SocrelNews

2016
Issue 3

Announcements

- BSA Annual Conference, Aston University, April 6-8 2016 - Global Societies: Fragmenting and Connecting – Registration Now Open
- Socrel Annual Conference, Lancaster University, July 12-14 2016 – Registration Now Open
- Socrel Mentoring Scheme - Mentor and Mentee applications

Welcome

Welcome to the third issue of SocrelNews. I'm delighted to be back convening Socrel and by all that's been achieved in my absence. In this issue you can read about - and listen to - the first Socrel Response Day organised by our new Chair Adam Dinham last November 'The Future of Learning about Religion and Belief', and what one of our funding competition winners, Anja Pogacnik, was enabled to do in Jaipur by her award.

We also look ahead in this issue to the British Sociological Association (BSA) annual conference in April at which there will be a strong Religion stream, and Socrel 2016 'The Construction and Disruption: The power of religion in the public sphere' at Lancaster University in July. Registration is now open so do book your place!

The newsletter concludes with our regular series of interviews with Study Group members at different stages in their careers. Gordon Lynch discusses child migrations and moral cultures. Yvette Taylor (one of the speakers at our stream plenary at the BSA this year) talks about youth, religion, sexuality and class, as well as the meaning and usefulness of disciplines. Finally Shanon Shah tells us about his recently completed doctoral ethnographic research with gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain.

To me, all this, along with our ongoing mentoring scheme for women expertly run for us by Sonya Sharma, speaks to the health and variety of the sociology of religion in Britain. It fits well with our upcoming podcast collaboration with the Religious Studies Project on 'new horizons', which I ask you to keep an eye out for.

Following Socrel 2015, members were invited to submit ideas for how to spend Socrel funds to benefit the membership and field. The forthcoming podcast collaboration forms part of our consequent investment and other creative new initiatives which the Committee is working hard on, details of which will be announced in due course.

I'd like to end by thanking all the Committee for their continuing hard work, including our Communications Officer Alp Arat for putting together another great SocrelNews. I am also particularly grateful to Sarah-Jane Page for stepping back in as Convenor to cover my maternity leave.

Enjoy the newsletter and thank you for being part of Socrel.

Rebecca Catto (Convenor)

Response Day – The Future of Learning about Religion and Belief

5th November 2015

(Click on speakers for audio links)

The Socrel Response Day, held on Thursday 5th November at the BSA offices in London, explored the future of learning about religion and belief from a variety of perspectives, reflecting not only on what the future might hold, but also considering what knowledge we need for encountering religion in the modern world today. The day began with a keynote address from Prof Robert Jackson and involved a series of presentations from Dr Amanda van Eck, Martha Shaw and Dr Matthew Francis, before concluding with a highly participative plenary session facilitated by Prof Adam Dinham.

Prof Robert Jackson (*click for audio*), the director of Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (1994-2012), kicked off the day by discussing how the study of religion can support intercultural education in schools. After considering the drivers of change for religion and education in western democracies, such as secularisation and pluralisation,

Prof Jackson discussed the various aims of the study of religion and the issues associated with 'representing' religions in inclusive RE. Drawing on the Council of Europe's publication *Signposts,* he went on to consider how the study of religion can contribute towards intercultural education and the need for such education to include both religious and non-religious convictions.

Dr Amanda van Eck, deputy director of Inform based at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), presented on educating civil servants for religion and diversity. Dr van Eck highlighted the need for religious literacy for those who have an active role in policy and governance. Drawing on personal experience, Dr van Eck discussed the issue of religious literacy when working with civil servants and how we should not always assume a solid knowledge base when it comes to matters of religion and belief. In considering how best to promote religious literacy in this area, Dr van Eck suggested a needs-led approach whereby the first priority is to learn what they need to know and how to present and disseminate such knowledge that will prove both useful and accessible.

Martha Shaw, a researcher at the Faiths & Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths University and lead researcher on REforReal, delivered a presentation questioning what young people leaving school should know about religion and belief. Drawing on data gathered from the REforReal project at Goldsmiths, the paper discussed what it means to be religiously literate and explored a range of perspectives on the role and the purpose of learning about religion and belief in schools. Key questions asked included what employers, teachers, students and parents think the purpose and content of RE should be and how such teaching and learning should be structured. In terms of content, it was argued that learning about religion and belief in schools needs to reflect the real religious landscape, which would include non-religious world views and a focus on everyday lived religion.

Speaking on the role of religion in a secular university, **Dr Matthew Francis**, a Senior Research Associate at Lancaster University and Communications Director of the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, presented findings from a case study undertaken into the religious literacy of a UK Higher Education Institution (HEI). Through interview data which foregrounds the experiences of students and staff, coupled with a review of published policies, Dr Francis provided an insight into the various perceptions of religion and belief while exploring what role(s) religion has played within a nominally secular institution.

Concluding the presentations, Socrel Chair Prof Adam Dinham led an engaging session reflecting on the topics and themes discussed throughout the day. Split into three groups, delegates were asked to consider some of the key ideas and issues that emerged from the day's presentations, before coming back together and discussing this as a group.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend a very warm thanks to all our speakers, Prof Robert Jackson, Dr Amanda van Eck, Martha Shaw, Dr Matthew Francis, and Prof Adam Dinham for their contribution and offering such engaging presentations. Feedback from the day was very positive and it was an excellent opportunity to meet so many individuals undertaking research in this area.

Rachael Shillitoe (Conference and Events Officer)

2015 Funding Competition Winner

Anja Pogacnik

Research Trip Summary

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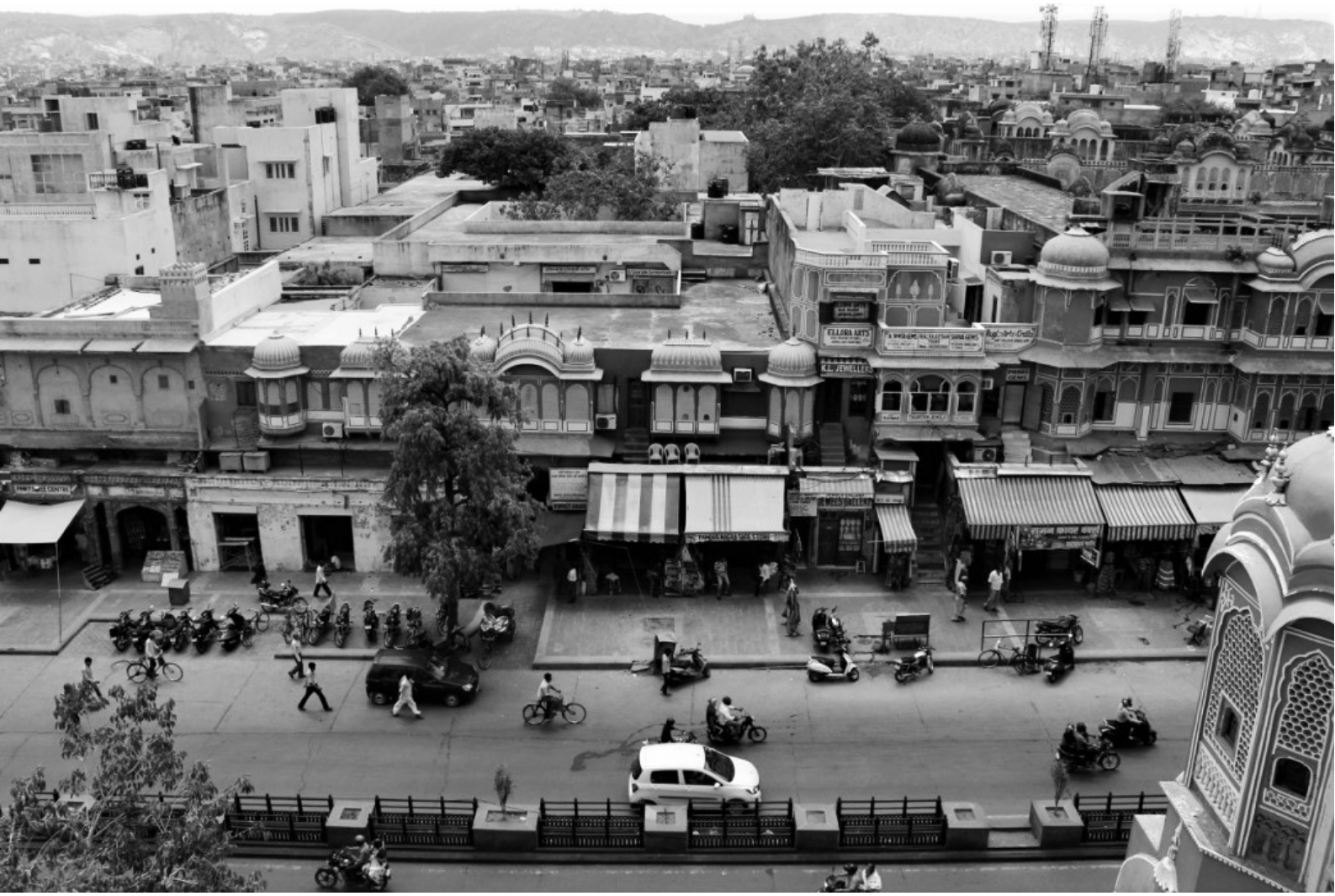
Socrel Meets Indian Jainism

On a weekday morning in a midsized Jain temple in Jaipur, Rajasthan, a freshly bathed young man from Delhi is performing his daily worship of *tīrthankaras* surrounded by six curiously looking foreigners. He alternates between reciting Jain sutras in a singsong voice, saying the customary words at an almost breakneck speed, and explaining their meaning in broken English to his foreign friends. Whenever he puts forth a pinch of rice, almonds, dried coconut, or some spice, his friends follow in awkward repetition, their eyes reflecting a mix of curious fascination over the ritual unfolding before them, respect for the man's actions and the meanings behind them, and an almost unperceivable trace of angst at offending their Indian friend by unknowingly doing something wrong.

One of those six ever-less confused foreigners participating in a *pūjā* on that June morning was me, a PhD student from the University of Edinburgh researching religious change in Jain diaspora, who decided to spend a part of her summer attending the International Summer School for Jain Studies (ISSJS) in India. From 28th May to 8th July 2015 I shared lecture halls, lunches, rooms, and experiences with sixteen other students from across the world interested in learning about Jainism, an ancient South Asian religious tradition little known outside India. During those six weeks we spent most of our time at a Jain campus in Delhi, though we also travelled to Jaipur (Rajasthan) and Indore (Madhya Pradesh), and made frequent trips to various places of interest around those three cities.



We spent over eighty hours in lecture halls listening to many local and visiting professors (Dr Shugan Jain, Dr Ulrich Timme Kragh, Dr Veer Sagan Jain, Dr Philip Clayton, Dr Kusum Jain, and Dr S. R. Bhatt to mention just a few) sharing their knowledge on early Jain history, Jain doctrine (e.g., karma, soul, non-violence etc.), rituals, sutras and other philosophical expositions, contemporary Jain communities in India and abroad, and several other topics connected with Jain beliefs and practices. We also spent many a days visiting Jain temples, pilgrimage sites, renunciants/ascetics, and lay Jains, which gave us an opportunity to form a more experiential understanding of what was discussed in the classroom. Although our days were filled with lectures, reading, writing, and discussions,

we seized every possible opportunity to slip outside the campus gates and explore the cities around us. Tasting *samosas*, *jalebis*, *pani puri*, *kulfis*, sugarcane juice and other local delicacies, we made our way around Delhi's Red Fort, the Palace of the Winds in Jaipur, an evening food market in Indore, Agra's famous Taj Mahal, and a bathing ghat on the banks of the Ganges in Haridwar.

Those six weeks spent exploring Jainism in India merged into a fun learning experience that gave me not only invaluable knowledge of Jainism, but also an extensive global network of scholars that share my interests. A good understanding of Jainism and its social dimensions is key in the fieldwork I am currently undertaking with Jains in Leicester (England) and Jamnagar (Gujarat), where I am exploring the impact of the cultural environment on one's religious practice. Attending the International Summer School for Jain Studies helped me deepen my pre-existing knowledge of Jainism, provided me with a better understanding of the everyday life of Jains in India, and by doing that ensured that my current and future research will produce meaningful findings and have a wider academic impact.

BSA's *Sociology of Religion Study Group* and its funding competition committee also recognised the value and potential impact of my attendance at the ISSJS and were generous enough to provide me with a travelling grant, which stretched a long way in India. The financial help I received from Socrel enabled me to cover some of my travelling costs and made my stay in India a much more enjoyable experience. For the recognition and financial help given I am eternally grateful and forever in debt to Socrel and the BSA.

Thank you and warm greetings from Gujarat!

Anja Pogacnik
University of Edinburgh

Socrel Member Interviews

Prof Gordon Lynch
Michael Ramsay Chair of Modern Theology at University of Kent
Department of Religious Studies
Keynote Speaker at Socrel Annual Conference 2016

What are you currently working on?

My most recent research has just been published as a book by Bloomsbury - 'Remembering Child Migration: Faith, Nation-Building and the Wounds of Charity'. This project explores migration schemes run by major British churches and charities between 1869-1970 in which children were sent, unaccompanied by parents, to other parts of the British empire, particularly Canada and Australia. It also formed the basis for my co-curation of an exhibition on these schemes, 'On Their Own: Britain's Child Migrants' which is running at the V&A Museum of Childhood in London until June this year.

Writing about child welfare interventions in the nineteenth and twentieth century is a long way from the work I was doing on popular culture a decade ago. But there are some fundamental questions that I keep returning to in my work concerning how moral meanings shape social life and how we might think critically about their social effects. Over the past few years I've become increasingly interested in child welfare interventions as moral projects, intended to shape children's lives in positive ways and to make them (morally, spiritually and civically) better people. In many cases, major interventions such as these child migration schemes (which, in the UK, affected around 100,000 children), native assimilationist programmes in Canada, Australia and the United States, and systems of residential child-care (such as the industrial school system in Ireland) had strong moral and religious claims made in support of them.

In many cases, they have also come more recently to be the focus for public moral censure through public inquiries and truth commissions and critical media coverage, leading to public attempts at reparation including formal apologies and financial redress schemes. I'm interested both in the moral cultures that originally legitimised these child welfare interventions (and how these moral cultures operated in ways that exposed children to serious harm) as well as the ways in which public memories of these schemes today are constituted on strongly moral grounds. Throughout all of these processes, children seem to be invested with particular moral significance - as objects for moral redemption or victims of profane abuse - in ways that take on a public significance beyond the life experiences of specific individuals.

By looking at these issues, I'm hoping to understand more about the moral investments that are made in public interactions in relation to children, and the effects these have on children's lives. I think this is an important example of the kind of moral processes that I'm interested in more generally, but I'm also struck by how little work has been done on these

kinds of religiously-oriented child welfare interventions within religious studies and the sociology of religion and hope to encourage at least more awareness of them within our discipline.

Please could you expand a little more on the actual mechanics of these child migration schemes?

The child migration schemes began as philanthropic initiatives in the late Victorian period, inspired by similar schemes in America that re-located poor and displaced children from Boston and New York across America using the growing rail-road system. The British child migration schemes were developed by the new child-saving charities of that period, such as Dr Barnardo's Homes, as well as children's charities closely embedded into the structures of the Catholic, Anglican and Methodist churches. Children usually came into these schemes, in the context of a failing Poor Law system, when they were placed in charitable homes or workhouse schools as a result of parental death, illness or unemployment. Between 1869 and 1924, these schemes sent around 80,000 children to Canada, using regional distribution homes to place them in private households, where the intention was that they would be trained up as farm labourers or domestic servants. By the time the British child migration schemes to Australia were growing in the twentieth-century, welfare provision in Britain was beginning to improve. Children sent to Australia tended to have been placed in residential homes by single parents, sometimes on a temporary basis, or given over to schemes by parents struggling with poverty who were persuaded by charity workers that migration offered their children opportunities that they could never provide at home.'

In light of your focus on the moral cultures that legitimised these welfare schemes, what lessons can be drawn from these historic interventions and the humanitarian field more generally today?

Whilst these child migration schemes have more recently been the subject of widespread moral censure, they were, in part, motivated by forms of humanitarian piety that still exert a powerful moral claim on contemporary social life. Through line drawings, narrative case studies, and later, photographs, child migration organisations depicted the bare suffering of children to which some form of rescue was a necessary humanitarian response. It's possible to see how these powerful humanitarian sentiments could reduce children to objects of beneficence, whose role in this interaction became one of displaying gratitude, hard work and redemption for the hard work done on their behalf. The ways in which humanitarianism constructs particular power relationships between social actors, and obscures the wider political structures that give rise to human suffering, has received much attention in the recent, growing critical literature on humanitarianism. I don't entirely agree with those critiques though, and can see, even in the child migration schemes, how genuine, mutual, caring relationships were formed in some cases between children and adults within this wider humanitarian project. But the child migration schemes do suggest how humanitarian piety can structure social relationships in ways that leave people vulnerable to harm if it leaves institutions less self-critical of their work, more able to deflect criticisms on grounds of their moral rectitude and more reliant on unwarranted bonds of trust between diffuse networks of carers. Those processes can be present in contemporary charities and NGOs just as much as they were in these earlier child migration schemes.

Prof Yvette Taylor
Professor of Education at University of Strathclyde
School of Education
Keynote Speaker at BSA Annual Conference 2016

What are you currently working on?

I've just completed the book for the ESRC project by the same name, *Making Space for Queer Religious Youth* (Palgrave, 2015) and I'm still finding that there's much to say about the research. At the moment, I'm thinking through the construction of employment futures, in times of 'aspiring', 'post-welfare' or 'crisis' youth transitions, as mediated by sexual-religious identification. I'm hoping to re-considering the intersectional relations of both sexuality and religion in constructing young people's aspirations, pragmatisms and caring orientations, including a 'calling' to religion as a site of present-future vocational investment. I'm thinking though the subversive potential of alternative values and futures, and the place of queer precarity and religious uncertainty here. I'd also like to dwell more on the intersection of class and religion, having accessed quite a middle-class sample in the *Making Space* project – that says something in itself and has been quite a marked contrast with my previous projects such as *Working-Class Lesbian Life* (2007) and *Lesbian and Gay Parenting* (2009). I'm currently working on producing a Special Issue, able to more fully take account of class and religion, with Dr Sarah-Jane Page and Dr Mathew Guest.

At the BSA I'll specifically consider the disciplinary dis-ordinations of 'queer research' (and the 'queer researcher'). My own deliberate 'dis-orientation' began with the intention of stretching – or shattering – disciplinary, policy and public separation of the categories of 'youth', religion' and 'sexuality'. These categories are often seen as in tension, incompatible and variously (un)interesting. In the BSA conversation – with Prof Grace Davie – I want to question the language of 'discipline' and 'sub-discipline' as ordered hierarchical spaces of (not)belonging, asking what happens when research-researcher-researched breach these boundaries? What do we expect of researchers newly entering 'our fields', which arguably have their own disciplining practices? How to make an impact at the *inter*-discipline or is this always a risk in being sidelined, and seen as 'child' to the 'parent' discipline? How are interdisciplinary conversations and realizations rendered precarious? What of researchers-researched who must insist on 'adding (themselves) on' to disciplinary agendas? Lots of questions and I'm not claiming to have the answers. While the particular focus is on exchanges between 'religion' and 'sociology', I want to probe at the cohesiveness of these categories, asking general questions on disciplinary loyalties, inheritances and dis-orientations.

As you state, intersections between sexuality and religion sadly remain out of bounds for many sociologists today. Furthermore, adding employment to the mix is only bound to lead to further confusion. To clarify your position, please could you present a more concrete example of how these spheres of influence come together in practice?

I think you are right to note the ways that sexual-religious subjects are seen outside of different disciplinary boundaries and I've hopefully hinted at my position there in terms of stretching disciplinary imaginations.

'Youth' have been thought of *as* transition, as well as *in* transition, gaining much policy and academic attention, which often represents 'youth' as 'lost' categories 'in-need', and certainly LGBTQ youth have been mis-placed in this way. I'd have to say that confusion or hesitancy around taking sexuality, youth and religion into account would be matched by my own confusion around not doing so! We know that no-one occupies singular identities or subjectivities and no-one feels their experiences one-at-a-time, as the academic 'add on'.

To give you a concrete example of this working in the field of employment, and employment aspirations, many of the young participants had religious vocations in mind but were considering their possible future (employment) place in these fields, against a sense of inclusive practices and possibilities. Would, for example, inclusive churches, such as the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) founded in, by, for, LGBT community, be a more pragmatic choice? Or would this render them economically precarious in being unattached to 'traditional' churches?

This consideration was one of sexual-religious identity as well as gender inequality within traditional religious spaces, which the young participants were acutely aware of. Indeed it was often female participants who blurred 'work' and 'care' in describing the potential of a religious vocation – and that's been a long-standing concern in feminist scholarship: who has to work and care, who does 'care' as work?

Your notion of young people's calling to religion in the midst of our present risk society seems poignant here. You seem to be especially interested in the subversive potential of such interactions. Please could you contextualise the present picture with the experiences of the 60s and 70s more generally?

Well, yes, but that's made me think! I am always, I hope, interested in subversive potential. But we've both noted the ways in which to hold a religious subjectivity is often to be positioned as 'conservative' and, for LGBTQ youth, this may render them outside 'queer' politics and places. For example, there's been a lot of commentary of queer scene spaces, and perhaps more so historically in the 60s/70s, as sites of radicalism – where in contemporary times we might think of these as leisure spaces heavily commercialized with a 'pink pound' value. I think it's important to question who, what and where is seen as 'subversive', acknowledging that these can be resourced positions reliant on emotional resources as well as material resources. That's something I was keen to highlight in the Working-Class Lesbian Life project.

So, in terms of Making Space, many young participants spoke of 'Church hopping' and engaging with different traditional and inclusive Churches. But as middle-class young people they did have the time, information and resources to access such 'chosen' spaces and actively exercise their preferences around, for example, university calendars. Many interviewees sang in choirs, played music, seen themselves as future musicians and so on,

and again often spoke of the importance of incorporating this into their religious practice, something which Inclusive Churches have developed in hoping to increase youth participation.

This resonates generally with other ways of being and doing religion, and we might say 'spirituality' here. I think it's notable that interviewees didn't really use 'spiritual' as a substitute for 'religion'. Yet they were actively stretching religious practices and the question is who has the power to define what 'religion' actually is? I do think there's something significant here in young people's attraction to religion and naming themselves, even if ambivalently, as religious, with religious vocational ambitions too. You don't really hear that in discourses of the UK as an increasingly secular society, where sexual-citizenship is wrapped up in and supposedly indicative of secularity. Secularity isn't necessarily subversive, it of course brings with it its own normative assumptions and requirements – religious-sexual subjectivity may interrupt that but we need to be mindful of placing such interruptions as also fully social.

Dr Shanon Shah
PhD (completed) Theology & Religious Studies
King's College London

What is your PhD about?

My doctoral thesis is entitled 'The Making of a Gay Muslim: Social Constructions of Religion, Sexuality and Identity in Malaysia and Britain'. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in both countries between 2012 and 2013. It explores how gay Muslims respond to understandings of Islam often used to vilify, marginalise or even persecute them and focuses on their everyday narratives, practices and social relations. I wanted to analyse what the experiences of gay Muslims in both countries could illuminate about majority-minority relations and how society comes to embrace or exclude particular groups of people.

Could you tell us a little more about how the two countries compare?

Most significantly, Islam is the religion of the majority in Malaysia and also the official religion, meaning that it informs various state laws and public policies. Also, the Malaysian Constitution defines ethnic Malays as Muslim while the state recognises only Sunni Islam, mostly based on the Shafii school of jurisprudence. Yet Malaysia is also a very diverse

country, with Muslims comprising 61.3 percent of the population, the bulk of the remainder being Buddhist (19.3 percent), Christians of various denominations (9.2 percent) and Hindu (6.3 percent).

Politically, post-independence Malaysia is a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy but Islamic laws and sentiments are increasingly used by successive governments to justify authoritarian rule. In this climate, certain minorities can become especially vulnerable to state-sanctioned demonisation, especially Shi'a Muslims, Christians, ethnic Chinese, and lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders (LGBTs). Gay Muslims thus get caught in the middle of politically motivated agendas to defend Malay and Muslim privileges while stigmatising or demonising various minorities. Yet the political rhetoric often does not match everyday lived experiences – anti-gay laws are rarely enforced and some cities have thriving subcultures of sexual minorities. As tan beng hui, a Malaysian academic, has put it: "The state's anti-gay bark is worse than its bite."

In the last 50 years, by comparison, the British state has adopted increasingly liberal and inclusive attitudes towards sexual diversity even though it historically outlawed homosexuality and other sexual offences. In fact, Malaysia's anti-sodomy laws are a colonial inheritance. Politically, however, anti-Muslim ideologues continually cast Muslim minorities as particularly prone to extremism or violence and therefore threatening national security and social cohesion. In this climate, gay Muslims also get caught in the middle of competing agendas that uphold sexual diversity as a British value while positioning Islam as the problem child in issues ranging from education to dietary practices to dressing to religious extremism.

What recurring theme would you say ties your ethnographies together?

One recurring theme in my research was that in fashioning their sexual and religious identities, gay Muslims adjusted their responses – rebelling, conforming, innovating, retreating or merely keeping up appearances – based on how strongly anti-gay or anti-Muslim sentiments informed their immediate surroundings. The politicised spotlight on Islam in both countries meant that it became a primary referent in their identity constructions. Yet gay Muslims would innovate on their own religious expressions and understandings by engaging with various social and religious authorities and alternative interpretations of Islam. In that sense, they were clear examples of how some marginalised groups use religion as a cultural resource to construct their personal and collective identities.

What are you currently working on?

Having successfully completed my PhD very recently – I graduated in January 2016 – my work now consists of a portfolio of projects with various organisations and groups. I am on a three-month placement at the William Temple Foundation developing a project on spiritual capital. I am also an associate researcher at Inform based at the London School of Economics and Political Science where I help to refine and update their existing records on Islam-oriented or Islam-derived new religious movements. Apart from academic research, I am also a Deputy Editor of Critical Muslim, a quarterly magazine of ideas produced by the Muslim Institute. What ties my projects together is my overarching interest in people's lived experiences and how they innovate on their religious expressions in response to changes in wider society.

What advice would you give to other Socrel PhDs?

I was very insecure about writing chapters before and during ethnographic fieldwork and always felt like I wasn't ready. But my supervisor, Dr Marat Shterin, gave me some excellent advice – writing is thinking. It doesn't matter if you don't get it right the first time. Starting to write chapters early on in my PhD was extremely challenging, but it helped me to think more critically about my research as it developed. I could always tell when my thoughts were fuzzy because the writing would also turn out vague and full of waffle.

I also learnt that writing consistently every day in small bits was better than binge-writing. And producing clear and vivid prose was the result of a ridiculous amount of redrafting and editing which was actually fun. Being a graduate teaching assistant also helped me hone my thinking, as did presenting my work-in-progress at conferences and seminars.

It was crucial not to burn out, however, and I developed several interests outside of academia. My energisers were playing tennis, singing, cooking, Nordic noir and *Orange is the New Black*. When I felt particularly crushed, I read the *Thesis Whisperer* and Howard Becker, especially 'Writing for Social Scientists' and 'Tricks of the Trade'. And I had a loving partner, friends and family acting as cheerleaders – never underestimate the healing power of having more than one shoulder to cry on!

Lastly – and I don't know if this is ironic for a sociologist of religion – I kept the faith that one day I *would* finish the PhD successfully. And I did.

Editor/Dr Alp Arat

aratalp@gmail.com

Illustrations/Hugo Yoshikawa

www.hugoyoshikawa.com