



SocrelNews

2020
Issue 11

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Peter Gee, Liz Graveling, Joanna Bryant

Convenor's Welcome

Dear Members,

I hope this newsletter finds you and your family in good health and safe, in these unusual times.

In these difficult times, we are all facing different challenges. Some of us are working full-time from home, while looking after young ones or trying to home-school our children. Some of us may be looking after vulnerable people. Some of us are feeling isolated and lonely. Some of us dearly miss their friends and family. Maybe some of us have found some extra time for research, but it is most likely that most of us have found it difficult to find the time or the headspace to write something coherent. Regardless of the situation you are in, you are not alone.

While our events have had to be postponed to 2021, we are currently looking into how to maintain our community engagement online, while also avoiding online event fatigue. If you have any ideas/suggestions for a series of online mini-events, please do not hesitate to [contact us](#).

As a result of the pandemic, journal editors have already noted that very few women have been able to submit articles in the last few weeks. If you are a woman, and you are struggling and need mentoring, please remember that our [mentoring scheme](#) is still open.

I hope you can keep safe, and I look forward to seeing you all soon again.

Céline Benoit (Convenor)
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Update on Socrel Committee

As you know, as a result of Covid19, we have had to cancel this year's annual conference, which was due to be held in York. We have also decided to cancel our AGM, usually hosted at the conference.

As part of this we are suspending nominations and minimising changes to the committee. As a result, the following roles have been extended:

- Convenor until July 2022
- Events Office until July 2021
- Communications Officer until July 2021

While all three posts were due to come to an end in July 2020, we feel it is important to maintain the committee's stability in these difficult times, and to give the possibility to members to return to 'normal' working conditions before considering volunteering for a new role within the Committee.

You will have noticed that the role of the Convenor has been extended to July 2022 instead of July 2021. This is to avoid having everyone leave at the same time (note that the PG/ECR Officers and the Chair are also due to step down in July 2021). We will, however, co-opt a new Internet Officer, to replace Carl Morris from July 2020 (thank you, Carl, for coming to our rescue the last few months!), and we will keep you informed about the nomination.

We have made these decisions on the assumption that we will be able to plan and attend our annual conference in York in 2021, where we will resume standard procedures.

These decisions do not contravene the Socrel constitution, but if you have any suggestions, concerns or questions about it please contact our Chair, Prof. Sophie Gilliat-Ray.

Again, we hope that you are safe and well, and very much look forward to seeing you all again.

Sophie Gilliat-Ray (Chair)
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Update on Events

As many of you will be well aware by now, it is with a heavy heart the events Socrel had planned for 2020 have been postponed in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is not a decision we took lightly and was something that was discussed at great length with the committee, staff at the BSA and invited speakers. We know that this will come as a big disappointment to many as Socrel events are an important way to keep the study group active, meet with friends and collaborators, forge new networks and progress our research. However, the health and wellbeing of our members is of the utmost importance, so it was only right we postponed these activities as many other research networks and groups have also done. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the committee, event organisers, invited speakers and presenters for their support and understanding during this time. In particular, I would like to thank Tim Hutchings (University of Nottingham) and Lyndsey Henry (the BSA events team) for all their help and support with planning (and unplanning!) our events scheduled for this year. I did not realise that unplanning events takes nearly as much time as planning them!

With this said, we are of course looking towards 2021 as a time where, all being well, we can come together as a community and take part in some of the events we had scheduled for this year. Of course, we are aware that even at this stage events for 2021 are uncertain, however, we will work towards this and of course, putting the wellbeing of our delegates first, adjust and amend these events accordingly.

Socrel 2021

I am pleased to announce that we have managed to secure a new date for Socrel 2021. The conference is now due to take place on **Tuesday 13th – Thursday 15th July 2021 at the University of York**. Our invited speakers are all able to make this new date, and we will also work towards having the postgraduate study day on Monday 12th July 2021. Those with accepted abstracts will automatically have the abstract they submitted for 2020 accepted for 2021. I appreciate that people's commitments and research may well have changed in recent weeks, so please do get in touch with me to discuss any queries or questions you may have concerning this. Call for papers will be circulated in the autumn and we will be honouring those bursary recipients who were awarded bursaries in 2020 for Socrel 2021. Should any bursary recipient have any questions or queries, then please do not hesitate to get in touch with me or our PGR Liaison officers, Joanna Malone and Emily Lynn.

Other Events

Regarding other Socrel events, the response day is currently postponed, and we are considering our options as to when this could be rescheduled. The BSA annual conference in April 2020 at Aston University was cancelled. The next BSA annual conference is 13th - 15th April 2021 at the University of Manchester. This will be the BSA's 70th Anniversary conference, and the theme is 'Remaking the Future'. Call for papers will be sent out in the autumn.

We are also looking into organising online or virtual events and activities over the next 12 months in place of in-person events. Please do get in touch if you do have any suggestions or advice- this will be most welcome! Please can I also encourage members to circulate details of any other online events they are aware of through our JISCmail mailing lists. It would be great to hear about other virtual activities taking place over the next few months, and the JISCmail list is a helpful way to publicise these events and opportunities.

If anyone did register for the Socrel response day, Socrel annual conference or BSA annual conference, your registration fee should have been reimbursed. Please do get in touch with me if there are any issues related to this.

Tweeting your research!

During the week commencing Monday 13th July, when our annual conference was due to take place, we invite our presenters due to present their research to post their abstracts on twitter with the hashtag #Socrel2020. The BSA did something similar during the week of their cancelled annual conference, and it was very successful with many participants engaging in online discussions about their research. We will email all presenters closer to the time with more details on this.

I hope everyone and their loved ones are well and managing during these difficult times. I look forward to seeing everyone again soon when we can come together safely as a community, and thank you again for your support and understanding.

Rachael Shillitoe (Events Officer)
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How to Use Your PhD Outside of Academia

The theme for the PG/ECR event that we had planned for York this summer concerned non-academic routes for work after doctoral research in the sociology of religion. It's an important theme for the whole higher education sector to consider, as we graduate more and more people with doctorates yet getting jobs in the sector [seems to be a struggle](#). This is a conversation that has developed for a while, and the disruption the sector faces due to coronavirus – including the much-publicised financial hit anticipated due to reduced international students next year – only [makes things worse](#).

We're sad that we can't host that conversation with our postgraduate and early career members this summer. But we had timed this issue of Socrel News to support that conversation. If we can't have the workshops we had planned, we can still bring you insights from three of our members who have doctoral training in the sociology of religion but do not work with universities in teaching and research. Instead, they have taken their skills and interests to other parts of society – health care, global development, and religious institutions. Their stories are on the pages that follow.

Just a word about the format: these profiles, which feature in every issue of Socrel News, try to catch members at different moments in their career – as they finish studies or just after completion, in the middle of their careers, or at a more senior and established point. For me, this set of profiles therefore helps to illustrate that the challenges we face now of what to do with our PhDs when either we don't feel right for higher education or higher education hasn't made space for us is not new. It is an enduring part of our personal discernment, and it is also shaped by the cultural moment at which we graduate with that qualification.

My thanks to the three scholars who have shared their stories with me for this issue, as I thank all members who've taken part in these interviews over the years. My thanks also to our illustrator, Hugo Yoshikawa, who has quickly and creatively produced the distinctive caricatures that accompany these profiles.

Michael Munnik (Publications and Communications Officer)
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Socrel Member Interviews



*Peter Gee
Head of Business Technology
Overseas Development Institute*

Unlike many members of the study group, your daily work is not in academia but in the charitable sector - global development. What advantages does that perspective give you when considering our field?

I have been on the staff of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) – a London-based research centre on international development and humanitarian policy – since the mid-1980s. That was a particularly difficult time to begin an academic career in sociology, and I took the pragmatic decision to move to London and look for whatever jobs I could get. ODI first recruited me as publications and press officer but I soon also took on an information technology brief which has remained with me throughout my career.

ODI's focus and reputation has been built on evidence-based research directed towards economic and social transformation. That empirical and global perspective can be a useful corrective to the insularity and theoretical preoccupations of much sociology of religion in the UK, though I think the discipline has broadened out in the last decade. I now have a much greater respect for quantitative social research. I believe that it ought to be possible for theory in sociology of religion to be empirically tested rather than evaluated on the basis of the elegance of argument or compatibility with Weber or Durkheim.

Turning the question round, I have also found many insights from all those studies of power and authority in cults, sects, new religious movements, in how to be successful in bringing about organisational change at ODI.

Last summer, you finished your term as Membership Officer of Socrel's executive. And that's not the only role you've filled on this group's executive committee over the years. How has the group's focus changed over the years you've been a part of it?

I joined the study group in 1976 when I started as a postgraduate student in Oxford, supervised by Bryan Wilson, and I have been a member ever since. On the committee I have been Treasurer (1992-5), Publications Officer (1996-9), Convenor (2003-8), and finally Membership Officer (2013-19). I also edited (with John Fulton) the first two study group books, *Religion and Power* and *Religion in Contemporary Europe*.

The study group has grown, and become more diverse in membership, with only a minority in sociology departments and the majority in religious studies, theology and other disciplines, in the UK and internationally. This might have resulted in the loss of a

distinctive sociological focus, but I don't think that has happened. In the early years, new religious movements, Roman Catholicism in Britain and secularisation were dominant themes, and at times we were caricatured as a slightly eccentric niche group, well insulated from both mainstream sociology and culture. There was very little about Islam, not much about mainstream Christianity, and gender wasn't very prominent either. Thankfully, all that has changed – we are closer to mainstream sociology and research encompasses the wide religious landscape. For eleven years, the January postgraduate conferences in Bristol hosted by Kieran Flanagan were an invaluable resource but for a few years we had our own period of financial austerity.

Fortunately increasing political concern about religious radicalisation made possible the great AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society project, led by Linda Woodhead, and funding for so much excellent research. As a result we gained more members and all that activity resulted in some very profitable study group conferences, boosting group finances, so we have been able to do much more recently to support the membership with more study days, bursaries, small research grants and to further develop support for postgraduates and early career members. In one sense though, the group has not changed at all. It is still friendly and welcoming.

What aspect of religion in Britain now would have surprised you most when you were a doctoral researcher?

The ambition of my doctoral research project was to analyse how religious groups creatively adapt in response to processes of secularisation, economic and cultural change, not just at the level of organisation but also in re-working their ethics and theology. I believed that sociology of religion had bought into an essentially conservative characterisation of what constitutes authentic religious life, so that necessary change could be presented as yet further evidence of religious decline, and I wanted to challenge that. Yet I was also convinced that despite the limitations of classic secularisation theory, a far-reaching process of decline in the institutions of mainstream religion was underway.

Nearly forty years later, there is more interest in all things religious, and that is a pleasant surprise. A huge factor has clearly been immigration, firstly from Britain's former colonies and then from Europe. Without that influx of people committed to religious practice, the churches would have declined much faster, and there would not have been the growth in the Muslim and other religious communities. Some evidence for that was there in the 1970s. But not so predictable was the growth of a politicised Islam which transformed the social significance of religion across the world.

I would have been surprised by the speed and extent of far-reaching social and cultural change in the UK and Western Europe, with the transformation in attitudes on issues like same-sex marriage. And at the same time, how rapidly abuse within the churches has undermined their moral authority, everywhere, but particularly in Ireland.

Many churches, mosques and other religious groups have embraced some aspects of contemporary culture, like digital technology (so apparent during the recent lockdown). Within Christianity, mainstream churches have changed but they have not responded creatively enough to the new context and the result has been greater marginalisation.

I am sure I would have been surprised about the lack of theoretical focus on the continuing decline of mainstream Christianity. There were many weaknesses in secularisation theory including a static and inadequate understanding of the dynamic nature of religious belief and institutions, and perhaps an implicit secularist agenda. But not enough attention has been given to the effect of the ageing demographic profile of so many congregations which will have profound and inevitable consequences in the next two decades. I don't think many religious organisations will disappear, but they will be transformed, and the religious landscape will become more fragmented but even more interesting.



*Liz Graveling
Research Officer
Living Ministry
The Church of England*

Your work concerns the ongoing professional development of people - specifically clergy. I saw the inviting phrase "vocation is a lifelong journey" on your website. How do you apply that metaphor of journey to your own life?

I would say that 'lifelong' and 'journey' are both key words in that phrase. Although I'm not myself ordained, a lot of my work concerns clergy and ordinands who have been through what is known as a 'discernment process' before entering training, as they explored whether or not they had a vocation to ordained ministry. People sometimes assume that, once ordained, the discerning and learning are over, having produced a fully formed and equipped minister. Obviously that's not the case, and clergy, like other people, go on working out their vocation as they change and grow through different circumstances and contexts.

Understanding my life as a journey has been massively helpful in lots of ways. There are different kinds of journey: some are straightforward and functional – a way of getting from A to B – and I know people who have always been sure exactly where they are going and have planned carefully to get there. For me, life has been – and continues to be – more of an exploratory journey. It has taken a few swerves and off-road adventures, but looking back I can trace the threads that have brought me to where I currently am. From an undergraduate degree in French Studies, leading into linguistics work in West Africa, which sparked an interest in international development and eventually a Masters in development studies and a PhD in religion and development focussed on Ghana, to my current research role for the Church of England, the desire to understand people and processes through qualitative research has grown steadily.

There have been times when I have travelled slowly – even felt as though I were crawling – and I've learnt that those times can be just as important and fruitful in developing self-awareness, grounding and resilience as the adrenaline-fuelled zipwire moments. There have been times when I have sensed a call to a particular place or role contrary to logic and I have, to borrow an image from the Bible, picked up my gifts and followed the star. I have never regretted it. Early on, there were times when I dreamed of finally arriving at my destination: the perfectly fulfilled life and career. What I have learnt is that we never really arrive. We are constantly learning about ourselves and the world and, for me, even

currently in a job that I love, the fulfilment remains largely in the journey itself.

You completed a doctorate in religion in 2008. What were your goals with that degree and, to the extent that they changed, what influenced that change?

The reason I started (and the reason I completed) my doctorate was mainly interest. Interest in the topic, which was how religion plays out in everyday life and particularly in the context of a village in coastal Ghana, and broader intellectual curiosity about the process of research and understanding. At that time, I assumed I would continue my career within academia, largely because that was the context I was in at the time and my role models then were all in academic posts. However, I also wanted to use my learning to make a difference. I was acutely aware at the time of the enormous privilege of being paid a stipend to study something in which I was so interested, and I remember feeling frustrated and uncomfortable that I couldn't see a way for it to make an immediate practical difference to people's lives. Looking back, I can see that my studies weren't such a selfish endeavour as I had felt. Besides learning that contributing to knowledge is a good thing, since finishing my doctorate I have been able to use what I gained through it to benefit others as well as myself. In the Church of England, we refer to the education and training of ministers as 'formation.' As well as providing me with the qualification itself and the knowledge and practical research skills that go along with it, my doctoral studies contributed to forming me both in character and in the way I think about and question the world, other people and myself. For some, those skills and attributes play out as a positive force within academia, often in collaboration with other organisations; for me, exploring topics such as clergy flourishing and gender and ministry, I have been able to channel them within a policy context that has brought together my training, my values, and many of my interests and passions.

What advice would you offer those who are currently in a doctorate or establishing themselves as an early-career researcher and are discerning the right path?

There's so much I've learnt since then, and the world always looks very different with hindsight!

One of the things I have found immensely helpful, and that I wish I'd done earlier, is spending time identifying my core values and then building my life and work around them. So, for me, one of those values is understanding the world (and especially people), and another is making my work count – whether I'm teaching, publishing or influencing policy and practice through reports, resources or speaking engagements. To do that, I've had to learn the language of the people I'm communicating with, especially in my case church policymakers and clergy. I have also had to maintain and assert my own credibility: don't be afraid to use the title Dr, and do ensure you uphold the highest professional and ethical standards, building your own accountability structures where necessary.

Secondly – and, as an introvert, this doesn't always come naturally to me – talk to people. Talk to people working in your own areas of interest; talk to people you respect and/or would love to work with (most people will be happy to give you time and will let you know if they can't); talk to peers who will feed your excitement and relate to your struggles; talk to people treading a path you've already walked so you can pass on what you've learnt; talk to people with different perspectives, working in different areas or in different roles; talk to people you don't know by attending conferences or engaging on social media. Talk to people because they're interesting, rather than because you want to use them. It is easy to find our horizons have narrowed to the particular context in which we are currently working and living. As well as mitigating against isolation and boosting mental wellbeing, talking to other people broadens horizons, sparks creativity and opens up opportunities. Research skills are transferable and there is a whole world of potential out there, with

research opportunities across the globe in academic institutions, research agencies, government, business and the third sector. Even if you end up staying in the same place for your entire career, you won't regret looking out.



*Joanna Bryant
National Institute for Health Research (NIHR)
Grants Research Assistant
Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust*

What is the work you've been doing since you graduated?

Since graduating (or even since my Viva!) I've been working in research administration, initially at the University of Leeds and then for the NHS in Manchester. In my Leeds role as Research Operations Administrator, I was based in central research administration, but deployed to different faculties to provide cover for short-staffed research support teams. In the seven months I was there, I worked in Engineering; Earth and Environment; Arts, Humanities and Cultures; and Medicine and Health. My work involved providing 'cradle-to-grave' support for research, i.e. from grant application to grant set up, finance management, and then grant closure/reporting.

I left that post in October 2019 and started in post as NIHR Grants Research Assistant at Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust. My current role is essentially supporting all grant applications to the National Institute of Health Research (known for their fiddly application procedures) being made by Trust employees. I support clinicians, nurses, and allied health professionals with applications regardless of their specialism, so I've been privileged to support a wide variety grant proposals. However, with all this COVID-19 business, I received an email on Friday to tell me I was being stood down and possibly redeployed, so I'm not sure what will happen if I'm not redeployed!

How have the skills, practices, and knowledge you developed during your doctorate helped you in this work?

Funny you should ask about my skills from my PhD now! When completing the redeployment survey I was sent last week, I was asked to state what level my skills were at for things like research and data analysis. But having worked in the NHS for some months, it seems as though the advanced research and data analysis skills from my PhD mean very little. These skills, which are understood rather broadly in an academic context, have a very specific meaning in an NHS context (i.e. clinical experimental research;

quantitative/statistical analysis). Really, I think that the skills I've used from my PhD are mostly 'soft' transferable skills: stakeholder liaison, autonomous working, thinking outside the box, project management, taking initiative, persistence, resilience, and self-motivation. My line manager quickly observed that 'I'm on the ball', and I think that comes with having to be quite 'plugged in' to new developments in research. Sociological knowledge has been helpful because I'm occasionally dealing with some clinicians who include qualitative research as a buzzword in their proposals, but don't really understand what it's about. I think my research and analysis has made me quite sensitive to the dynamics of office politics, which has been useful for my day-to-day reflections on what's going on. Having said all this, I have supported an applicant who was interested in developing a culturally and religiously sensitive physiotherapy intervention, so offered a bit more support than my remit might otherwise allow, but that was very much the exception rather than the rule!

At what stage in your PhD journey did you decide to orient yourself to work outside of academia (and what support did you receive in this regard from the scholarly community)?

Up until my third year of my PhD I'd been set on an academic career. I was passionate about research and really enjoyed teaching undergrads. I started seriously reconsidering this in my fourth year and considered submission a good time to call it quits. I received no career support, either academic or otherwise (except perhaps nice references), although maybe I should have asked for it? I'm not sure who I would have asked at that stage. I once sent my CV to the University careers service but I recall the response I got was not very helpful. On my train journey back home after submitting, I thought about which employers fit my values and just went from there. The most difficult thing I suppose was knowing my market value - how much did I think I was worth on the job market? Was I over- or underselling myself? Still not sure where I sit with that!

Socrel Committee

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