements of my past into a robust new academic identity.

And this is why I was more than happy to accept this position. As a sociologist of religion, I strongly believe in Socrel’s aims and the work that it does. I have nothing but profound respect for its founders and those who have continued to lead it to greater heights. And I was thrilled to come on board to work with such a capable, enthusiastic and visionary Committee. All these things remain true, except that my own personal trajectory has changed.

Partly it’s because, like countless other early career scholars, I face an increasingly insecure and brutally competitive job market in academia. Perhaps this is something that should be discussed as frankly and constructively as possible within Socrel, especially among the early career scholars amongst us. In my case, the realities of job-hunting within and outside of academia have become a crucible for shaping my own personal goals. I’ve come to realise in the past few months that my own future does not lie within traditional academia.

I am *not* writing an indictment of higher education because (a) there are enough blogs you can browse for that and (b) that’s not something I find helpful anyway. The world needs independent and rigorous academics with impeccable scholarly integrity, now more than ever. And I would still wholeheartedly recommend the Socrel Convenorship to any committed early career scholar.

But me? Since completing my doctorate, I’ve been writing quirky essays and creative non-fiction for the quarterly magazine *Critical Muslim* (which I am now Deputy Editor of, too); researching new Muslim movements with Inform; facilitating workshops on Islam and sexual diversity for high school students, Muslim therapists, Christian and Jewish congregations, and secular lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender activists; and performing girl-pop covers from Bananarama to Lady Gaga for liberal churches and progressive Muslim groups – “I live for the applause, applause, applause”! I’m applying what I learned from my doctorate, but this also means I am probably not going to gain a long-term university appointment any time soon. And given that I’ve bitten off way more than I could chew after coming out of the PhD, it’s also imperative for me to prioritise my workload (especially the stuff that pays!).

My primary concern is that my resignation should not disrupt the crucial work of the Committee. To this end, I've already agreed on a handover plan with our Chair, Adam Dinham. Finally, I'd like to thank all of you for your support and encouragement, and my deepest thanks go to Adam, Alp Arat, Rachael Shillitoe, Peter Gee and Carl Morris – a dream Committee for any Convenor.

With my very best wishes to all,

**Shanon Shah (Convenor)**

# PG/ECR Workshop

## *Religion and the Media*

This 2016 workshop, 'Religion and the Media', explored the ethical issues that affect the work of scholars of religion who engage with the media, as well as how to acquire practical media engagement skills. It was held on 2 November at the BSA Meeting Room at Imperial Wharf, London.

The morning discussion was led by Professor Reina Lewis, Professor of Cultural Studies at the London College of Fashion, whose research interests include the growth of modest fashion amongst Muslim, Christian and Jewish women. Professor Lewis reminded us that the relationship between academics and the media is reciprocal – we deal with the mass media as part of our research and we also need to disseminate our research through mass media channels.

The main challenge we discussed was the difference in ethics codes and evidence bases between academia and journalism, which we constantly need to be clear about. This includes different ways of handling participants' requirements for confidentiality and permissions for taking and reproducing photographs. Professor Lewis helpfully provided us with some tips for engaging with media requests regarding our research topics. This included remembering that as academics, we have a right to find out as much as is necessary about the piece before agreeing to participate (and refusing if we are uncomfortable), and a responsibility to get our facts right and to communicate clearly and professionally when we do agree. It was also important for academics to follow up and get copies of these media outputs for our own records.

The afternoon session, led by the religion expert and media consultant Michael Wakelin, focused on putting these ideas into practice. Michael emphasised the need for academics to see media engagement as an *opportunity* to disseminate their work in the public interest. To avoid getting our messages distorted, however, he talked us through a few strategies, including cultivating good networks with journalists, knowing our audience, honing and rehearsing our key messages (including eliminating jargon and abstract theories and giving concrete examples or stories as illustrations), and working on our public speaking skills. The remainder of the session involved Michael giving a one-to-one tutorial to each participant for a mock 3-minute radio interview on their research specialisms.

The workshop was a useful reminder of the significance of the study of religion in the public interest and the importance of engaging constructively with the mass media. It was also helpful to discuss some key challenges – for example, on ethics – as well as practical ways of getting our message across. At one point, Michael reminded us that even a word like "conversation" can become jargon when used in certain academic discussions – something to be aware of when speaking to a wider audience.

**Shanon Shah (Convenor)**

## Response Day

### *Connecting for change: emerging research and policy on religion and belief in the public sphere*

21<sup>st</sup> October 2017

The Socrel Response Day, held on Friday 21st October at the BSA offices in London, explored the connections between religion and belief research and the public sphere through a series of presentations and discussions on various aspects of policy or practice. The public sphere has been both prominent and turbulent in recent times, and in common with other interests and disciplines, the study of religion and belief has been exploring the questions currently raised. From the role of faith in public life, to media representations, legal cases and controversies, and the future of school RE, a plethora of research and reports has been underway which connect religion and belief with policy and practice. In conversation with various disciplines including politics, education and the sociology of religion, the presenters at this Response Day drew on several key examples to illustrate the connections between research on religion and current policy and practice.

The day began with a keynote address from Professor Tariq Modood before a series of presentations from Dr Erica Howard, Sandra Maurer, Céline Benoit, Katie Gaddini, Dr Andrew Orton, Professor Hazel Bryan, Dr Lynn Revell and Jo Bryant.

Tariq Modood, Professor of Sociology, Politics and Public Policy and the founding Director of the Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship at the University of Bristol, kicked off the day by offering some reflections on the Commission on Religion in British Public Life. The Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life report, convened by the Woolf Institute, Cambridge, explores the place and role of religion and belief in contemporary Britain and pays particular attention to examining the relationship between national identity and religion and belief, while considering in what ways shared understandings of the common good may promote collective action and support the move towards a more harmonious society. In this keynote address, Professor Modood focused on understanding the context of the place of religion in an ever changing Britain, with specific reference to egalitarian inclusivity in relation to secular belief and minority faiths. Professor Modood explored three contentions that can be found within such debates, the first being the assertion that Britain is still predominantly a Christian country, the second that Britain is now a multi-faith country and finally that Britain is mainly a secular country. Professor Modood also examined different understandings of the secular that are inbuilt within these perspectives and the importance of understanding the differences between the different constructions of the secular, such as the secular as belief and the secular as political secularism. These three contrasting perspectives present us with different lenses in terms of how to understand the role and place of religion in British public life and in turn, how to balance the considerations of secular belief and minority faiths at a time when they are showing a certain vitality, with that of a declining Christian heritage.

Professor Modood's address and exploration of the secular and religion in contemporary Britain, was the perfect opener for the following presentations which considered the place of religion in public life through various lines of enquiry. Dr Erika Howard from Middlesex University explored freedom of expression in relation to religious hate speech. Howard considered the difficulties faced when tackling religious hate speech in light of the need to

protect freedom of expression. Drawing on examples from the Dutch political sphere, Howard examined the important role that freedom of speech has in democratic societies and the difficulties that would arise if such freedom was restricted. Sandra Maurer, a PhD student from Goldsmiths, showcased some of her doctoral research on faith groups in UK universities. Advancing the current research on religion in higher education, Maurer demonstrated the influence that faith groups and societies have within universities and how their actions both inform the public sphere and shape particular understandings of what it means to be a religious youth.

Staying in education, PhD student Celine Benoit from Aston University gave us an insight into how religion is reimagined and understood with the Religious Education (RE) syllabus. Using the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus (BAS) as a case study, Benoit critically examined RE policy arguing that particular constructions of religion emerge within the BAS and that it also runs the risk of reproducing secularist attitudes towards religion. Moving on to Evangelical Christianity, Katie Gaddini from Cambridge drew on her PhD research in order to explore women's perspectives on the relationship between evangelicalism and politics. Using data gathered from evangelical congregations both in the US and the UK, Gaddini illustrated the various tensions that emerge in terms of individuals' views on the role of Christianity in intervening with public policy.

Dr Andrew Orton from Durham University discussed Christian responses to debt and the different ways in which particular organisations sought to support communities facing financial difficulty. Revealing how these groups foster and broker relationships with a wide range of community groups, Orton shows how such highly diversified networks, including faith based and non-faith based groups, work together to develop strategies to tackle the perceived causes of debt in their communities and the strengths of using participatory approaches when conducting such research. Utilising Bauman's theory of liquid modernity, Professor Hazel Bryan (University of Gloucestershire) and Dr Lynn Revell (Canterbury Christ Church University) explored professionalism within teaching and how teachers manage their religious or nonreligious identities when moving between public and private spheres. They argue that recent developments within educational policy actually serve to undermine and delegitimise particular forms of belief, whilst promoting others.

Finally, Jo Bryant a PhD student from Cardiff University considered the place of religion in the public sphere from the perspective of chaplaincy in the NHS. Bryant's doctoral research focuses on the integration of minority faith groups in healthcare chaplaincy. In this presentation, we were able to gain an insight into some of the preliminary findings from Bryant's work and discover the ways in which religion is reimagined and redefined in healthcare and how discourses and policy relating to diversity and safeguarding impact and shape the construction of religion in this sphere.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend a very warm thanks to all our speakers, Professor Tariq Modood, Dr Erica Howard, Sandra Maurer, Céline Benoit, Katie Gaddini, Dr Andrew Orton, Professor Hazel Bryan, Dr Lynn Revell and Jo Bryant for their contribution and offering such engaging presentations and to SocRel Chair, Professor Adam Dinham, for putting together this timely and worthwhile event.

**Rachael Shillitoe (Conference and Events Officer)**

## Socrel Member Interviews



*Prof Bryan Turner  
Presidential Professor of Sociology  
City University of New York  
Keynote Speaker at Socrel Annual Conference 2017*

**Given the plurality of readings of the secularisation thesis, please could you give us a summary of your own take on our sub-discipline's paradigmatic theory?**

It is common knowledge that the sociology of religion has had a chequered career. At the foundation of sociology as such from Comte onwards, religion was a key issue in understanding the industrialisation and modernisation of society. While religion, including its demise and/or transformation, was a major concern in Weber, Durkheim, Simmel and later Parsons however, the dominance of the secularisation thesis in Wilson and to a lesser extent Martin indicated the potential demise of the field in the second half of the twentieth century.

One problem I see in this uneven history is the significant gap between the subfield in the USA and Europe. Sociology of religion in the US was relatively successful, somewhat dominated by quantitative research, less theoretical, and largely blind to European traditions. More importantly perhaps, it was staunchly blind to historical and comparative research which was left to the anthropology of religion. This is not just a caricature, as illustrated in Anthony J. Blasi's (2014) *Sociology of Religion in America* which has little to say about Robert Bellah or Peter Berger whose work did in fact straddle the US and European traditions. The gap between these traditions is perhaps well illustrated by *Social Compass* and the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. More recently *Critical Research on Religion* opens up the possibility of a philosophically oriented journal on American soil.

But this takes us into the issue of secularisation as a theme somewhat dominant in sociology since Weber's famously pessimistic lecture on 'Politics as a Vocation' in which he spelt out his famous metaphor of the disenchanting garden. With Wilson's influential *Religion in Secular Society* in 1966 (see Steve Bruce's excellent edited version in 2016) it appeared that sociology of religion had little future apart from measuring the disappearance of its subject matter. Moreover, if we take Giddens as the dominant social theorist of British sociology between 1970 and 1990, then his various publications on modernity, self identity, reflexivity and so forth had almost nothing to say about religion.

## **How then do you explain the recent growth in the prominence of our sub-field, if not vis a vis sociology then the social sciences as a whole?**

I would say it was Jose Casanova's (1994) *Public Religions in the Modern World* which accepted a limited version of secularisation and drew attention to the profound impact of religion in the public/political world, especially the Shia Revolution, the Moral Majority, liberation theology, and the Solidarity Movement. This re-orientation in the sociology of religion did not occur immediately but this emphasis on public religions was subsequently re-inforced by 9/11, which had the consequence of bringing Islam in the West into the agenda of sociology generally and the sociology of religion in particular. This subsequently led to a new academic industry around Islamofascism and Islamophobia. I might add however that this has been dominated by French academics who are not necessarily part of the mainstream of the sub-discipline. Comparative and historical studies of Islam from within sociology however are weak.

By contrast, in my perception, modern work in the sociology of religion in post-secular societies predominantly examines the individualisation of religion under many headings – spirituality, on-line religion, religion on-line, post-institutional religion, DIY religion and low-intensity religion. This contrast strikes me as somewhat odd. On the one hand there is the legacy of Casanova's publication in which there is interest in public religion – however this is somewhat focused on Islam in the west and is mainly concerned with Islamophobia. On the other hand we have a wide spread academic interest in the internet and religion, social media and religion, and spirituality. This focus on post-institutional religion is in my view something of a dead end.

## **In light of your overview, what would you say are more promising avenues on the agenda today?**

I can suggest a number of research agendas here which I hope to expand on in more detail in my keynote this summer. First, it is obvious that populist politics will dominate much of the political agenda for at least the foreseeable future. In other words, Trumpism will outlast Trump. In the US for instance, at first glance religion was absent from the presidential campaigns between Trump, Clinton, and Sanders, especially compared to the Obama and Romney campaigns when there was much public concern about whether Obama was a Muslim and whether Mormonism was a religion. Yet despite his language about woman, Trump had the support of evangelicals because of his views about the Supreme Court, his opposition to abortion, his attacks on illegal (mainly Hispanic) migrants who are mainly Catholic, his defence of WASPS (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) in America, and one might add his view of women as inferior to men. In short, I would say that the Trump victory was highly consistent with evangelical Protestantism. Protestant religion was an important if implicit factor in his success, while evangelicals could not tolerate Clinton's liberal values and her defence of *Wade v Roe*.

There is also a more general issue here that is connected to Brexit, the migration crisis and the future of Europe which is that European borders are increasingly defined at least in public rhetoric in terms of Christianity versus outsiders or a restoration of the idea of an *Abendland* with Russian and Greek orthodoxy in the east, Catholicism as the border of Poland and the south, and a Protestant northern frontier.

This moves into a more general proposal that we need more research on religion and law – and not just the growth of Sharia arbitration tribunals – but a more general interest in legal pluralism. There is now a widespread tension between law and religion over same sex

marriage, euthanasia, abortion, circumcision. These topics appear to be dominated by legal studies rather than sociologies of religion.

And finally there is the whole issue of biotechnology, medical interventions, genetic revolutions, nanotechnology, cryonics and so forth. We are familiar with ethical debates about abortion and euthanasia, but here I refer more to radical changes to human ontology that we may witness in the next few decades. These reconstructions of the human body have given rise to ideas about post-humanism and transhumanism but within philosophy rather than sociology. In the field of demography, we are aware of how processes of low fertility and ageing populations are radically changing society. In my view these developments raise radical questions about the future of religion insofar as they raise questions about the future of humankind, but as yet they have not emerged in sociologies of religion. A spate of recent books on 'the future of religion' have in fact little to say about the potential transformation of humans.

To summarise, as self advertisement, I have an article forthcoming in the *European Journal of Social Theory* on religion, body, habit and the Anthropocene which gets at some of the theoretical issues behind this agenda.



*Dr Andrew McKinnon  
Senior Lecturer in Sociology  
School of Social Science  
University of Aberdeen*

### **What are you currently working on?**

For the past eight years, I've been working on a project on conflicts in the Anglican Communion with a friend and colleague in Divinity here at Aberdeen, Chris Brittain. I sometimes describe the project as "Anglicans fighting about sex", though that's mostly said for effect. It would be better to say that homosexuality has been the presenting symbol for a conflict that is the mostly about other things. The focus of the contentions has undoubtedly been the fact that some Anglican jurisdictions have moved towards having blessings or marriages for couples in same sex relationships, and have openly accepted gay priests and bishops. For some, that really is the most upsetting issue. For others, it is the belief that the church's position is no longer faithful to the Bible and the church's historic teachings on marriage (at least how they understand those things). For others, such as some leaders in the Global South, it is the feeling that leaders from the West are trying to "impose" (a word we heard often) an ethic that they find very difficult to accept. As homosexuality has become more accepted in North America and Europe (and respect for human rights has increasingly a condition of aid money), homosexuality has become a salient negative symbol in post-colonial politics. For Anglican Church leaders in Africa this is particularly difficult because they are being out-competed by Pentecostal churches; these churches are quite unambiguous in their teachings about same-sex relationships—and

some have taken to referring to the Anglican Church, even in Africa, as “the gay church”.

**Given the vast literature on gender and religion, please could you say a little more about how you sought to differentiate your work from what's already out there?**

In a way, I would say that we are arguing really that the conflict is only partly about gender and sexuality, though that is certainly the symbolic hook on which a lot of complaints are hung. This is of course not to say that it is not painful to be a symbol for someone else's agenda, nor is it to say that those who are arguing for greater inclusion of sexual minorities aren't trying to do what they say they are. But it isn't straightforward, either. As sociologists of religion we have long been aware of the significance of globalisation for religious change (and retrenchment), but Chris and I have become keenly aware of how the global media-scape has shaped the recent conflicts. Anglicans have had many disputes in the past; its various international institutions are mostly the accretion from previous conflicts. But this is the first disagreement that has taken place in a world of instant (almost) global communication and (relatively) inexpensive long distance travel. This of course is an enormous advantage for us as researchers. Chris and I managed to do our research patched together on a shoe-string budget that could cover short trips but not many long ones. While the research ended up taking a lot longer than it would have had we been richly resourced, I really think the research was the better for the paucity of our funds. While I certainly would not dispute that is a great deal to be gained from feet-on-the-ground research in diverse locations, Skype allowed us to speak with leaders from all across the globe (and in a few cases, by making calls to mobile phones in locations where the internet connections are not fast enough to support a good Skype connection). The fact that many Anglican leaders worldwide pass through London on their travels created other opportunities for face-to-face interviews with global leaders. Given that we had become convinced that this was a dispute mostly between church leaders, this gave us much more useful insight into the dynamics of the conflict. The ability to interview a group of people across the globe without great expense offers endless possibilities for sociologists!

**What are your plans for the future?**

I'm just starting a term of research leave—a reward for the fact that most of my time in the past few years has been expended in the administrative tasks of a minor university apparatchik. So I'm turning my attention to more strictly theoretical concerns. I've done a fair bit of work on the how conceptual metaphors work both in religion, and in our attempts to understand religion sociologically. I think I've made the case that you can't do religion without using metaphors; nor can you study religion without them, and so it is important to think about how they work. For this term my hope is to turn a bit broader to think about rhetoric more generally – how does one deploy words to convince someone that something is the case? Why are some attempts to convince more compelling than others? What are the conditions for someone to find a case convincing? This involves metaphors, certainly, but it also involves, among other things, narrative. Part of this is because I've become increasingly dissatisfied with so-called “discourse analysis” which leaves little role, in my view, for skill, for agency or for contingency—discourse always seems to win!



*Céline Benoit*  
*PhD Candidate in Sociology of Religion*  
*Aston University*

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

I started this project when I moved to England, in 2008 – quite a few years before I formally enrolled for a part-time PhD at Aston University. I had just left Dublin, Republic of Ireland, where I completed a Masters dissertation on the rise of multi-denominational primary schools in a predominantly Catholic education sector. Being French and having grown up in a society characterised by *laïcité*, I took for granted the absence of religious symbols in public institutions such as schools. Leaving France challenged my assumptions vis-à-vis religion and education, as I realised that they did not have to be mutually exclusive. Leaving France also made me realise that the concept of *laïcité* – which I had uncritically understood as neutrality towards religion – could serve as a state apparatus to reproduce particular power relations, and anchor Frenchness in secular ideologies. Reflecting on the differences between France, where religion is banned from schools, and England, where Religious Education (RE) is compulsory and religious symbols can be accommodated, I started to wonder what it meant in terms of national identity and national unity. Studying the English context quickly became an *idée fixe*. Examining the question of whether religion is constructed in a more positive framing in English education, and whether religious minorities are or are not ‘Othered’ became the driving force behind the conduct of my research. For my PhD, I chose to focus on primary education, a fundamental stage in a child’s development.

### **Please could you tell us a little more about how the French and the English systems compare?**

Rather than reflecting a process of secularisation in terms of beliefs or practices *per se*, the French republican value of *laïcité* is primarily entrenched in anti-clericalism, and the protection of the nation from the Catholic Church and other religious organisations, which have been constructed as authoritarian, oppressive, anti-democratic, and therefore as incompatible with the values of the Republic. Whilst the French State respects the freedom to practise a religion, and acknowledges the role of religious organisations as social institutions, cultural and religious differences are confined to the domestic space. By adopting an ‘assertive’ approach to *laïcité*, France tends to exclude religious communities from the public sphere.

In the name of *laïcité*, state-funded schools in France must be barred from religious symbols, whether they are in the form of artefacts or clothing items. The prohibition of wearing religious symbols such as the hijab in state-funded schools (see *l’affaire du foulard* for example) is not innocuous, as it can serve to construct religious minorities as the ‘Other’. The study of modern religions is also banned from the national curriculum. Modern religions thus tend to be mentioned when teachers address significant events that

have punctuated human history, often resulting in religions being associated with ideological oppositions, deadly conflicts and regression, therefore (re)-producing mostly negative discourses.

The situation in England seems different. For instance, broadly Christian acts of collective worship and RE are, by law, compulsory in every state-funded school. But does this mean that religion(s) is/are constructed in a more positive framing? This is what I am exploring in my PhD: how is religion constructed? What discourses are reproduced? How are religious communities represented? One of my aims is to assess the role of religion in education in shaping a sense of national belonging and unity, and to understand how religious communities are positioned. In order to bridge the gap between policy and practice, I have not only scrutinised policies and syllabi, but I also have spent a year in a primary school in Birmingham – where I have been living for the past seven years – collecting data.

Working in Birmingham is fascinating. Although the plurality of the city would be enough to make Birmingham an interesting case study, there are many other reasons why we should look at Birmingham more often when it comes to exploring the role and function of religion in education. Birmingham recently featured heavily in the local and national press for many weeks because of the Trojan Horse Affair, and the subsequent allegations of a Muslim take-over in state-funded schools. However, this should not be the sole reason why researchers turn their attention to Birmingham. The city should also be of interest for its influence on RE and its delivery. For example in 1975, Birmingham Local Authority had been the first to launch a multi-religious approach to RE, moving away from Bible reading with the aim to be more representative of its new religious diversity. Although contested for including the study of Marxism and Humanism, the avant-gardist syllabus greatly influenced how RE is still delivered nationally. Today, Birmingham is once again at the hub of debates with its latest RE Syllabus, *Faith Makes a Difference*, as it rejects the national guidelines and the traditional thematic pedagogy and focuses on 24 common ‘dispositions’ (or values) between religions (BCC, 2007). The syllabus is also frequently the object of criticisms as it intentionally excludes non-religious worldviews such as atheism or humanism. Yet, despite its innovative pedagogy, the syllabus has not been the object of many academic studies.

### **How does the Birmingham syllabus differ from the national model?**

The *Faith Makes a Difference* syllabus takes a unique approach to RE, and a critical perspective on the National Framework for RE. Marcus Felderhof, the drafting secretary of the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus argues that the latest National Framework for RE is too descriptive, and draws too much on Religious Studies. He also argues that the secular framing of religions in the National Framework encourages a spectatorial attitude to RE, therefore failing to fulfil the objectives RE is set to meet. As a consequence, children tend to adopt a passive attitude towards religion(s) and are less inclined to feel involved. Thus, instead of promoting the teaching of different religions over a set amount of time, the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus requires teachers to teach 24 ‘dispositions’ that are common between religious traditions. Instead of looking at religious phenomena around the world, the syllabus focuses on spiritual values. By not teaching religions as self-contained homogeneous categories, one of the aims is to resist essentialising religious traditions. RE becomes a moral code, or a reservoir of values that are common between different religious traditions. As a result, the Attainment Targets (i.e. learning *about* religion and learning *from* religion) have also been rearranged (learning *from* faith and learning *about* religious traditions). In my PhD, I am looking at how the syllabus is implemented in Birmingham, and how religion and religious traditions are constructed as a result of this new pedagogy.

## **What advice would you give to other Socrel PhDs?**

One of the biggest challenges I faced was having to do my PhD part-time. I have found that belonging to and remaining connected with the Socrel research community really helped! It's allowed me to meet supportive colleagues and regularly engage with my research interests. Therefore, the best piece of advice I can give to anyone who is in a similar situation is to keep the conversation going – you'll feel less lonely, and it'll keep you motivated. And don't compare your progress with anyone else, as the experience is very different from one person to another!

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Editor/Dr Alp Arat

[aratalp@gmail.com](mailto:aratalp@gmail.com)

Illustrations/Hugo Yoshikawa

[www.hugoyoshikawa.com](http://www.hugoyoshikawa.com)