



Charting Challenges and Change: The Past, Present and Future of the Sociology of Religion

British Sociological Association
Sociology of Religion Study Group Annual
Conference

14th July to 16th July 2025

Durham University, UK

Welcome

It is with great pleasure that we welcome you to this year's conference, marking a landmark anniversary for our Study Group. The 2025 conference takes place at Durham University, where we gather to reflect on the transformative journeys both the sociology of religion and religion itself have undergone over the past fifty years. The conference's theme - Charting Challenges and Change: The Past, Present and Future of the Sociology of Religion – accordingly invites us to look backwards and forwards, as we, correspondingly, connect again with old friends and colleagues, and welcome new ones.

The last five decades have seen religion's role in society shift dramatically, reflecting broader social changes and challenging us, as scholars, to adapt and respond in meaningful ways. This conference invites us to take stock: to explore the evolving status of our field, to learn from our intellectual heritage, and to consider how we might ethically and impactfully navigate the challenges of the 21st century. Our sessions and discussions are designed to foster dialogue on a wide range of timely and pressing topics, from digital cultures and ecological crises to intersectionality, conflict, and the emergence of new spiritual landscapes.

In embracing both critical reflection and forward-thinking innovation, we hope to deepen our collective understanding of religion's changing place in the world and reinvigorate the sociological tools we use to study it. Thank you for joining us in this vital conversation, and for contributing your insights to the continuing evolution of our discipline.

We received many excellent abstracts and proposals for SocRel 2025, the building blocks for this year's wide-ranging, diverse programme of parallel sessions, panels and plenaries. Presenters hail from across the world, a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, and every career stage. We are excited to enjoy learning from and with all of you. During a challenging time for Higher Education, especially in the UK, we are pleased to have been able to offer an increased number of conference bursaries, by way of an investment in our community and our shared subject of study.

We are particularly grateful to our keynote speakers: Professor Linda Woodhead and Professor Gordon Lynch, as well as Professor Monique Moultrie who will be joining us remotely. Thank you as well to several invited speakers – especially Dr Sarah Harvey, and Dr Caroline Starkey and colleagues representing the ongoing *Race and Class in UK Religious Studies and Theology* project.

This year's conference places particular emphasis on access and inclusion. We have taken steps to ensure that participation is open and supportive, recognizing the diverse needs, identities, and contributions of our colleagues. We aim to create a space where all can engage fully and meaningfully, and in the best way possible, and we are hugely grateful to SocRel EDI officers Dr Renasha Khan and Dr Krysia Waldock for their insight and support to this end. We are looking forward to their roundtable session on Religion, Disability and Neurodivergence. However, we are also conscious that enhancing inclusion is an ongoing task. If you have feedback on how we can continue to improve the annual conference with access and inclusion in mind, we would be very pleased to hear from you via email.

A special thanks to all who have contributed towards making this conference happen. Firstly, our thanks to all of you attending as presenters and delegates. Thank you for prioritising this conference, for your excellent submissions, and for all you do to make these annual conferences warm, inviting places to share and learn. Particular thanks to all who have volunteered to chair sessions, for taking on this essential role that keeps conferences running smoothly and convivially.

At Durham, we would like to thank Lauren and Leanne for their support and liaison in advance of the conference. We are also especially grateful to all those at the BSA who have helped to coordinate this event, particularly, Anna-Marie McGlanaghey.

To our fellow committee members – thank you for all of your support. In particular, Dr Ellie Atayee-Bennett and Morgana Loze-Doyle have worked tirelessly to support comms and advertising for this anniversary conference, demonstrating enviable eyes for detail. Dr Lucy Potter has been a constant help in ensuring that this year's meeting is a welcoming, inviting opportunity for early career and postgraduate colleagues. We are also grateful to Dr Rob Barward-Symmons for contributing to this year's PGR and ECR workshop exploring public engagement with research.

Finally, we owe a great deal to the study group's outgoing chair, Prof. Mathew Guest, and co-convenors, Dr Dawn Llewellyn and Dr Sonya Sharma, for their guidance, their oversight of the group, and their support. We hope this year's conference serves as a fitting celebration not only of the group, but of their time leading it.

Jennie and Alex

Dr Jennifer Riley and Alex Arthur-Hastie (SocRel Events Officers) on behalf of the SocRel Executive Committee

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Key Information

Getting Here

Department of Geography
Durham University
Lower Mountjoy
South Road
Durham
DH1 3LE



By Car

The building is located in the Lower Mountjoy site toward the South Road entrance side (west). The A177 South Road links the A167 Darlington Road, at the Cock o' the North Roundabout with the A177 Stockton Road on the south side of the City Centre.

Parking

Due to building works at the University, there is no on-site parking available. The nearest public on-street pay and display parking is either on Stockton Road to the north-east, or Quarryheads Lane to the north-west.

If you have a Blue Badge, or otherwise require parking close to the building, please contact Anna-Marie on a.mcglanaghey@britsoc.org.uk as soon as possible to make arrangements.

By Bus

There is a bus stop within 150 metres of the campus.

The nearest bus stops are on Stockton Road to the north-east of the site, "University - Palatine Centre" stops, served by bus routes 40BD, 56,57, 57A, 58, X12, M20 (westbound) and 853 (eastbound). Additional bus stops are on Quarryheads Lane to the north-west, "New Inn - Quarryheads Lane" stops, served by bus routes 6, 21 (eastbound), 40BD, 56,57, 57A, 58, ED1, S1, N21 and X12.

By Train

The nearest railway station is Durham, which is located approximately 1.3 miles to the north of the Lower Mountjoy site, on the far side of the city centre and River Wear.

Buses run from outside the station to the city centre. This station is a category A station and has step free access to all platforms. Interchange between the platforms is via a subway. Lift access is available to the subway from both platforms.

Registration and Participation

Badges and Communication Cards

Delegates will be offered a name badge which gives you access to the conference. We request that your conference badges be worn at all times for security reasons and the provision of meals. Should you have any queries please ask a member of staff who will be available at the registration desk wearing a lanyard, or our student helpers who will be wearing a BSA t-shirt.

There will be the option to add a sticker to your badge which specifies your pronouns. We ask that you respect others' pronouns.

We will also have some communication cards available for those who would like to use them. You can pick up these cards when you register and change them as needed.

- Red – listening only, please don't talk to me
- Yellow - only happy to talk to people I already know
- Green – happy to talk to anyone

No card also means green card.

Please ensure you follow the cards other delegates may be using. Please also return these cards at the end of the conference.

It is OK to participate as is most comfortable for you. If there is a group or pair discussion, there is no pressure to take part.

If you don't want to take part in a discussion, you can use a red communication card to let people know you'll only listen.

Breaks and Quiet & Regulation Room

We have tried to schedule regular breaks throughout the conference programme, and will aim to stick to proposed timings as closely as possible. We will aim to communicate any changes to the programme as early and clearly as we can.

You can take breaks at any time that you need to, and you do not need to let anyone know.

You can use the Quiet and Regulation Room during the hours of the daytime schedule. The room is W309, near to the conference space. Please note that this room does not have a step-free access. If you need step-free access to a quiet space, please let Anna-Marie (BSA Events Team) know. There is a free classroom space for the majority of the programme which you can use.

We have provided some fidget toys and other materials, and you are welcome to bring whatever you find useful and helpful to use in this space. We ask that you return anything you use or borrow from this room before the end of the conference.

Schedule

As part of the BSA's ongoing green initiative, we are moving away from hard copy programmes and Abstract Books, although some hard copies will be available to look at whilst you are at the registration desk.

A copy of the Outline Programme is in this pack on Page 24 and the Programme Grid is in a separate document.

If you would appreciate a printed copy for your own use at the Conference, please let Anna-Marie know by Thursday 10th July, and we will be pleased to provide one.

Accommodation Check In

If you have booked accommodation at Collingwood College, you can check in from 2pm on the day of your arrival, and you must check out by 10am on the day of your departure.

Breakfast is served between 8am and 9am in the Collingwood dining hall.

There is a [Collingwood College Guest Information Guide](#) which contains information on facilities, security and provisions.

Luggage

You can leave your luggage in Room W309. Please note that this may be left unattended for short periods, and that it is also being used for the Quiet and Regulation Room. We would ask that you be mindful of others whilst accessing this room.

Food and Refreshments

During the daytime programme, lunch, tea, coffee, and refreshments will be served in the foyer areas of W103. All conference registrations include daytime catering.

Evening meals must be pre-booked, and there are still some places available.

On Monday 14th July, dinner will be served in Collingwood College, a few minutes walk from the Geography Building. Staff will be on hand to direct you and offer any assistance you might need. Dinner will be served from 19.30, and is an informal, 3-course serverly dinner.

Tuesday 15th July is the SocRel 50th Anniversary Celebration Dinner. This is at:

Radisson Blu Durham

Frankland Lane

Durham

DH1 5TA

This will be a 3-course meal. The bar is open from 18.30 and dinner will be served at 20.00. Drinks are not included with dinner but the bar will remain open until dinner is finished.

If you would like to pre-book drinks for dinner, you can do so by emailing events.durham@radissonblu.com with your name and drinks order **before 9th July**.

Full pre-payment is required for any pre-orders via a link that will be sent to you by the Radisson, and you can collect your drinks from the pre-event bar from 19.30.

The bar will remain open throughout dinner if you would prefer to wait until the night.

There will also be a SocRel quiz and some photos from Conferences of the past. If you've got any photos you'd like to share with us, please email them to a.mcglanaghey@britsoc.org.uk

Access and Inclusion

As a committee, we are keen to ensure that SocRel is a welcoming, friendly community for all, and are mindful of the myriad and intersecting ways in which Equality, Diversity and Inclusion ought to be embedded.

Following the hugely successful 2025 Response Day, led by SocRel EDI officers Renasha Khan and Krysia Waldock, this year we have taken steps to integrate advice, information and suggestions which take into account attendees' processing styles and need, including

diverse processing and communication styles. Many of these are reflected in this delegate pack. We also warmly invite anyone to reach out ahead of the conference if there is a particular need or adjustment you would like to discuss with the conference organisers

Moreover, we are conscious that this conversation surrounding neurodiversity, disability and accessibility is, necessarily, an ongoing and evolving one, and that we will not have got everything right. Please do reach out to either the SocRel Events Officers (Jennie Riley, Alex Arthur-Hastie) or EDI Officers (Renasha Khan and Krysia Waldock) with feedback and suggestions, ahead of the conference, during it, and afterwards. We would be pleased to hear from you.

Access Information – Durham University

There is a comprehensive but easy to read [Access Guide](#) which includes text and pictures of the spaces we will be using during the conference.

There is a hearing loop in all the conference rooms.

Room W103 (Lecture Theatre) is accessible by stairs or a lift, with an entrance at the top and bottom of the room.

Room W309 has a stepped entrance and there is no lift.

Access Information – Radisson

Our room for dinner, the bar and the toilets are all step-free and on the ground floor.

There is a hearing loop in the room, please let Anna-Marie McGlanaghey (a.mcglanaghey@britsoc.org.uk) know in advance if you need this and we will let the Radisson know.

Discord


SocRel is now on Discord - join [here](#)!

Discord is a free social communication platform that facilitates community building online. Set up your profile via an Internet browser or download the app on your smartphone or tablet.

We have different channels set up including one for the annual conference, which we will use to circulate information during our time together in Durham.

We have also created a private PGR/ECR channel which will be dedicated to supporting postgraduate and early career researchers and which we hope will become a valuable, collaborative space. Join [here](#).

SOCREL: SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION (BSA) STUDY GROUP




BRITISH SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

PGR/ECR COMMUNITY

Anyone who identifies as a postgraduate student (PGR) or an early career researcher (ECR) is invited to join.

This channel serves as a platform for casual networking and connecting with others in the community.

Members are encouraged to use this group to organise or propose their own events, to make it their space.



Evening Activities

We are thrilled to announce the addition of a tour of World Heritage Site Durham Cathedral lead by Professor Emeritus Walter Moberly.

The tour will take place on **Monday the 14th of July at 8pm**, at a cost of £20 per person with 28 spaces available. The tickets can be found on the conference registration booking site at <https://www.britsoc.co.uk/events/key-bsa-events/sociology-of-religion-conference-2025/>

Prayer Room

There is a Prayer Room in the Confluence Building, a short walk from the Geography Building. A member of staff or the BSA event team will be able to direct you.

Breastfeeding Room

Please see a member of the event team who will be able to direct you to a room for breastfeeding.






WiFi





The University WiFi is easy to connect to and is available across the building. There will be instructions on the notice board by the Registration Desk.



Bloomsbury

Thank you to Bloomsbury Plc who are exhibiting at the event over lunch and refreshment breaks. Please make sure you visit their stand when you are available.

Who's Who

	Mathew Guest Chair	Mathew Guest is a white British man with dark brown hair. He wears glasses with thick dark frames.
	Sonya Sharma	Sonya Sharma (pronounced Son-ya) is a brown (South Asian) woman with shoulder length black hair. She sometimes wears glasses.
	Alex Arthur-Hastie Events Officer	Alex Arthur-Hastie is a white woman with long black hair. Alex has her nose pierced and does not wear glasses.
	Jennie Riley Events Officer	Jennie Riley is a white woman with blonde hair in a long bob which she often wears tied back. She sometimes wears glasses. She is happy to be referred to as either Jennie (jeh -nee) or Jennifer (JEN-ih-fer)
	Krysia Waldock EDI Officer	Krysia Waldock (pronounced kri-shah) is white with long dark red hair, and often wears red or purple lenses and 'Lucy and Yak' dungarees.

	<p>Renasha Khan EDI Officer</p>	<p>Renasha Khan (pronounced ren-Ay-sha) is a brown (South Asian) woman with long black hair. Renasha does not wear glasses</p>
	<p>Ellie Atayee-Bennett</p>	<p>Dr Ellie Atayee-Bennett is a white woman with long brown hair, which she often wears tied back, and dark brown eyes. She does not wear glasses. She has her ears and nose pierced.</p>
	<p>Morgana Loze-Doyle Comms Officer</p>	<p>Morgana Loze-Doyle (pronounced mor-gan-uh) is a white woman with brown hair in a bob. She has a nose ring and sometimes wears glasses.</p>
	<p>Lucy Potter PGR and ECR Liaison Officer</p>	<p>Lucy Potter (pronounced lu-see) is a white woman with blonde hair, sometimes wears glasses and colourful earrings.</p>

	<p>Anna-Marie McGlanaghey</p> <p>BSA Events Team</p>	<p>Anna-Marie has dark, shoulder-length curly hair and usually wears glasses with a gold rim and bright trainers</p>
	<p>Georgina Robinson</p> <p>Conference Assistant</p>	<p>Georgina Robinson (pronounced "jaw-jee-nuh") is a white woman with long, dark blonde hair. She usually wears glasses.</p>

Guidance for Presenters, Chairs, Panel Hosts and Discussants

Computer stations and linked electronic display equipment will be available for your use. Each room is equipped with computers for presenters and will be running the Microsoft Windows operating system and Microsoft Office software. Please use Microsoft PowerPoint for visual aids. Presenters, Chairs, Panel Hosts and Discussants should attempt to arrive 10 minutes prior to the commencement of their sessions to discuss the running of the sessions and check that visual aids are displaying correctly.

You can bring your presentation on a USB stick or bring your own laptop. There are connection points available to connect laptops to the display systems, but if you use a Mac, please bring the required cables to connect to a PC as these will not be available at the venue.

We encourage you to incorporate BSA and SocRel branding into your slides.

Chairs

We are extremely grateful to all those who have agreed to chair one or more sessions. If you have agreed to chair and are now not able to make the session, please let us know at registration so we can make alternative arrangements. If you find yourself in a session without a chair we would be very grateful if someone in the audience could volunteer to take this role. Chairing guidelines are on page 21.

Oral Presentations

It is essential that presentations run in accordance with the scheduled times. This will allow delegates to move between presentation rooms during the parallel sessions. We ask that Chairs place due emphasis on timing when running parallel sessions. The general expectation of an oral presentation is that a 30-minute paper slot should consist of a 20-minute presentation followed by a 10-minute opportunity to answer questions.

Telephone Numbers

For conference enquires, the BSA Events Team can be contacted on the following numbers should a member of staff not be available at the registration desk.

- **Main office: 0191 383 0839**

- Events extension: 0191 370 6633
- Email: events@britsoc.org.uk

In a fire, health or crime related emergency, your first point of contact should be **Emergency Services on 999**, which is the emergency number in the UK for fire, ambulance or police.



BRITISH SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Guidelines for Chairs of Sessions

Thank you for agreeing to act as chair for a session at this conference. If at any point you have any difficulties please don't hesitate to contact a member of the BSA events team.

BEFORE THE SESSION

- Please check the time and location for your session carefully, and arrive promptly. If possible arrive five minutes early to identify your presenters, and introduce yourself to them.
- Check that all speakers are present and are aware of the order in which their papers are to be presented, and that any slides are ready to display.
- Check whether the presenter would like you, as the chair, to introduce their paper (title) and institution, or if they would prefer to do this themselves. If they would like you to introduce them, ask them, for example, which institution they are representing, how they pronounce their name, and whether they would like you to indicate their pronouns (we kindly ask that you avoid assuming the pronouns of speakers in your introductions). Where a presenter is an early career or postgraduate researcher, we discourage you from drawing attention to this, as it may add to existing nervousness.
- Check whether any of the speakers require any adjustments or accommodations, such as seats. Out of consideration for those with sensory sensitivities, you may wish to consider alternatives to clapping, such as 'flappause' or clicking after each speaker, or encourage audiences to clap once for all presenters at the end of the session, rather than after each paper.
- Check there is water available.

DURING THE SESSION

- At the start of each session, please briefly introduce yourself and, if you feel comfortable doing so, please give your own pronouns (as this establishes an environment in which presenters can state their own pronouns should they desire), and welcome delegates to the session. State the session title in case anyone is in the wrong room.
- Each paper has been allocated 30 minutes. Presenters have been asked to prepare to speak for 20 minutes and allow 10 minutes for questions/discussion after each session. We encourage you to stick to this structure, and keep time as strictly as

possible, such that those wishing to swap between parallel sessions have the opportunity to do so.

- Not every room has a clock, so we recommend you bring a watch or phone to keep time.
- Cards will be provided for you to pass/show to the presenter to let them know how much time they have left (indicating “five minutes to go” and “stop please”). When additional discussion takes place at the end of a session it is important that the chair ensures that each speaker has the chance to respond to questions and not only the last speaker. It is also important to remember that papers which have more than one speaker aren’t allocated time per speaker, but time per paper.
- It may be useful to think of some questions to ask about the papers if the discussion is slow to get started. Questions like ‘what findings surprised you?’ and ‘what could be some future directions from this work?’ are sufficiently flexible across papers and also sufficiently discrete for speakers who prefer more structure.
- Act as the moderator of panel or floor discussions. When taking questions, ensure that the widest participation is achieved. Encourage people asking questions to say who they are. Please try to avoid using names of people you know during questions/discussion time. This can seem excluding to those who do not know the speakers or other members of the audience.
- For accessibility reasons, please encourage those asking questions to ask them clearly and one at a time.

AT THE END OF THE SESSION

- Thank the speakers and audience. Adjourn the session in sufficient time to allow the room to be cleared for the participants of the next session to arrive in time for the next session.

IN THE CASE OF AN EMERGENCY, PLEASE MAKE SURE THAT YOU KNOW WHERE THE FIRE EXITS ARE IN THE SESSION ROOM

We greatly appreciate the contribution of chairs to the smooth running of the conference and we hope you enjoy the conference!

BSA Anti-Harassment Policy

The British Sociological Association believes that every person should be treated with dignity and respect. Activities held under the BSA umbrella should be welcoming, supportive and respectful. As a community of sociologists, the BSA aims to maintain a high standard of mutual respect with all those who come into contact with the organisation, its members and staff.

The aim of this code of conduct is to encourage harmony and respect amongst individuals so as to promote good working practices with a view to all having the best experience possible at a BSA meeting / event.

1) Positive behaviours to embrace:

- Collegiate, welcoming, inclusive
- All allowed a voice
- Productive discussion
- Efficient – Chair or Convenor moves meetings on politely
- Positive energy
- Respect
- Leave status and credentials at the door thus no perceived hierarchy
- All members have an equal opportunity to speak
- Only one conversation at a time during meetings
- Follow BSA procedures and terms of reference
- Responsibility and accountability needs to be clearly articulated
- Keep meetings enjoyable
- Invite counter views/opposing views explicitly
- Listening
- Conscientiousness regarding language to avoid inadvertently framing a conversation or importing power structures

2) Negative behaviours to avoid

- Marginalisation on the basis of status
- Perceived power of individuals
- Not engaging or engaging but in a disruptive manner
- Overly strong/lengthy/loud interventions in meetings
- Approval or disagreement noises
- Inclusion/exclusion behaviours

Outline Programme

Monday 14th July 2024

10:00 Registration Opens

11:00 PGR and ECR drop-in/welcome

11:45 Formal Welcome

12:00 Parallel Session A

13:30 Lunch

14:30 Keynote – Monique Moultrie (Hybrid)

16:00 Refreshments

16:30 Parallel Session B

18:30 Dinner – for those attending the Cathedral Tour, please make your way promptly for dinner as we will aim to serve you first

20:00 Cathedral Tour (pre-booking essential)

Tuesday 15th July 2024

From 08:30 Day Registration

09:00 PGR and ECR Breakfast

09:30 ECR and PGR Workshop – Dr Jennifer Riley, Dr Rob Barward-Symmons & Dr Renasha Khan – Public Engagement with Research

11:00 Refreshments

11:30 Parallel Session C

13:00 Lunch

13:45 SocRel Annual General Meeting

15:00 Parallel Session D

16:30 Refreshments

17:00 Plenary – SocRel History: In Conversation

19:30 for 20:00 – Conference Dinner, Radisson Blu Hotel, Durham

Wednesday 16th July 2024

From 08:30 Day Registration

09:30 Parallel Session E

11:30 Break

11:45 Roundtable - Religion, Disability and Neurodivergence – Reflecting on the SocRel Response Day 2025

12:45 Lunch

13:30 Keynote Plenary – Linda Woodhead and Gordon Lynch

15:00 Parallel Sessions F

16:45 Final Remarks & Conference Close

ECR and PGR Workshop

Day 2 – Tuesday 15th July 2024, 09.30 – 11.00

Room W215

This interactive training session is designed for postgraduate and early career researchers (PGRs/ECRs) looking to strengthen their public speaking, communication, and engagement skills. Through a combination of expert talks and hands-on activities, participants will explore how to effectively pitch research across diverse contexts—from academic conferences to media and public engagement.

Speakers Jennie Riley, Renasha Khan, and Rob Barward-Symmons will each deliver presentations that draw on their diverse portfolios of experience in making research accessible, communicating with non-specialist audiences, and leveraging media and policy platforms. Each talk is paired with a ‘Pitch a Project’ task, encouraging attendees to adapt their research for different audiences – whether journalists or wedding guests.

Facilitated by Lucy Potter, the session will include individual and group activity, Q&A, and space for reflection and feedback. By the end of the workshop, participants will have developed practical tools for distilling complex research into engaging, accessible formats—essential skills for today’s public-facing academic landscape.

About Jennie Riley

Jennie Riley is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in Divinity at the University of Aberdeen, the postdoctoral representative for the Association for the Study of Death and Society, and SocRel events officer. She won a 2025 Excellence Award for her public engagement work, including her TEDxAberdeen talk ‘Grave Matters: Death and Identity.’ Her research takes an interdisciplinary approach to exploring death and dying, religion and ritual, particularly in the context of contemporary Britain. Her current project, ‘Baggage for the Beyond,’ explores ‘grave goods’ practices in the UK, in light of the presence, absence and complexity of 21st century afterlife beliefs.

About Renasha Khan

Renasha Khan is Lecturer in Religion and Social Sciences at King’s College London and a director at Forward Culture. Her forthcoming monograph about Muslim Joy explores how British Bangladeshi women in East London use digital culture, faith, and everyday creativity to express agency and belonging. She is also co-editor of Muslim Who?, a forthcoming collection on global Muslim identity that brings together voices from across disciplines and communities. Before entering academia, Renasha had a successful career in television,

directing and producing documentaries for the BBC, Channel 4, Sky Arts, National Geographic, and The Guardian. Her background in documentary filmmaking continues to shape her scholarship, particularly in how she approaches storytelling, ethics, and public engagement.

About Rob Barward-Symmons

Rob Barward-Symmons is Head of Research at Theos Think Tank, Senior Research and Impact Manager at Bible Society, and Co-Director of the Centre for the Study of Modern Christianity at St John's College, Durham. His recent co-authored report *The Quiet Revival* has received global press attention, including from The Guardian, The Economist, The Times, The New York Times, Dazed, and Newsweek. He has also featured on multiple podcasts (in the UK, US, and Australia) discussing this research. He is currently completing his first monograph, *Becoming Evangelical*, based on his PhD research.

About Lucy Potter

Lucy Potter is a researcher specialising in migration, non-religion, and asylum. Her recently completed PhD at the University of Sheffield explored the experiences of ex-Muslim refugees in the UK and the role of belief in asylum claims, in partnership with a third-sector organisation. Her work examines the intersection of non-religious identities and the causes of forced migration. She is currently the PGR/ECR Liaison Officer for SocRel.

SocRel Annual General Meeting (AGM)

Day 2 – Tuesday 15th July 2024, 13.45 – 15.00

Room W103

Join us for the AGM to receive an overview of the past year's achievements, financial performance, and strategic direction for the coming year. This session provides an important opportunity for members to engage with leadership, participate in governance decisions, and contribute to the future direction of the organisation. All are welcome, but voting rights are only for SocRel Study Group Members.

Keynote Speakers

Religion, Reproductive Justice, and Ensuring Black Women's Reproductive Futures

Monique Moultrie, PhD

Georgia State University

Monday 14th July 2025, 14:30 (hybrid)

Room W103 (Lecture Theatre)



This talk explores religion, reproductive justice, reproductive futurity, and Black women's negotiations of pronatalist policies in the United States. I will use autoethnography, qualitative interview data, queer theorists, and womanist/feminist ethicists to interrogate religious responses to anti-abortion legislation enacted since the repeal of Roe.

About Monique Moultrie

Dr. Monique Moultrie is a Professor of Religious Studies, Africana Studies, and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Georgia State University. Her scholarly interests include sexual ethics, African American religions, and gender and sexuality studies. Her published books include *Passionate and Pious: Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality* and *Hidden Histories: Faith and Black Lesbian Leadership*. She is the co-principal investigator for "[The Garden Initiative for Black Women's Religious Activism](#)."

Professor of Religious Studies, Africana Studies, and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Georgia State University

Pronouns: she/her/hers

Past, Present and Futures of the Sociology of Religion: Methods and Substance

Wednesday 16th July 2025, 13:30

Room W103 (Lecture Theatre)



Gordon Lynch, PhD

University of Edinburgh



**Linda Woodhead, FBA FRSE
FAcSS**

King's College London

In this keynote session, Professors Linda Woodhead and Gordon Lynch present a series of reflections about the past, present and futures of research in the sociology of religion. They explore how the field has productively broadened from debates about theories of secularization to explore more complex relationships between religion and social structures such as gender, class and ethnicity, as well as evolving forms of religious and non-religious movements and lives. Drawing on experiences of their own recently completed work, they will explore what has been learned about the complexities of doing research in the sociology of religion, as well as the implications of thinking about issues of power and abuse in religious contexts. In looking to the future, they will explore future challenges for the field including the new wave of religious populism, the relationship between the sociology of religion and the study of values, and changes in methodology.

Whilst summarising insights from their work over more than two decades in the field, the session is intended to stimulate wider discussion within the group, with the initial talk

intended to stimulate a wider conversation about achievements, gaps and future challenges in the field amongst the session's participants.

About Gordon Lynch

Gordon Lynch joined the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh in September 2024, having previously worked at the University of Kent where he held the Michael Ramsey Chair in Modern Theology. Over his career he has won numerous fellowships, grants and funded studentships for projects exploring forms of meaning and value in contemporary societies, with a particular interest in the social uses and consequences of sacred moral commitments. Over the past ten years, he has also undertaken a range of work on historic institutional abuse, with his work on UK child migration schemes including a national museum exhibition and substantial expert witness work for both the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse and the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry.

He has a range of leadership experience with subject groups and networks and served as the national sub-panel Chair for Theology and Religious Studies in REF2021. He has been active in developing national training for doctoral students in the study of contemporary religion and previously served as the Director of the Graduate and Researcher College at Kent. He has extensive experience of partnership work with organisations and professionals including in the museum sector, think-tanks and third sector organisations, digital education and the creative arts.

About Linda Woodhead

Linda Woodhead was appointed F.D. Maurice Professor at King's College in 2022, where she is also Head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies. Previously she was Distinguished Professor at Lancaster University. She studied Theology and Religious Studies at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and first taught at Ripon College Cuddesdon, Oxford. She grew up in rural Somerset and now lives in both London and Glasgow.

Linda works with journalists covering religion, culture and values, and regularly broadcast on these topics. She founded the Westminster Faith Debates with the Rt Hon Charles Clarke.

Linda continues to work collaboratively on improving how religion is handled in schools and public life.

Abstract Book

Day 1 – Monday 14th July 2025

Parallel Session A, 12.00 – 13.30

Room W007 - Workshop

Publishing Your Thesis: 3 Easy Steps

Abby Day

Good enough to be a book? Why not?! As academics, we know the value of books. We even, I argue, fetishise them. That's probably why so many doctoral candidates look forward to finishing their thesis and getting it published. And, that's where they go wrong. In this presentation, I discuss why and how not to publish your thesis. Focusing on three main pitfalls, this session will be interactive and practical, drawing on 50 years of experience in publishing and academe and my recent book: *How to Get Published and Win Research Funding*. 3rd edition. London: Routledge. 2023.

Room W103 – Islam and the Life Course

Chair: Adam Possamai

Becoming the Subject of Hope within Collectivities: The Experiences of “Religious Youth” in Türkiye

Nesibe Demir

Youth as a socio-political category has existed in Türkiye since the late Ottoman period as a myth in the discursive field to compensate for the past or to construct the future. In the early period, they were imagined as the guardians of the state, sometimes they were seen as a threat and tried to be pacified, and they were re-imagined under the changing politics of governments. In this sense, in Turkish Islamism, which emerged as a reaction to the interventions against the presence of religion in the public sphere after the establishment of the Republic, youth has been constantly interpellated as an object of hope in Islamic circles to imagine a "good" future. This auto-ethnographic study, based on two years of field research on religious youth in Istanbul, reveals how this discourse and construction of hope is embodied in the subjectivities of youth as subjects of hope. By transforming and displacing the discursive field, “religious youth” reconstruct within various collectivities a sense

of responsibility that places more emphasis on the moral aspects of religiosity, and thus struggle for their roadmap towards solving the problems of Muslims and their problems as youth.

“Yet Again, Mistaken but Righteous?” How Religious Nones Emerge amid State-Sanctioned Islamism’s Shift from Divine to Humane Politics

Metin Koca

The rapidly growing body of sociological work on non-religion, focusing largely on (post)Christian Western cultural contexts, suggests that non-religious identities develop partly in response to a hegemonic ideology, such as the Radical Right (Braunstein 2022) or conservative institutional Christianity (Woodhead 2016). Yet little is known about non-religious identities and experiences in Muslim-majority contexts where local cultures maintain an idiosyncratic relationship with faith. Focusing on Turkey, this study revisits the long-standing question of how non-religion emerges as a social and political category in Muslim-majority contexts—not by re-emphasizing the secularism(s) already interwoven into the public culture, but by investigating a relatively new process of religious disaffiliation, the foundations of which are paradoxically laid by state-sponsored religious socialization. In doing so, the paper explores representations of the shift from divine politics—defined by moral absolutism, divine rulership, and fatalism—to humane politics, which is characterized by (1) the dominion of a worldly sovereign who acknowledges fallibility yet demands the impunity of divine authority, (2) a politically constructed elite whose authority, while appearing unchallengeable, faces ongoing challenges within religious thought, and concomitantly, (3) perceived inaccessibility of the divine. By analyzing young religious nones’ social media narratives that expose this tension, the paper examines the emergence of new, alternative political identities in contemporary Turkey. Contrary to received wisdom among Islamist movements, which advocate a top-down seizure of state power, this wave of non-religion does not emerge as a byproduct of secularism but rather as a paradox generated by state-sanctioned Islamism entangled with the secular.

Room W414 – Analytical Lenses

Chair: Eileen Barker

Congregational Studies: what can be learned by a renewed engagement with the Sociology of Religion

Helen Cameron

In the first years of the 21st Century, foundations were laid for the study of the local church in the UK, mostly at the intersections of the sociology of religion and practical theology. Particularly significant were the 2004 collection edited by Mathew Guest, Linda Woodhead and Karin Tusting,

Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context and the 2005 publication of the Kendal Project by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*.

Twenty years on I have undertaken a review of the UK literature in the intervening period to evaluate what was built on those foundations. I conclude that what has been built resembles a cairn of found objects carefully placed by lone researchers who are largely motivated by understanding and developing their practice. Through a thematic analysis I question why congregations have not been a lens through which to answer extrinsic questions about broader changes to social phenomena and institutions. In particular, I highlight:

- The congregation as a lens to understanding both decline and change in religious observance and social participation.
- Understanding race and immigration through the formation of diasporic and inter-cultural congregations.
- The relationship between the growing social action of congregations and the pressures on the welfare state.

As the Sociology of Religion Study Group takes stock and looks forward, my aim is to identify whether further engagement between Congregational Studies and the Sociology of Religion could encourage the asking of these broader questions.

More than Flirting with Media in the Sociology of Religion

Michael Munnik

As SocRel marks 50 years of academic support and research, I want to look at how the concept of media (or “the” media) has been treated by those presenting at annual conferences of the study group. I self-designate as a sociologist of media and religion, and I bring that interdisciplinary lens to the abstracts presented over the last 10 years, helpfully archived online. The combination of media, religion, and culture or society has grown as its own academic subdiscipline since the early 1990s, and it is unsurprising to see its growing and changing presence at a conference aimed at the sociology of religion. I do not declare a “turn” to media, but I note the term’s prevalence, which has been fairly consistent but has also ebbed since the pandemic and lockdown. I also consider its use – the extent to which presenters distinguish “social media” or “mass media”, what use is implied by the term, and whether it is a passing reference – perhaps as a foil for building an argument – or the central focus of the paper. From this, we can begin to see where the concept of media sits within the discipline of sociology and the topical interest in religion.

Dividual and not Individual Personhood to drive sociology of religion

Douglas Davies

The sociology of religion, rather like philosophy, has focused on 'the individual' as the theoretical 'unit' of agency and group membership for far too long. I propose a redirection in adopting the notion of dividual or complex personhood as its interpretative replacement. Beginning with Durkheim's 'double' nature of people, Anton Zijderveld's *Homo duplex*, along with McKim Marriott, Marilyn Strathern, and increasing numbers of social scientists of complex humanity, I argue that dividuality brings nuance to social class, religious group membership, theology of identity, and especially to a new theory of grief.

Room W010 – Author Meets Critic

Chair: Sharon Jagger

The Culture of Care in Britain since the Second World War: a critical conversation between the author Bernice Martin, and Grace Davie and Mathew Guest

This is a discussion dedicated to Bernice Martin's newly published volume *The Culture of Care in Britain since the Second World War* (Bristol University Press, 2025), including the author alongside two established sociologists of religion in Britain: Grace Davie and Mathew Guest.

This book was written during the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic which had begun soon after the author's husband, David Martin's, death. It became a way of addressing unfinished business in her own intellectual life, notably the high priority she had given to care, both explicitly and implicitly, which she traces back to her class as well as gender formation. The book's focus is on the underlying culture of care for others in British society since the Second World War, using autobiographical recollection and cultural sociology. Martin re-examines the dominant intellectual 'discourses' which she had to reckon with during her academic life, notably secularisation, feminism, class and the economics of capitalism. The book examines the relation between secularisation and the 'sexual revolution', in particular through a critique of Callum Brown's argument about the defeat of 'the feminisation of piety' in the sexual revolution of the nineteen sixties and seventies, a movement Martin links to care for others, which still largely remains a female 'duty' in spite of serious changes in many cultural fields. Placing the evolving place of 'care' in relationship with emerging transformations of the social order, Martin's book explores one of the most under-researched aspects of British culture and its relationship with religious identities.

Parallel Session B, 16.30-18.30

Room W007 - Methodological Case Studies

Chair: Daniel Nilsson DeHanas

Measuring Religiosity in Times of Pluralisation: An Attempt at Trans-Religious Abstraction Using a Multidimensional Scale of Transcendence

Ruben Below

Research on religion famously faces significant challenges in defining and measuring its core concept due to cultural differences, entrenched Eurocentrism, and the evolving religious field characterised by individualisation and pluralisation. Building on Kalton (2000), this study proposes a theoretical and empirical differentiation between 'vertical' and 'horizontal' transcendence, primarily distinguishing between belief in higher supernatural beings and in the holistic interconnectedness of all life, to address these challenges. Following a multidimensional approach to measure different facets of religiosity, a symmetrical scale of transcendence is introduced to systematically compare both axes using original survey data from Germany.

Using these data, the proposed scale is subjected to rigorous statistical validation. Confirmatory factor analysis is used to confirm the scale's two-dimensionality, while various linear and nonlinear regression techniques, supplemented by additional variables measuring supernatural explanations of reality, religious individualism, and support for religious authorities, are used to assess its convergent and divergent construct validity.

This new framework not only offers general advantages over existing quantitative scales, which still tend to overemphasise theistic conceptions of religion, but also addresses salient debates. Horizontally transcendent faith better aligns with Western trends towards de-institutionalisation and pluralisation, while simultaneously offering new possibilities for comparison with non-Abrahamic traditions. Moreover, prevalent research often narrowly associates horizontally transcendent faith with esotericism or 'New Age', thus hindering accurate understanding and cross-cultural comparison. Finally, the distinction offers new insights into secularisation discourse by illuminating the decline of ecclesiastical-theistic religiosity in the West without presupposing the disappearance of supernaturalist worldviews altogether.

Biblical language in gender dynamics: a socio-cognitive discourse analysis of Genesis 2:18-23 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15

Chisom Ogamba

This study employs Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to critically examine selected biblical Narratives (Genesis 2:18-23 and 1 Timothy 2:8-13) to explore how language and discourse contribute to gender imbalance and directly reinforce rape culture. While religious narratives have been extensively studied, there is still a significant gap in examining how specific linguistic choices in these texts perpetuate patriarchal ideologies that influence contemporary gender norms. Using van Dijk's framework, this research investigates the socio-cognitive dimensions of biblical language, analyzing how mental models shaped by religious discourse normalize male dominance and female oppression.

The methodology involved a qualitative analysis of the purposively selected texts, focusing on key linguistic features such as lexical choices, metaphorization, and thematic structures. Findings indicate that traditional interpretations of these passages frame women in roles of submission and dependency, which intersect with societal attitudes that justify gender discrimination and contribute to rape culture. The analysis reveals that the consistent depiction of women as subservient has helped sustain patriarchal power structures over time, eliminating female autonomy and participation in leadership roles.

The study concludes by emphasizing the need for reinterpretation of these texts through a linguistic, feminist and egalitarian lens to promote gender equality. It recommends educational initiatives to challenge traditional narratives, policy advocacy against gender-based violence, and further research into religious discourse's impact on gender roles. This research contributes to ongoing discussions on gender justice by offering insights into how critical reinterpretations of religious texts can help dismantle harmful societal norms.

Examining the methodological and ethical challenges when researching shunning practices within the Jehovah's Witnesses as an ex-JW.

Lindy Lovett

The experience of leaving a high-control religious group, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, is one marked by profound emotional, social, and spiritual upheaval. Central to this disruption is the practice of shunning, wherein ex-members—whether they leave voluntarily or are disfellowshipped—are systematically ostracised by their former community. For the individual, the process of exiting involves not only the practical challenges of losing a support system but also the existential task of reconstructing an identity outside the group's structure.

For an academic researcher with firsthand experience of shunning, analysing this practice is fraught with unique challenges. The dual role of scholar and former member necessitates carefully balancing personal insight and academic rigour. While personal experience can provide unparalleled depth of

understanding, it also risks introducing bias, particularly when addressing a subject as emotionally charged as shunning. Thus, this paper seeks to navigate the intersection of lived experience and objective analysis, acknowledging the immense value of personal narrative in enriching our understanding of the subject while adhering to the principles of scholarly impartiality. By integrating these diverse perspectives, the aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of shunning, thereby contributing to broader discussions about the ethics of religious practices, individual autonomy, and community dynamics.

As a former member and researcher, this presents my work with unique methodological and ethical challenges. This paper explores the complex challenges surrounding research methods and ethical dilemmas when exploring a community with first-hand experience.

From Numbers to Narratives: Methodological transformations in the Sociology of Non-religion

Saroop C L

The sociology of non-religion has undergone significant methodological transformations over the past few decades, moving beyond the quantitative approach and the traditional secularisation thesis toward a more nuanced understanding of nonreligious identity and practice. Early research was dominated by quantitative methods, primarily large-scale surveys and demographic analyses, which framed non-religion as a passive outcome of religious decline. However, these approaches often reduced nonreligious individuals to a residual category, failing to capture their lived experiences and identity construction. In response, contemporary scholars have increasingly employed qualitative and interpretive methodologies, such as symbolic interactionism, ethnography, and narrative analysis, to explore how individuals actively construct and negotiate their nonreligious identities. This methodological shift reflects broader trends in sociology, including the recognition of intersectionality and the rejection of universalist models of religious decline. Studies now examine how factors such as gender, race, caste, class, and cultural context shape nonreligious experiences, particularly in non-Western settings. The rise of digital ethnography and computational text analysis has also provided new avenues for studying online secular communities and digital discourse on non-religion. By tracing these methodological changes, this paper highlights the evolution of the field from a passive, quantitative approach to an active, qualitative, and intersectional framework. It argues that future research must continue to embrace context-specific, interdisciplinary, and digital methodologies to fully capture the complexity of nonreligious identity and meaning-making in diverse socio-cultural settings.

Room W103 – Nature, Ecology and Climate Change

Women & the Ecological Crisis: An Exploration of Opposing Ideals in Salafi Islam

Chair: Krysia Waldock

Saxony Anders

This paper considers whether there are avenues to easing the ongoing transition from orthodox Salafi Islam to an environment of greater inclusivity between genders and whether these solutions lie in finding a common ground between Salafism and diversification.

Salafism is an orthodox branch of Islam which follows their original interpretation of Islam, as led by the Prophet Muhammad and the successive three generations of Islam. The Salafi understanding of women and gender roles is orthodox, whilst they are theoretically more aligned to arguments in favour of protection of the natural environment.

Utilising existing literature and early-stage interview analysis, this paper explores how these opposing ideals of Salafism can be understood in the contemporary era of religious and economic change in Saudi Arabia. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with community and local organisation leadership and analysed using thematic and narrative analysis. Early findings suggest a paradoxical relationship between Salafi belief, gender and environmental degradation. Crucially, this paper seeks to clearly lay out the key relationship of religion and gender in Saudi that does and will continue to affect the success of the Saudi government's Vision 2030 agenda; a success which is necessary for global efforts in combating the ecological crisis.

Wortcunning and the Weight of Knowing: Plant Ontologies and Everyday Injustice

Clare Hughes

Herbal medicine and plant magic were once deeply intertwined in Britain, with evidence of magical plants, objects, and lifestyles found in sources ranging from Anglo-Saxon burials to medieval texts. Central to these traditions was the figure of the wortcunner, a practitioner whose medicinal and magical work was gradually marginalised under pressure from the expanding Christian Church and the rise of a male-dominated scientific medical establishment. In recent decades, Western Herbal Medicine in Britain has experienced a resurgence in popularity, particularly among women. However, the extent to which plants continue to be engaged with for magical or spiritual purposes remains under-explored in academic literature. Also overlooked are the sociocultural effects of such beliefs on the lived experiences of contemporary plant practitioners.

This paper presents preliminary findings from semi-structured interviews with contemporary wortcunners living in Britain who engage with plants for medicinal, magical, and spiritual purposes. Participants shared rich and nuanced narratives that reflect embodied, relational engagements with plants and the wider other-than-human world. Alongside these affirmations of practice, they also

described instances where their knowledge and experiences were dismissed within dominant epistemological frameworks. Elements of symbolic violence emerged in the form of micro-aggressions, spiritual belittling, and the invalidation of their expertise in both formal and informal settings.

Drawing on the concept of epistemic injustice, this paper explores how the marginalised ontologies held by these wortcunners are subtly yet persistently devalued, not only through overt ridicule, but through silencing, misrepresentation, and condescending dismissal. Several participants expressed a need to conceal aspects of their practice or to moderate their language in order to be heard. I argue that these voices deserve to be heard, held, and respected, not marginalised, as part of a richer, more inclusive way of living in relationship with the rest of the world.

Nature and Women's Circles: A personal and critically reflexive exploration

Madeleine Castro

Nature, it is said, is good for us. Scientific research claims that time in nature increases health and wellbeing in various ways including social connection (e.g. White et al, 2019; Henderson et al, 2024). Other research in the social sciences records how sublime, sometimes life-changing, 'transcendent' experiences appear to be triggered by natural environments (e.g. Williams & Harvey, 2001; Castro, 2010; Taylor, 2010). Research in the sociology of religion and transpersonal psychology chronicle 'sacred' nature via Indigenous, wisdom and faith traditions across the globe and via (neo)paganism or druidism (e.g. Adams, 2023; Williams, 2020). Ecofeminism has emphasised the interrelationship between patriarchy and the degradation of nature (as well as via racism, classism and misogyny) and thus encourages our reconnection with and cultivation of deep respect for the natural world (Plumwood, 1993). Rather distinctly, there is a burgeoning body of research which suggests that women's circles can have beneficial effects (e.g. Longman, 2018; Castro, 2020), albeit with caveats. This paper centres personal and critically reflexive observations about a closed Women's Circle which takes place around a monthly campfire in the woods that I have regularly attended for about 7 years. I consider the impact and implications of this 'psycho-spiritual' space and what it might be 'doing' in personal and cultural domains (Santamaría-Dávila et al, 2019). This includes observations about a deepening nature connection and acute awareness of the seasons. Simultaneously, I grapple with how to navigate ever-present tensions regarding wellbeing, personal transformation, social justice and issues of privilege and power.

Autonomous Moral Re-Engagement with Religion: An Ethical and Sustainable Twist to Reflexive Religiosity in Contemporary Society

Ellie Atayee-Bennett

Contemporary society faces numerous challenges, many of which are modern phenomena and thus never before navigated in religious worlds. The climate crisis and associated concerns are explored in this study to analyse how individuals of faith respond to such challenges. Focusing upon the lives of 'faith vegans' (vegans whose religiosity intersects with and underpins their veganism) in the UK, this paper asks, how does religion become a driver of ethical and sustainable behaviour change? And how are individuals of faith engaging with their religions with ethics and sustainability in mind? To answer these questions, this qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews, social media-based diary methods, and virtual participant observation, to explore the understandings and experiences of 36 faith vegans (Muslims, Jews, and Christians), all of whom were over the age of 18 and lived in the UK. This paper finds the widespread adoption of reflexive religiosity, as described by sociologist Ulrich Beck, albeit with a core ethical focus. I therefore develop Beck's concept and talk instead of autonomous moral re-engagement with religion, to describe how my participants felt empowered to engage in dialogue with religious ethics and reinterpret them in line with veganism and other sustainable behaviours. This process was very important for participants as it enabled them to negotiate religious thought and practice and pursue a path that facilitated ethical and sustainable behaviour change, all the while reaffirming their religious identity. Such expressions of reflexive religiosity offer insight into how religion as it is lived is changing in contemporary society, and in response to ethical and environmental concerns.

Room W414 – Female Experience and Feminist Spirituality

Chair: Sara Mchaffie, **Barnali C**

Subverting Patriarchy, Reshaping Devotion: Gendered Contestations in the Bhakti Movement and Contemporary Religious Praxis in India

Dharti Sharma

The Bhakti movement in India was a radical reconfiguration of religious devotion that challenged Brahmanical hegemony, caste stratification, and institutionalized mediation between the divine and the devotee. While it promoted egalitarian spiritual access, its praxis remained deeply entangled in patriarchal structures that dictated who could speak, write, and claim authority within the devotional domain. As Ramaswamy (1992) highlights, women Bhakti saints—Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, Andal, Janabai, and Bahinabai—navigated complex social restrictions, facing ostracization, moral policing, and even violence for rejecting the normative gender roles that tethered them to domesticity, marriage, and socio-religious compliance. Their poetic and performative defiance not only carved

alternative spaces for devotion but also exposed the gendered tensions inherent within Bhakti itself. This paper interrogates the paradox of the Bhakti movement's liberatory promise and its simultaneous reinforcement of gendered hierarchies, demonstrating how women's devotional agency is constrained by the very structures Bhakti sought to dismantle. Building on Chakravarti (1989) and Pande (2010), this paper examines the enduring legacies of these tensions in contemporary India, where patriarchal gatekeeping continues to regulate women's access to religious spaces, theological authority, and ritual participation. From temple entry debates (such as Sabarimala and Shani Shingnapur Temple) to the policing of female asceticism and the exclusion of women from priestly roles, the barriers imposed on women's religious self-expression persist in both explicit and implicit ways. By bringing together historical analysis, feminist religious critiques, and contemporary sociological inquiry, this study situates the struggles of women Bhakti saints within a broader discourse on gendered religious agency.

Reclaiming the Sacred: Goddess Worship Rituals and the Future of Sociology Beyond Postfeminism and Neoliberal Individualism

Sharon Jagger

There is a growing interest in individualised spiritualities that are predominantly pursued by women, such as witchcraft and goddess worship. Attracting critiques of essentialism and labelled as postfeminist, neoliberal, and consumerist around the fetishisation of self-care and wellbeing (for example, McRobbie, 2009), our understanding of goddess-centred spiritualities is in danger of being reductive. Sociology needs to expand the discussion and study of the complexities of such individualised spirituality. Some scholars (for example, Zwissler, 2018) argue that sociology should take a deeper theoretical interest in spiritualities that include, or are blurred across the boundaries, of magic and the individualised esoteric. Further, some scholars (such as Castro, 2020) are resisting and challenging the postfeminist labelling of women's communal and individualised spirituality that has developed beyond the New Age into further atomised and diverse forms of goddess worship.

My research with women who identify with the broad term of goddess spirituality reveals a more complex picture of community and *communitas* (Turner, 1969), and a symbiotic relationship between the individual and society. In this paper, I challenge the assumptions that goddess-centred beliefs and practices are postfeminist and neoliberal and present instead an argument that the connection to the communal comes out of the development of the self. I also argue that essentialist views of femininity are being replaced with more post-gender ideas that can be aligned to feminist positions.

Femininity and Faith: Black Feminist, Womanist, and Postcolonial Perspectives on African Pentecostalism in the UK

Mabel Alkali

This paper examines the construction of femininity within African Pentecostal churches in the UK, focusing on the intersections of race, gender, and diaspora through the lenses of Black feminist thought, womanist critiques, and postcolonial African women's voices. African Pentecostal teachings on holiness and submission often draw on biblical interpretations intertwined with cultural norms, creating gender ideals that both empower and constrain women within these faith communities.

Drawing on womanist theology, particularly the works of Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Emilie M. Townes, this paper critiques patriarchal constructions of femininity and highlights the resilience and agency of African women navigating these spaces. Additionally, insights from Black feminist thought, including Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality, and postcolonial perspectives shed light on the unique experiences of African Pentecostal women as they negotiate identity, faith, and cultural heritage in the diaspora.

Through an interdisciplinary analysis that incorporates ethnographic findings and theological critique, this paper explores how these voices challenge dominant patriarchal narratives within African Pentecostalism and reshape gender roles in contemporary faith communities. These insights contribute to broader conversations on gender, power, and religious authority in diasporic African Christianity.

These Women Turn the World Upside Down

Elsa Pereira

In my doctoral research, I conducted 51 interviews with leaders of free evangelical churches in five European countries: Portugal, Germany, Sweden, Italy, and Bulgaria.

Out of these 51 interviews, 11 are with women and four do not work in their country of birth. What countries are they from? Where and in what capacities do they work? What are their biographical, migratory, professional, and social trajectories? What sociological factors can we identify in how they navigate their gender roles? What foundations of female empowerment have they found? What power struggles do they face in the religious field? How do they use their status and titles in the extra-religious sphere?

In seeking to address all these questions, I will explore two innovative conceptual proposals:

The first is the Three-Dimensional Model of the Religious Phenomenon, which explains the interrelationship between the field of faith and society at large, focusing on religious practices that are culturally adapted.

The second is the presentation of evangelical communities as spaces of alternative sociability, functioning as faith-based solidarity networks that both embrace and strengthen personal identity while fostering the co-construction of religious practices as a shared project and purpose. These spaces of faith, characterized by greater informality than institutionalization, enable the sharing of social capital, both bonding and bridging (Putnam, 2006), thereby strengthening interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging. This dynamic has consequences not only for the realm of spirituality but also for the daily lives of believers.

Room W010 – Lived Religion, Lived Spirituality

Chair: Sonya Sharma

Studying Spiritually Transformative Experiences: Expanding the Sociology of Lived Spirituality

Ruth-Helen Vassilas

A quiet spiritual evolution may be underway in secular western societies, where a growing number of people find faith not through institutions or doctrine, but through direct, non-denominational experience. Spiritually transformative experiences (STEs)—such as mystical psychedelic, out-of-body or near-death experiences—are altered states of consciousness that disrupt individuals' conventional understandings of self and reality. While psychology has documented the broad transformative effects of STEs, there is a lack of sociological research investigating the subsequent lived experience. Because STEs lack the rules, roadmaps and community guidance of institutional religion, as well as scientific recognition and validation, experiencers are often left to chart their own course. This raises a critical question: how do people integrate STEs into their personal, social and spiritual lives?

This paper addresses a long-standing blind spot in the sociology of religion, which has historically privileged institutional belief and practice over personal spiritual experiences and encounters. Drawing on 48 questionnaire responses and 25 in-depth interviews with experiencers predominantly in the US and UK, this study explores how individuals make sense of and navigate their post-STE reality. Findings reveal that experiencers recalibrate their understanding and management of their bodies; construct new criteria for relating to friends, family, and peers; and cultivate spiritual identities that reflect both personal experience and broader cultural currents. By foregrounding these non-denominational conversions, this paper reveals new intersections between religion, science, society and self in contemporary spirituality and how STE interpretations are both a product of, and contributor to, contemporary spiritual landscapes.

Finding something in nothing: Exploring how absence is present, meaningful and inspiring in the everyday lives of sexually abstinent religious students.

Michael Keenan, Carrie Paechter

This paper will present initial findings from the BA small grant (Wellcome) funded 'Finding something in nothing' project which explores the everyday experiences of sexually abstinent religious students at English universities. The project is an eighteen-month project which explores sexually abstinent students' experiences via a combination of survey, interview and diary methods. This paper will explore emergent themes from survey data around religious students' reflections on the meaning of abstinence and the experience of 'being abstinent' or 'staying abstinent' at university. While recent years have seen increased interest in the interconnection of religious and sexual lives, recognising diversity of practice, belief, and the meaning of such practice for individuals, abstinence has been less present, despite still being a lived experience for many religious people.

In discussing the survey data, we will reflect on how practices, decisions and reflections make sexual abstinence an everyday presence, particularly within the context of university communities. With reference to Susie Scott's 'Sociology of nothing' and Meredith McGuire's 'Lived Religion' we will reflect on how presences often discussed as absences, such as abstaining, avoiding and nonparticipation actually make the absence of sex a meaningful and impactful presence in the everyday lives of religious sexually abstinent students.

Intersectionality in sociological research on religion: genealogies, usages and opportunities

Line Nyhagen

This paper aims to develop the agenda for intersectional research in the sociology of religion. It starts out by demonstrating how scholarly literature on intersectionality produces and reproduces histories and genealogies about the origins of intersectionality, which in turn are contested. While US-based contributions from the 1990s are often cited as foundational within origin stories, it is necessary to take both a longer perspective and use a broader geographical lens on intersectional analysis. This also applies to intersectional research within the sociology of religion, as argued in this paper. Starting with a discussion of the concept of intersectionality (where it comes from, what it is about and how it applies to studies of religion), the paper moves on to show how intersectional perspectives have been and can be used in the sociology of religion. In particular, the paper suggests that linkages between the concepts of 'embodied intersectionality' (Mirza 2013), 'religion as embodied practice' (McGuire 2008) and 'lived religion' (Neitz 2011) provide useful perspectives for the sociology of religion. Finally, the paper underlines the importance of an intersectional lens in self-reflexive methodological practice. Careful attention to specific historical, geographical, and socio-political context is a necessary element of intersectional analysis and self-reflexivity.

Achieving Social Impact through Sociology of Religion: Insights from the Bible and the Chinese Community in Britain Project

Yinxuan Huang

This paper will demonstrate how empirical research in the sociology of religion, when attuned to real-world issues, can generate profound social impact. The Bible and the Chinese Community in Britain (BCCB) project exemplifies this potential through its exploration of faith, migration, and social integration within one of the UK's fastest-growing Christian communities. Conducted during a transformative period marked by COVID-19 and the influx of Hong Kong migrants, the research aims to shed light on a religious community's critical historical juncture through a sociological perspective. Accessing a minority is inherently challenging for outsiders, yet the sociological approach has both empirically and narratively facilitated trust-building, equipping this study with the tools to break through barriers and critically explore the community's inner dynamics. A distinctive feature of the BCCB project lies in its ability to resonate widely, engaging both the public and media. By employing diverse methods—including quantitative, qualitative, and artistic approaches—and weaving them into a cohesive storytelling framework, the project successfully brings together various audiences and stakeholders in the field.

This approach not only garners extensive attention from mainstream media but also makes complex sociological findings vivid and accessible, thereby enhancing its social impact. For example, the project has yielded several 'unexpected' outcomes, such as its documentation of school bullying and anti-Asian hate, which has influenced UK anti-racism initiatives. Furthermore, BCCB's dissemination in East Asian communities has sparked significant interest among youth, inspiring many to pursue sociology to better understand their identity and societal role.

Room W215 – Queer, Minority and Marginal Experiences

Chair: Renasha Khan

Conversion and cosmological shift(s): Narratives of sorcerers and contestations around religious identities in an indigenous community

Ananya Pattnaik

In a pre-dominantly Kondh village in Odisha, due to conversion projects, people have been fashioning themselves as either Hindus or Christians. Conversion to either religion has meant that people not only have to adopt an alternative set of religious precepts and

practices but are in the process of dis-embedding themselves from a pre-existing cosmological universe, comprising of deities, spirits, and other supernatural agents. In this paper, I take the stories of sorcerers-cum-ritual specialists within the community who get embroiled in village controversies, to open up questions about how Kondhs whose lives are deeply embedded in a cosmology that transgresses the visible, material world, respond to the fading supernaturalism associated with their past religion, in the light of their move towards dominant, 'scientific' religious traditions of Hinduism and Christianity. I highlight the stories of two sorcerers, one who was abruptly arrested by the police in the middle of a ritual performance, and the other who was banished by the village for casting arbitrary and dangerous curses on the villagers. I attempt to show that the stories present important features that reflect how Kondhs situate themselves in the recent changes, make sense of their new religious identities and ethics, not just by adhering to its precepts, but by evaluating and responding to complex circumstances in their daily lives. In examining these disputes, I show how wider socio-political discourses around religious conversion campaigns, Hindu nationalism, and religious conflict and violence in India, get weaved into the everyday social worlds inhabited by Kondhs.

Impact Of Hindu Nationalism on Marginalized Communities in India

Neha C

This paper examines the evolving dynamics of Hindu nationalism in India and its implications for social inclusion within a post-independence secular democratic framework. Although India was founded on secular principles aimed at fostering religious and social harmony, recent political trends indicate a shift toward a more pronounced Hindu nationalist ideology.

In this context, the study critically analyses the phenomenon of "Saffronisation"—a process involving the revision of educational content, hate speech in public gatherings, targeted policies, affecting judiciary and social media discourse and resulting with increased communal polarisation which has led to Islamophobia, an increase in cultural violence, and attacks and exclusionary practices affecting minority groups like gender minorities, Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims.

Employing a qualitative research design, the paper analyses secondary data alongside digital content sourced from social media like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The study explores how narratives linked to Hindu nationalism contribute to the rising of Islamophobia, caste-based violence, and other forms of systemic discrimination. This not only allows for an understanding of how political ideologies are communicated and reinforced across different public spheres but also highlights the role of digital media in shaping public perceptions and policy debates.

By analysing how religion plays an important role in India to shape society, the paper contributes to the ongoing scholarly dialogue regarding the interplay between Hindu nationalism and social justice.

The findings aim to inform both policymakers and academics about the challenges posed by these emerging dynamics and to suggest pathways for promoting a more inclusive and equitable democratic society.

Affective Activism: Religion, Race, and Queer Excess in South African coloured performance

Megan Robertson

Cape Town, often framed as Africa's gay capital, remains shaped by colonial and apartheid-era spatial divisions, with a predominantly white queer scene in the city centre. While religious conservatism and the legacies of racialised apartheid often reinforce heteronormativity and whiteness in these spaces, performance has long served as a site of subversion—from the Kaapse Klopse carnival to contemporary art forms. This paper examines how South African coloured artists working in comedy theatre, drag, hip-hop, horror theatre, and dance engage religion, race, and sexuality to challenge dominant gendered and racialised narratives. Specifically, I am interested in how they engage 'colouredness' as a racialised identity, often essentialised in cultural production as either violent gangsters or frivolous jesters. Drawing on José Esteban Muñoz's concept of utopia as queerness "on the horizon" and his theorization of racialised affect, I explore how these performances generate a "feeling brown" that encompasses the melancholic, parodic, and resistant. Through excessive aesthetics, parody, and religious disidentification, artists reimagine the boundaries of gender, sexuality, race, and the sacred, disrupting respectability politics and forging new modes of queer cultural and religious meaning-making. By centring affect and performance art, this paper highlights how South African 'artists' transform the stage into a space for both joy and critique, expanding the possibilities for liveable queer Black lives.

Exit/(Re-)invent: Thinking Ambivalences and Islam(s) otherwise Alongside Queer ex-Muslims in Southeast Asia

Ali Kassem

Through interpretive qualitative research, this paper thinks alongside the experiences of 12 Southeast Asian queer persons who (differentially) identify as 'ex-Muslim'. Examining the affective and cognitive processes these participants traverse as they articulate their discontent with and movement away from hegemonic forms of Islam, the paper analyses the constituents and formations of this. These include, I argue, text-centrism, Arabo-centrism, institutionalization, and legal-centrism. From there, the paper inquires into the role Islam (ceases to) perform in participants' lived experiences across scales of the epistemic and the everyday. The paper identifies a complexity and messiness where a desired haunting of an (alternative, including Indigenous, queer, and animist) Islam(icate) is pursued as participants seek to relationally (rather than individualistically) construct

notions and practices of 'good life'. Conceptualizing this as a 'post-Islamic ethics', I argue for the need to move beyond the Muslim/ex-Muslim as a binary and examine the complex affects that shape and form ambivalent lived experience. Through this, I challenge dominant frameworks in the sociology of religion by centring the experiences of Asian queer ex-Muslims and offering a critique of the field's binary conceptions, including of religion and non-religion as well as practicing and non-practicing. Engaging with debates on queering and decolonizing the discipline, I ultimately posit the need for ambivalence and mess as central analytics for the study of contemporary (queer) Islam, and possible non-secularists liberatory horizons.

Parallel Session C

Tuesday 15th July, 11.30-13.00

Room W007 – Contemporary British Religion & Non-Religion

Chair: Stephen Jones

Spirit Communication and the Disenchanted World

Caroline Starkey, Florence O'Taylor and Anupama M. Ranawana

Amidst a range of alternative spiritual practices in 'post-Christian Britain', there has been a recent renewed interest in nineteenth-century psychic and mediumship traditions, and this has received surprisingly scant attention in scholarship. Addressing this gap through innovative interdisciplinary research on the lived experiences of 'spirit communication', I present my new ethnographic study of the patrons, staff, and volunteers of a Spiritualist church and nearby psychic shop in a working-class town in the North of England. Both the shop (where one can have one-to-one mediumship readings, past life regressions and crystal healing) and the Spiritualist church (that holds services three times a week) have growing levels of local participation, especially amongst working-class women. Whilst Spiritualism is often presented as dying out in Britain following the Second World War, I challenge this assumption using contemporary ethnographic evidence, alongside the unexamined diaries, scrapbooks, and drawings of Julia May Shaw, a medium and spiritual healer operating in nearby Bradford from the end of the First World War until the 1970s. Drawing together interdisciplinary theories about changing religious practices in the contemporary world and the relationship between spiritual life, social class, and place, I argue the case that modern Spiritualism is a response to, and product of, disenchantment, science, and discourses of rationality, persistent through the development of modern Spiritualism, and it is this relationship that is at the heart of its quiet resilience. This paper presents the key arguments of my new monograph, *Spirit Communication and the Disenchanted World*.

The changeable role of religious faith and practice throughout the lifecourse: findings from the frailty and ethnicity study

Victoria Cluley

In this presentation, findings from the Frailty and Ethnicity study will be used to show the changeable role of religious faith and practice throughout the lifecourse. The Frailty and Ethnicity study aims to

explore the experience of ageing into frailty among older people of different ethnicities living in the UK through the discussion of participant generated photographs. Participants were asked to take photographs of anything and everything that shows their personal experience of ageing. Many of the photographs shared show the role and importance of religion in older age. The participant images facilitated in depth discussion of the changing role of faith and practice throughout the lifecourse, whereby, participants associated experiences of faith with a range of intersectional factors such as ethnicity, age, ill health and biographical trajectory. Previous literature highlights the positive role of religion in older age. Religious faith and practice have been shown to provide a source of comfort, support and resilience. Here photographs and participant talk are discussed in relation to sociological concepts of time and intersectionality to show and make sense of participant experiences of faith across the lifecourse.

Exploring British South Asian Faith Community Relations

Serena Hussain

This paper discusses findings from a British Academy funded study exploring South Asian faith community relations in Britain. Focus groups conducted by same faith and gender matched facilitators explored perceptions of inter-group relations with British Sikh, Muslim and Hindu participants. Despite an acknowledgment of strong joint South Asian activism, concerns regarding how divisive domestic policies, as well as imported ideological teachings and right-wing nationalist politics from countries of origin, can detrimentally impact the way communities interact within the British urban space. Furthermore, participants discussed how inflammatory content shared transnationally via social media has contributed towards instigating tensions, which was not the case in previous decades. The study therefore contributes empirically informed discussion to both national and international debates regarding inter-religious engagement.

Room W103 – Author Meets Critic

Future Directions in Gender and Christianity: Reproductive Rights, Complementarianism, Leadership and Religious Identity (Panel)

Sarah-Jane Page, University of Nottingham, Tracy McEwan, University of Newcastle, Australia, Rosie Shorter, University of Melbourne, Sharon Jagger, York St John University

This panel will be showcasing hot-off-the-press books published on gender and Christianity. Four authors with recent monographs (since 2024) will collectively discuss their books, generating a detailed conversation on recent empirical insights and theoretical developments. In the process we will be examining future directions for the sociology of religion on the topic of gender and Christianity.

Since the 1990s the study of religion and gender has increasingly become established on the SocRel conference programme. SocRel dedicated a three-day conference on the topic at Lancaster University in 2005. Increasingly, academic book series are focusing on gendered themes in the study of religion. This panel will be specifically considering outputs on Christianity, with a particular focus on the Anglican and Catholic churches. Topics include abortion and reproductive rights, the symbolic violence experienced by women priests in the Church and England, complementarianism in evangelical approaches, and navigating identities in the context of technologies of Catholicism.

Contributors include Dr Sarah-Jane Page (University of Nottingham) and her co-authored monograph entitled *Abortion and Catholicism in Britain* (Palgrave), Dr Sharon Jagger (York St John University) and her book, *Women Priests, Symbolic Violence and Symbolic Resistance* (Routledge), Dr Tracy McEwan's (University of Newcastle, Australia) monograph on *Women and the Catholic Church: Negotiating Identity and Agency* (Bloomsbury) and Dr Rosie Shorter's (University of Melbourne) book on *Complementarianism, Gender and Evangelism* (Bloomsbury).

Room W414 – Intersectionality and Interfaith

Chair: Ben Pink Dandelion

Gnosis and Exodus from the Iron Cage: Jacob Taubes and Ali Shariati

Saman Mahdevar

This paper examines the reflections of Jacob Taubes (1923-1987) and Ali Shariati (1933-1977) on Max Weber's concept of the "iron cage." Despite common generalisations of Weber's Protestant eschatological framework underlying his diagnosis of disenchantment, Taubes and Shariati sought a way out of the "iron cage" by contrasting Islamic and Jewish gnosis with these assumptions. By juxtaposing Taubes's philosophical Gnosticism with Shariati's revolutionary Shiism, this study shows how their different projects converge in offering an alternative to Weber's pessimism.

In the introduction to *Gnosis and Politics*, Jacob Taubes transforms Weber's rhetorical question—"Who will live in that cage?"—into a Gnostic imperative. For Taubes, the "iron cage" is not merely a sociological phenomenon, but the metaphysical crisis of modernity that demands an exodus. He interprets Weber's concept of *Verhängnis* (doom) as a "gnostic hieroglyph" that can be fully deciphered through the exodus from the iron cage. His project, however, remains suggestive rather than fully developed, serving as an invitation to further exploration of the Gnostic potential for emancipation.

The Iranian scholar Ali Shariati also embraces Weber's critique of modernity, but frames his exodus through the concept of *irfan*. While *irfan* traditionally refers to Islamic mysticism, Shariati reconfigures it into a Gnostic paradigm that combines spiritual awakening with social and political resistance. In his lectures on *Mysticism, Equality, Freedom* (*Irfan, Barabari, Azadi*), Shariati presents a gnostic

vision of irfan that can shatter the iron cage. Thus, Taubes' underdeveloped gnostic critique of modernity could be pursued through the lens of Shariati's irfan.

The future of interfaith activity on campus: Embracing intersectional approaches to religion and worldview-related tensions at the UK university

Lucy Peacock

Across the higher education (HE) sector, there is a growing body of sociological research illustrating the potential for interfaith engagement to tackle religion or belief-related hostility and foster peaceful student relations (Mayhew, Rockenbach and Bowman 2016; Peacock et al. 2023; Rockenbach et al. 2016). Despite this, institutional support and provision for challenging prejudice and hostility through interfaith engagement is mixed. Meanwhile, 'worldview'-related student unrest and activism spanning religious, political and ethnonationalist perspectives is on the rise, and little research explicitly explores how students navigate these tensions.

In the face of an urgent need to address how university interfaith activity might better tackle 'religion and worldview-related campus tensions' in their complexity, this paper proposes that the future of interfaith interventions on campus lies in intersectional approaches to exploring and understanding students' identity differences.

Based on the first stage of a 2025-26 research project, this paper presents emerging findings from multivariate statistical analysis of secondary survey data representing the interfaith experiences and attitudes of 4,618 UK university students. Through the analytical lens of intersectionality, the paper presents the ways in which students' experiences of religion and worldview-related hostility, discrimination, divisiveness, coercion and insensitivity on campus are shaped in patterns of power and prejudice by the identity markers of religion, ethnicity, nationality, gender and political leaning. The paper draws on these findings to reflect on how university interfaith activity, and the future sociological study of religion on campus, might be enriched by intersectional understandings of worldview differences.

The 'Impossible Subjects'? A theoretical exploration of identity and inclusion for autistic people within religious groups

Krysia Waldock

Exploration into identity within religious contexts and groups is a field with much interest within religious studies. Some scholars argue that religious groups are 'conduits to inclusion' (Sango & Forrester-Jones, 2019), and others argue the inverse (Homan & Burdette, 2021). However, despite the current dialogue, little theoretical exploration has been undertaken. In this light, this paper will argue for the relevance and application of identity control theory (ICT) (Burke, 1991; Burke & Stets, 2009) in relation to inclusion and belonging in religious groups for autistic people. This is a novel use of ICT. ICT is an identity verification process that emphasizes the role of identity standards (symbolic

meanings of what it means to be that particular identity). Religious identities and groups have been argued to be particularly normative (Allport & Ross, 1967; van Ommen, 2023), with Reynolds (2012) describing religious groups as ‘cults of normalcy’. In addition, autistic identity could be argued to be counternormative or stigmatised (Botha et al, 2022). This paper presents three new conceptual models based on empirical research with autistic people that offer pathways to explaining the differing experiences autistic people have in religious groups: assimilation; achieving differentiation; and alignment of both identities. The three pathways will also take into consideration how individuals have multiple identities, and what this means for experiences of inclusion and belonging. Directions for future research will be discussed, including the potential relevance of these pathways for other individuals with minoritised, counternormative and/or stigmatised identities within religious group contexts, and practical applications.

Room W010 – Workshop

More than prayer rooms: Religion and EDI in Higher Education (workshop)

Szilvi Watson

Equality, diversity and inclusion have been exceedingly important within institutions, yet even flagship aims such as gender or race equality are unfulfilled after decades of research and policy implementation. Very few institutions even name religion as an EDI concern. Whilst religious diversity has been growing on campuses, the culture around religious inclusion shows little sign of shifting. With over half of students identifying as religious or spiritual (HESA 2023) (staff data is not available), most universities fail to address the inclusion and normalisation of religion on campus.

Although I will be focussing on higher education, participants from other sectors can also benefit from the workshop. After presenting a non-exhaustive snapshot of EDI of religion practices at universities in England, I will use data from a multiple case study to illustrate experiences of religious (Christian) students, highlighting consequences of attitudes toward religious people on campus - even for those who form the largest religious minority. I will point out well-meaning yet ill-informed practices creating further tensions both among religious groups, and between the university and its religious members.

Participants will be invited to reflect on their own understanding of EDI of religion and on the culture of their institutions towards religious members through guided questions. I will use vignettes to inspire creative thinking in addressing issues around religious inclusion. Finally, we'll think together about how we can catalyse cultural change in our own institutions beyond provisions which tick boxes but do not address the heart of the problem.

Parallel Session D

Tuesday 15th July, 15.00 - 16.30

Room W007 – Race and Class Project

Race and Class in UK Religious Studies and Theology

Caroline Starkey, Florence O'Taylor and Anupama M. Ranawana

This session introduces the Race and Class in UK Religious Studies and Theology Project, a collaborative initiative led by Professor David Clough (Aberdeen), Dr. Dulcie Dixon McKenzie (Queen's Foundation), and Dr. Caroline Starkey (University of Leeds). The project aims to establish an institutional platform to monitor and challenge exclusionary practices within UK Religious Studies and Theology, particularly affecting UK Minority Ethnic and Global Majority Heritage and Working Class (UKME/GMH/WC) students and staff.

Research by the British Academy reveals that only 10.3% of academic staff in Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) identify as Black and Minority Ethnic (BME), compared to 23.9% of the UK undergraduate population and 15% of UK academic staff. Over a five-year term, the project will:

- Provide a quantitative overview of the issue.
- Conduct qualitative research on the experiences of UKME/GMH/WC students and staff.
- Publish a report with policy recommendations based on the data.
- Hold workshops to contextualize the findings.
- Seek additional funding to extend the project's impact beyond the initial term.

We will introduce the project team and Advisory Board, including SocRel, and outline our plans. An interactive session will follow to gather participant feedback on the project and its core questions. This is an opportunity to shape the project and advance its objectives.

Room W103 – Changing and Challenging Religious Scripts

Chair: Mabel Alkali

Sexual Scripting and Evangelical Purity Culture: Exploring how post-purity millennials are re-writing their sexual scripts

Morgana Loze-Doyle

At its height in the late 1990s and 2000s, the White American evangelical purity movement and its corollary purity industry entered the British evangelical milieu galvanizing young evangelical Christians to commit to abstaining from sex outside of heterosexual marriage for life by extolling its benefits and blessings and connecting this restriction of sexual development and expression to being a devoted Christian.

Growing scholarship points to the harm caused by purity culture's inflexible and heterosexist sexual scripting, particularly for those most marginalised by it, and this paper seeks to add to the emerging conversation by drawing on narrative interviews with British millennials who were teenagers and emerging adults at the height of its influence and who self-identify as being impacted by purity culture. I explore how they are they are overwriting their inherited restrictive sexual scripts to construct a sexually embodied sense of self. Within this exploration, I identify the tools and sites of experience which inform this construction, and how the rupture of religious trauma can impede it.

The Anxiety of Losing Ritual Time: A Phenomenology of Shiite Temporal Experience

Zahra Naghshband

In my project, I seek to explore the anxiety of losing the "true" time—not within the realm of secular life, but in the context of sacred time. In contemporary Iran, individuals navigate multiple, and sometimes conflicting, temporalities to structure the rhythm of their lives. The Shiite ritual calendar, in particular, is saturated with rituals for sanctifying hours, days, and months. This raises a central question: How does the "ritualistic subject" experience the anxiety of losing the right ritual time and its potential grace?

The ambivalence of ritual time complicates this anxiety. Ritual time is seen as cyclical, offering access to eternity—what Rappaport (1999) calls "endless repetition." Aligning with Rosa's concept of acceleration (2019), rituals should create a distinct temporal experience, slowing down the speed, anxiety, and irreversibility of linear time in capitalist societies.

On the other hand, the intersection of secular and "sacred" calendars, the mediation of time by authorities, and the overwhelming ritualized moments in the Shiite calendar suggest that ritual time is not entirely safeguarded as an "alternative" time. In other words, the "eternal time," always understood as recurrent, becomes paradoxical when juxtaposed with the anxiety of losing an "unrepeatable" moment for ritual participants.

In my research, I take a phenomenological ethnographic approach to explore how ritual practitioners experience the anxiety of losing the right sacred time. My fieldwork focuses on pilgrims in Karbala and Najaf during the rare convergence of Nowruz and the Nights of Qadr, a moment that intensifies this anxiety within sacred space.

Beyond the horizon: The limits and social functions of the myth of conflict between science and religion

Stephen Jones

Recent research in the sociology of science and religion has characterised the narrative of transhistorical conflict between science and religion as a Western mythology. Starting from this point, this article asks two related questions. Firstly, if the narrative of conflict between science and religion is a myth, what social functions does this myth perform? Secondly, if it is Western, how do we account for the fact that the West is internally variegated and that has blurred external boundaries? We pursue these questions by presenting an overview of findings from a qualitative study involving 432 interviews on perceptions of science, religion and evolution in Argentina, Australia, Germany, Spain, Sri Lanka, the UK and Canada. Drawing upon the work of Charles Taylor, we posit that the conflict myth acts as a communicative framework that provides individuals with a 'horizon of understanding'. We show how it is used by individuals to position themselves in 'moral space' and draw varied 'identity affirming' distinctions along (non)religious, class, ethnic and professional lines. While we agree with the proposal that the conflict myth is distinctively Western, we show how it is used to make distinctions, and shape conceptions of the good, beyond the West.

Room W414 – Methodological Change and Challenge

Chair: Serena Hussain

The methodological challenges of global surveys: A Quaker case study

Shena Deuchars

Religions are rarely considered on a global basis. ISSP has collected Religion data from 48 countries since 1991, but most analyses concentrate on a single geographical area or on cross-national attitudes to a social issue. The Pew Research Center has studied the attitudes of Pentecostals in ten countries (2006) and Muslims in 39 countries (2013).

Decennial surveys of Quakers in Britain (since the 1990s) has sparked increasing interest in carrying out similar research in other territories. In 2024, BSA SOCREL Seedcorn funding supported the development and delivery of a pilot project to conduct a survey of traditions, beliefs and practices in Quakerism worldwide.

The total population of Quakers (about 400,000) live in 87 countries and use over 30 languages. The project team chose to survey the 500 participants in the 2024 Quaker World Plenary, reducing the translation challenge by using only the three official languages of the World Plenary. The religious diversity of the participants (from 95 distinct Quaker groups, spread across six theological traditions) provided an additional challenge; the project team spent two days discussing the wording of the

survey questions. It tried to ensure the questionnaire catered for as great a range of understandings of belief and practice as possible.

This paper presents the way in which the project team tackled the challenges of developing a survey instrument suitable for a global audience. In addition, it offers initial methodological findings from the 250 responses received. This mirrors the high response rate seen in surveys of British Quakers.

Ethics of Opacity: Methodological Reflections on Researching South Korea's Shincheonji Church of Jesus

Mary Briggs

The Shincheonji Church of Jesus (hereon Shincheonji), a new millenarian Christian movement in South Korea, has been constructed in popular discourse as a 'secretive cult' whose members hide or lie about their religious identity. To complicate this normative narrative, I argue that the church and its members engage in 'opacity', which I define as a tactical mode of presentation comprised of various practices of nondisclosure or withholding information when engaging with non-members. I also explain why opacity cannot be reduced to either secrecy or privacy, although features of both concepts are present within it.

Drawing on case studies from my research, I reflect on the ethical dimensions of researching Shincheonji since opacity protects members from the devastating consequences of their religious identity being revealed and guards the church's exclusive knowledge of biblical truth. With these concerns in mind, I could not approach the limitations placed on my access to information and my mediated interactions with members as inconvenient obstacles. Instead, I had to understand opacity as integral to my research experience and my participants' everyday lives and sentiments. In this way, opacity was not something I had to overcome but an opportunity to gain a deeper insight into the experiences of Shincheonji members. To respect the centrality of opacity for Shincheonji and its members, I needed to move away from 'traditional' in-person fieldwork. This led me to take a more creative and ultimately fruitful approach, pairing digital ethnography with media content analysis.

LOUDfence and Material Religion: An Ethnographic Mapping of a Movement to Recognise the Impact of Child Sexual Abuse in Church Contexts

Sarah-Jane Page, Alana Harris, Chloe Storer, Grace Heaton

Child sexual abuse (CSA) in religious contexts has been an emerging controversy for the sociology of religion. Existing research has mapped the nature of abuse and the contextual conditions in which these have arisen (e.g. Keenan 2012; McPhillips 2019) but there has been less focus on community processes of reckoning and reconciliation. This is in a context of a continual news cycle revealing further religious institutional mismanagement of historic CSA furthering and continuing the negative impact on victims and survivors. LOUDfence (LF) is an Anglican and Catholic initiative to

acknowledge and commemorate historic CSA within religious settings, through tying ribbons to church railings. Events are typically accompanied by church services and publicly-displayed messages, photos and crafted objects which generate symbolism around some aspect of abuse and recovery.

We have ethnographically mapped LF events across England and Wales, discursively analysed displayed materials, and undertaken interviews with key participants. Using material religion (McDannell 1995; Morgan 1998) and a focus on how physical objects 'sound' and 'speak' in this context, this presentation will offer a critical account of how initiatives to promote safeguarding and repair have positive and negative impacts, asking questions such as who engages and why, and what level of acknowledgement and awareness there is for LF within church communities. This project sits in a broader consideration regarding a seeming reluctance with the sociology of religion field to investigate the abuse crisis, and a need to take stock of what has been learnt and what future interventions are required.

Room W010 – Author Meets Critic

Is the Digital Revolution fuelling a Spiritual Revolution? Influencer culture and new expressions of the sacred amongst British Millennial women.

Char Binns

It has been argued that “the major symptom of secularisation is massive indifference.” (Burce, 2002: 194). In 2000, a survey on “New Age” practices, found just 6% of respondents had tried or experienced crystals (ibid: 81). Twenty years later, a similar survey found that one in five Brits say crystals have healing properties (19%) (YouGov, 2022). And it isn't just crystals. Yoga and mindfulness have long become mainstream in British culture. More recently, an increasing number of non-secular practices, including tarot, reiki, astrology and numerology are not simply prevalent, but on-trend, desirable, aspirational. This paper explores the role social media influencers have played in this rapid reimagining of public expressions of the sacred.

Further, looking at the sociology of religion through a digital lens highlights how prevailing methods of research such as church attendance, are increasingly outdated and insufficient, if they were ever that useful. Previously, scholars (Taylor, 1992; Giddens, 1991) predicted that as society becomes increasingly individualised, religion would become more personal. Through social media, however, individualised practices can be shared with the world. Many contemporary experiences of the sacred therefore, are both individual *and* communal. In this way, the boundaries (and the binary) between the public and the private spheres become blurred.

Keynote Panel

Tuesday 15th July, 17.00

Room W103 – In Conversation on SocRel's History

Sarah Harvey with Grace Davie, Peter Gee, and Mathew Guest

In this panel session, Sarah will first give a presentation on her research for the History of SocRel project. Between 2021 and 2023, Sarah delved into the material archives of SocRel and conducted interviews with twenty academics who had been SocRel office holders, reflecting on their experiences with the study group. She will draw on these materials to discuss three key areas:

1. A potted history of the group – with analysis of main themes, issues, events and individuals within each decade of the 50-year history of the group. She will discuss the early focus on secularisation and sectarianism; an increasing focus on issues of gender, sexuality, spirituality, young people and a greater number of religious traditions; to a more theoretical focus on issues of inequalities, social justice, decolonialisation, intersectionality and more.
2. A celebration of the constant, positive themes of the study group – drawing on interview data, Sarah will highlight the benefits that people discussed in their experiences of SocRel, including the creation of a supportive space for academics studying religion; special support for postgraduates and early career researchers; the mentoring scheme; and attention to EDI issues.
3. A look to the future – Sarah will briefly discuss some ways in which SocRel, and the sociology of religion, could continue to develop into the future.

In the remainder of the panel, Sarah will invite three participants from the study to also address the three key areas and reflect further on their participation in SocRel over the years.

Parallel Session E

Wednesday 16th July, 09.30 – 11.30

Room W007 – Place, Time, Movement

Chair: Megan Robertson

The Temple, the Artisan, and the Deity: Pattachitra as a Sacred Cartography of the Jagannath Tradition

Dharti Sharma, Barnali Chetia

Swami Vivekanand stated, “above all, India is the land of religion. Each nation has a main current in life; in India, it is religion.” This statement is exemplified in Raghurajpur, a heritage village in Odisha, where Pattachitra art serves as both a sacred expression and a socio-economic lifeline. Rooted in the theological framework of the Jagannath cult, Pattachitra transcends mere artistic tradition to function as a medium of lived religiosity, embedding devotional narratives within the material culture of temple worship. The Jagannath Temple in Puri not only acts as a source of iconographic inspiration for the artists but also structurally integrates Pattachitra within its ritualistic framework—most notably in the Anasara rituals, where painted depictions of the deities temporarily replace temple idols, reaffirming the inextricable link between artistic labor and religious praxis. This paper examines the dynamic interplay between sacred iconography, artisan agency, and temple patronage, discussing how Pattachitra operates as a conduit through which religious semiotics are mediated, transformed, and negotiated in the contemporary landscape. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and historical analyses, the study interrogates how artisans navigate the pressures of globalization while upholding their role as custodians of sacred aesthetics. Furthermore, it explores how the performative and transactional dimensions of Pattachitra production reinforce the lived experience of religion, positioning the artisans as both cultural intermediaries and economic actors within the broader religious ecosystem. This research contributes to theoretical discourses on the entanglement of material culture, ritualistic embodiment, and economic sustenance in South Asian religious life.

The contemporary role of religions in shaping time: The Transition from Weekday to Holy Day in Jewish Society in Israel

Stav Shufan-Biton

This study examines temporal changes among Jews, specifically the shift from a Gregorian-universal time frame during weekdays to a Jewish frame on weekends. Using a multi-site qualitative phenomenological approach, interviews with 66 individuals from religious, traditional, secular, and ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel reveal a broadly accepted conception of Jewish Sabbath time, which applies at the personal, family, and societal levels. This concept is enriched by reflective verbal and ritual expressions.

On one hand, Friday practices and rituals signify the gradual shift to Shabbat. This includes not just the observance of traditional laws like candle lighting, but also behavioural changes such as completing tasks early and dedicating time to family from Friday evening. These gradual adjustments illustrate a significant temporal movement. On the other hand, despite a common understanding of Shabbat time, the terminology used to describe parts of Shabbat varies: secular Jews often use terms like "Friday evening" whereas religious Jews prefer "Shabbat eve". Similarly, "Saturday evening" is used by secular groups, in contrast to "Motzei Shabbat" among religious communities. These gradual adaptations and changes highlight the potential roles of religions in contemporary culture, serving as a bridge between the perception of time as abstract, neutral, and objective, and its socio-religious significance and interpretive dimensions. These interpretive dimensions, in turn, expose the inherent heterogeneity of the religious-cultural landscape, as exemplified by the Jewish context in Israel, along with the tensions that emerge from navigating between diverse religious timelines.

The Catholic Church as an Appropriable Organisation and its Role in Migrant Incorporation in South Korea

Bubbles Beverly Asor

This paper aims to contribute to the organizational study of religion, 'neglected' in recent scholarship. It examines the institutional key features of the Catholic Church mobilized as resources that shape the various levels of migrant incorporation in South Korea. The institutional configuration of the Catholic Church – centralized hierarchy, isomorphic religious teachings, 'universal' theological underpinnings, localized practices and rituals, (trans)national networks, and global identity as a sociopolitical actor - are viewed by many as rigid and constraining. However, I argue that they carry an organisational advantage in responding to the multifarious and disparate situations, contexts, and outcomes related to international migration. Drawing on my ethnographic and interview data between 2012 and 2019, and applying concepts and theories from organizational sociology, I treat the Korean

Catholic Church not only as a formal organizational unit but as an 'appropriable organization' (Coleman 1990). As such, it benefits from organizational sources (local, national and global networks of 'care' necessary for social service provision, facilities for migrant community formation, and institutional legitimacy for sociopolitical inclusion), the transnational reach of the global Catholic Church, and an organizing principle of 'catholicity' to engender an alternative construction of migration beyond the nation-state narrative. As an appropriable organization, the Korean Catholic Church, while created for religious mission and sacred purposes, has been (un)intentionally appropriated for migrant incorporation.

"We came to Miami to make big money": Migration and the Prosperity Gospel among Latin American immigrants in the USA.

Antonio Montanes Jimenez

The Prosperity Gospel (PG), a controversial form of Christianity asserting God's will for Christians is to be wealthy, healthy, and successful, is a global religious force with the potential to reshape religious fields and enhance upward mobility desires. In the USA, some PG churches and pastors have gained recent domestic political visibility upon becoming supporters of populist right-wing politicians, such as Donald Trump. Using ethnographic and qualitative methods, this paper investigates the diffusion of the Prosperity Gospel's doctrine, teaching, values and ideas among Latin American immigrants in the city of Miami (USA). Theoretically, the presentation interrogates the role of religion in spreading individualist values and neoliberal and entrepreneurship ideals through pro-market interpretations of biblical principles. Departing from the literature on religion and migration portraying religious communities as a buffer against hostile societies, I examine religion's potential to shift social boundaries and, perhaps, become a source of upward mobility, as well as the moral ambiguities involved in the process of becoming a religious subject in a globalized, neoliberal, and capitalist world.

Room W103 – Media and Digital Media

Chair: Michael Munnik

"Doing your own research" as religious quest: the surprising religiosity of alternative facts, stigmatised knowledge, and epistemological language.

Jo Banks

This paper examines the use of epistemological language – claims to be "doing their own research" – in controversial communities associated with both alternative spirituality and conspiracy theory. Drawing on testimonies published in media associated with the 'Freedom Movement' and on in-

depth qualitative interviews, I argue that the practice of “research” is often used to describe a search for spiritual meaning, purpose, identity, community, and salvation. Beyond what might appear to be solely an interest in truth claims, and questioning who has the authority to make them, this epistemological, secular language obscures what in other groups and movements is identified as a religious quest. Participants in these subcultures routinely feature “doing research” centrally in testimonies of spiritual and activist awakenings, as a precursor to a conversion experience. In this, “doing research” parallels stages in classical sociological process models of conversion developed through the study of religious groups. These findings align with scholarship suggesting that social reasons for expressing support for or opposition against a truth claim can be more compelling to individuals than its ‘empirical’ truth or falsity. An overemphasis on the inaccuracy of claims made by those interested in conspiracy and spirituality can lead to a preoccupation with explanations for why individuals would accept them as true, including brainwashing, radicalisation, and mental illness. Instead, this research encourages observers to approach these subcultures as religious networks, broadening their focus to include practices, rituals, communities, and social structures, to better understand their appeal.

Covid-19 and Perceptions of Digital Religious Options on the Island of Ireland – Promoting Faith, or Hastening Secularization?

Gladys Ganiel

Religious groups’ relationships with digital technology changed during the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper draws on data gathered as part of a three-year, multi-context research project, including online questionnaires of leaders and members, interviews, and analysis of hundreds of documents published by religious groups and faith-based outlets. It charts the original enthusiastic uptake of digital technology among Christian groups on the island of Ireland, which led some leaders to advocate cultivating digital religious cultures as a counter to secularization. It also explores how Christian enthusiasm for digital religious options waned, especially within Catholicism, in the latter stages of the pandemic. Catholic leaders observed declines in in-person attendance, provoking discourses linking digitalization to secularization. Protestant groups remained more optimistic, encouraging members to use digital resources to supplement in-person practice. While noting these trends, we profile the enthusiastic cultivation of a digital religious culture among participants in an online compline (night prayer) group in a Catholic parish in Belfast. Finally, we contrast Irish Catholic approaches to digital religious options with Catholic approaches to the digital in the other contexts included in our research study: Canada, Germany, and Poland, noting that despite misgivings, the Irish Catholic Church was more positive about maintaining digital options than in these other contexts.

New Media Experiences of Gen Z Muslims

Daniel Nilsson DeHanas

This paper investigates how Gen Z Muslims – who are members of the first generation born into a world with the internet – use new digital media to navigate their experiences at university. There are currently two dominant research traditions on contemporary Muslims: the first focusing on ‘domesticating Islam’ through ‘security, control and containment’ (Sunier 2014) and the second empathically attempting to understand how Muslims are affected by Islamophobia (e.g., Sayyid and Vakil 2011). In contrast, in this new research project I explore how members of Gen Z use new media for sources of motivation, spiritual meaning, and ‘Muslim joy’ (see Khan 2023). I argue that digital media do not create a separate world, but they instead enable young Muslims to engage in ‘augmented reality’ in which they bring new powers into public space (Jurgenson 2012). Taking theoretical inspiration from Michel de Certeau, I explain how new media augment Gen Z Muslims’ ‘tactical’ resources for navigating the various institutional and parental ‘strategies’ experienced during university. Digital media resources themselves (particularly TikTok, but also Instagram and X among others) enmesh young Muslims in a new ‘strategy’ of ‘the algorithm’, which adds another layer of complexity to how they attempt to seek a fulfilled life. In this paper I will present research findings from a London UK university campus, placing these in the context of a wider comparative project on Gen Z Muslims at University that was undertaken with colleagues at Australian Catholic University, Sydney.

Digital Exorcism

Adam Possamai, Rhys Gower

Recent works have highlighted that exorcism is not an atavistic ritual but that it has a renewed place in our contemporary western world. As religious institutions have become more secularised and rationalised, a vacuum has been left for religious professionals to deal with demons. While exorcists claim that there is a higher demand for exorcism, they grow as a profession and warn people of the devil’s presence in games, popular culture, and family curses. The use of social media has not been left out from these developments as exorcism videos have spread, and remote online forms of exorcism are available. While questions of morality are malleable in this context, e.g. giving a sense of security or providing extra insecurity in this world of anxiety, this article points to an attempt by an exorcist on his YouTube channel at re-sacralising society. This article discovers as part of these practices the importance of passing on messages of morality more so than curing peoples of their demons. The digital world thus provides a greater reach for exorcists to spread their morality with a far wider reach than in a darkly romanticised gothic and secluded room where exorcism is often perceived to take place.

Room W414 – Religion, Politics and the State

Chair: Georgina Robinson

The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) and the challenges of open science

Tom Clark, Luke Seeley

Founded in 1997, the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) strives to democratize access to the best data on religion. As a free-to-access repository for data and a variety of associated resources, materials included in the ARDA are submitted by the foremost religion scholars and research centres in the world. However, recent advances in open science are transforming the ways in which data can be gathered, curated, and accessed. Indeed, while the FAIR principles (Findability, Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reuse) offer substantial opportunities for the study of religion, they also present a number of challenges in terms of data management and metadata practices. This paper will review some of these challenges and introduce three major initiatives that are building upon existing ARDA features and services. These initiatives include: a new self-submission portal; a collaborative programme of work that seeks to incentivize the submission of replication data to the ARDA; and, a religion research hub that will aim to connect data archives and provide a searchable database of religious data sources.

Khanqahs and Political Influence in the Indian Subcontinent: A Sociological Perspective

Khawar Amir

Khanqahs, the spiritual lodges of Sufi orders, played a crucial role in shaping the political landscape of the Indian subcontinent. These institutions, beyond being centers of spiritual guidance, functioned as sites of social organisation, political mediation, and cultural synthesis. This paper explores how khanqahs influenced governance by fostering alliances with ruling elites, mediating conflicts, and serving as centers of economic and social welfare. Through a sociological lens, it examines the ways in which Sufi networks helped consolidate political authority, both during the Sultanate and Mughal periods and in the face of colonial interventions.

The study delves into the mechanisms through which Sufi leaders engaged with state structures—whether through legitimising rulers, resisting oppressive governance, or fostering local autonomy. It also analyses how khanqahs adapted to changing political dynamics, from the patronage of medieval kings to the challenges posed by colonial rule and modern nation-state formations. By assessing the intersection of spirituality and power, this paper sheds light on the continued relevance of Sufi institutions in contemporary socio-political contexts.

This research contributes to the sociology of religion by highlighting the role of mystical traditions in political history and governance. It aligns with the conference themes by addressing methodological trends in the study of religion, the historical impact of religious institutions on politics, and the ways in which past lessons can inform contemporary understandings of religious authority and social cohesion.

Muslim cemeteries and funeral practices in Belgium”: Unveiling the challenges, needs and demand

Eva Verschueren

In recent years, increasing ethnic and religious diversity in Western European cities, including in major cities in Belgium, has exposed significant challenges in meeting the funeral needs of religious minority groups, particularly Muslims. While burial options for Muslims in Belgium have gradually expanded, legal and practical barriers remain, such as the inability to secure an eternal grave and the requirement for burial within 24 hours. These constraints, alongside transnational ties, have historically led many Belgian Muslims to opt for repatriation to their country of descent. However, qualitative research and governmental data indicate a declining trend in repatriations, suggesting an increasing demand for local Muslim cemeteries. Beyond logistical and legal concerns, the presence of Muslim cemeteries carries symbolic significance. Reports of racist incidents in Muslim burial grounds across the Global North, along with political debates surrounding the visibility of Muslim graves, highlight broader societal tensions. This research aims to conduct the first large-scale quantitative survey of Muslims’ funeral needs and preferences in Belgium. Key questions include: What specific funeral needs do Muslims in Belgium have? How do these needs vary within different Muslim communities, and what factors explain these preferences? Additionally, interviews with religious stakeholders and people in the funerary industry (e.g. Muslim) undertakers, cemetery coordinators, city council, etc.) will explore the challenges they face in practice. This presentation will outline the research questions, study design, and preliminary findings from the initial data collection, providing insights into the evolving funeral needs of Belgium’s largest religious minority group.

Religion as a Political Instrument: PAS’s Populist Discourse in Malaysia

Aliye Kelesoglu

This paper explores how religious identities and narratives are used in populist discourse for political mobilisation to understand the interplay between religion, power, and social cohesion. While research on religion and populism is growing, its intersection with ethnic identity remains understudied, especially outside Western contexts. Focusing on Malaysia, this paper examines the political discourse of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) in terms of the use of ethnic and

religious elements in its discourse in 2022, during the 15th General Election campaigns. PAS originally advocated Sharia-based governance but has evolved into a party that blends religious and ethnic populism. The PAS's discourse now combines religious nationalism— which positions Malay-Muslim identity as central to the nation-state— with religious populism, which portrays politics as a moral struggle between the “authentic Ummah” and corrupt secular elites or non-Muslim outsiders. PAS constructs exclusionary boundaries between insiders and outsiders that reinforce its legitimacy and political dominance. The utilisation of ethnic and religious elements in a political discourse reveals how religion functions both as an identity and a political instrument. Given Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multi-religious social structure, PAS's political strategy has a significant impact on social cohesion and inter-ethnic relations. The party is increasingly positioning itself as the guardian of Malay-Muslim interests against the perceived threat from non-Muslim minorities and secular elites. The increasing instrumentalisation of religion for political mobilisation risks deepening divisions and undermining Malaysia's pluralist foundations.

Room W010 – Health and Healthcare

Chair: Ellie Atayee-Bennett

Spirituality and Religious Healing Practices among Mappila Muslims of Malabar: Exploring Their Role in Mental Health, Well-being, and the Intersection with Conventional Healthcare Systems

Farsana Kp

This study examines the role of spirituality and religious healing practices in shaping mental health and well-being among the Mappila Muslims of Malabar, with a focus on their interaction with conventional healthcare systems. Rooted in a rich socio-religious tradition, the Mappila community employs diverse faith-based healing practices -- including supplication, ritualistic interventions, and Sufi-influenced therapeutic methods -- as integral components of mental health management. This research critically analyses the efficacy and cultural significance of these practices in addressing psychological distress, resilience-building, and coping strategies. Furthermore, it explores the intersections, complementarities, and potential conflicts between religious healing traditions and biomedical approaches within contemporary healthcare frameworks. Employing an ethnographic approach, this study contributes to the broader discourse on the integration of indigenous healing systems with institutionalized medical care, offering insights into the sociocultural dimensions of mental health in pluralistic societies.

Chronic illness as cultural disruption: the impact of chronic illness on religious and cultural practice.

Victoria Cluley

In this presentation, I will introduce the concept 'cultural disruption', drawing on interviews with racially minoritised adults with end-stage kidney disease, who also identify as religious. The relationship between religion and health tends to be framed positively. Religion has been found to act as a coping mechanism and source of support in times of ill health. In the interviews presented, while religious practice and belief was said to provide strength and comfort, participants also discussed the disruptive impact of chronic illness on religious and cultural practice. Cultural disruption, based on Bury's (1982) concept of biographical disruption, captures the potential for ill health to change and disrupt experiences of faith and practice. To highlight this potential for disruption, I identify three elements of 'cultural disruption': Disruption to religious practice, disruption to sense of self and identity, and disruption to wellbeing. I then suggest that understanding and accounting for the potential of 'cultural disruption' when diagnosing, treating, and supporting people with chronic illness offers an alternative entry point to the life-worlds of patients who identify as religious and the things that are important to them.

Schooling Character in a Therapeutic Society: The Changing Role of Religion

Anna Strhan

Schools in the UK are reportedly facing an acute mental health crisis due to the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent cost of living pressures, leading to a renewed focus on therapeutic education and an increased prominence for wellbeing and emotion-based initiatives. Such developments form part of a longer story about the increasingly dominant influence of psychology and the therapeutic ethos in late modern societies, against a backdrop of progressive secularisation and growing religious diversity. This presentation uses schools as a window onto these wider social and cultural processes, by interrogating the relationship between the religious and the therapeutic through a specific focus on character education.

Drawing on ethnographic data from four primary school case studies across Britain, the study explores the nature and characteristics of therapeutic education in post-COVID Britain, and investigates how this agenda co-exists with, intersects with, or replaces the role of religion in educational settings. It is argued that in today's evolving religious landscape, psychological and therapeutic sensibilities emerge as dominant influences on character education, but that religion continues to play a role in this endeavour in certain forms and circumstances. In doing so, the presentation offers new insights into the wider relationship between religion and psychology within contemporary therapeutic cultures, contributing to sociological debates in this area.

Faith-Based Community Support and Its Impact on Well-Being: Examining the Role of Religious Education Centres for Elderly Women in Turkey

Rumeysa Nur Dogan, Merve Çetinkaya

This study investigates the relationship between attending Religious Education Centres (RECs) and the well-being, social support, happiness, and life quality of elderly women in Turkey. As institutions offering spiritual guidance and social engagement, RECs play a prominent role in the lives of many older women. However, their potential psychosocial impacts remain underexplored.

The study will involve 200 elderly women, equally divided into two groups: regular REC attendees and non-attendees. Quantitative data will be gathered using standardized scales to measure well-being, perceived social support, happiness, and life quality.

This research hypothesizes that attending RECs enhances social connectedness, emotional resilience, and overall life satisfaction. By providing a sense of community, shared purpose, and opportunities for meaningful interaction, RECs may help mitigate the social isolation often experienced by elderly women. Furthermore, the study explores how participation in such religious and social activities intersects with broader sociological themes of aging, gender, and faith-based community support.

The findings are expected to contribute to the growing discourse on religion's role in promoting well-being among aging populations. Insights from this research will inform policymakers, religious institutions, and community leaders about the potential benefits of RECs for enhancing the quality of life of elderly women in Turkey, with implications for similar contexts globally.

Room W215 – Religious Futures

Chair: Peter Gee

Challenges and Changes: The Past, Present and Future of British Imams

Riyaz Timol

Imams are the largest group of Muslim religious professionals in Britain who work principally within mosques: leading prayers, delivering sermons, and providing religious guidance to their congregations. While early imams in the UK were sourced from overseas providing an important sense of continuity with the homeland, the influx of a British-born generation of imams has gradually transformed expectations to encompass pastoral care, charity work, and outwardly oriented interfaith or civic events. The British imam however has rarely been the subject of in-depth sociological research. Based at Cardiff University's Islam-UK Centre, 'Understanding British Imams' is the largest study ever undertaken of Britain's Muslim prayer leaders based on several years of mixed-methods fieldwork. Drawing on interviews with 40 imams around the country and survey data collected from

more than 2000 imams, this paper presents a conceptual typology of roles within the British imamate rooted in the classical sociological dialectic of structure-agency, as well as Max Weber's tripartite 'sociology of authority' (herrschaft). Emerging inductively from our data analysis, the paper argues for the need to recognise internal heterogeneity within the sector by proposing a distinction between imams as 'Ritual Prayer Leaders', 'Preachers and Teachers', and 'Inspirational Faith Leaders'. Further, it explores the challenges and opportunities of intergenerational change among British imams as well as the critical importance of addressing practical issues regarding working conditions, salaries, and Continuous Professional Development provisions. Taken together, the paper sheds important sociological light on the nature and complexity of mosque-based religious leadership in Britain's largest minority religious group.

The Quiet Revival? Young adults and the future of British Christianity

Rob Barward-Symmons, Rhiannon Mcaleer

This paper presents the latest findings from a nationally representative survey of 13,000 adults in England and Wales exploring religious attitudes and behaviours. By comparing this data – undertaken by YouGov – with a previous study in 2018, we see a new generation emerging.

These findings present a radical challenge to the long-assumed projections around the future of religion – and in particular Christianity – in twenty-first century Britain. Central to this is the shift in religious behaviours, particularly churchgoing. Instead of steady decline we see explosive growth, with overall monthly churchgoing rising from 8% to 12% of the adult population. More remarkable still is the profile of these churchgoers. Instead of a church populated predominantly by older white women, we see minority ethnic groups along with men, particularly young men, flocking to join – with over a fifth of 18–24-year-old men now saying they attend church monthly, up from less than 5% in 2018. At the same time, there is a clear denominational shift occurring away from Anglicanism and towards Catholicism and Pentecostalism in particular.

Exploring the data shows that this is not simply a case of 'belonging without believing', however, with a correlated rise in belief in God and personal behaviours such as Bible reading – despite questions on religious identity reflecting recent census data. As a result, the church is not just growing but it is transforming, led by a young generation searching for – and apparently finding – meaning, community, and holistic wellbeing within churches.

Spiritual Seeking in a Frantic era: Developing Young Buddhist Groups in Hong Kong

Ngar-Sze Lau

This paper examines how the recent social instability has enhanced the development of a few young Buddhist groups in the Hong Kong Chinese context. With the impact of colonisation and Westernisation, traditional Chinese customs, local popular religions, and Buddhism were devalued

as superstitious by intellectuals and social elites in this cosmopolitan city over the colonial period. Nevertheless, over the social instability following the suppression of social unrest in Hong Kong in the past decade, a few young Buddhist groups in various traditions have been established. An increasing number of young people are interested in exploring Buddhism or Buddhist thoughts as practical ways of spiritual practice in facing frustration in personal and social life. For example, Buddolescent was established in 2011 by a group of secondary school students who were interested in searching meaning of life in this materialistic society. Buddhist Connection was established in 2021 by a young social worker who were in his 20s after he broke up with his girlfriend. Despite the pandemic, his activities attracted over 60 young people to join. Ms Chu, a 30-year-old woman, lost her assistant job after her law-maker boss was caught by the police. She felt lost until she started joining Zen meditation activities at Dharma Drum. Based on ethnographic research, this paper will examine how the socio-political environment with the collective anxiety, trauma, and unrest in the city during the pandemic, may have facilitated the growth of young Buddhist communities.

Living and Dying Well in Old Age: Spiritual Needs in a Non-Religious Future

Joanna Malone

Traditionally, religious institutions such as chaplains, ministers, or other faith-community volunteers provided many pastoral elements of support in older age. However, the shifting religious landscape in Britain, towards increasing non-religiosity, raises significant questions about what forms of care and support – in relation to spiritual, emotional, pastoral, or other forms of wellbeing – non-religious older adults need and desire. It further raises questions around what it means to live a good life in later life, and perceptions of a good death. In recent years, non-religious organisations, such as Humanists UK, have become providers of non-religious pastoral care. Yet, research conducted by Humanists UK demonstrated that many still associate ‘chaplaincy’ with Christianity. This suggests many non-religious older adults may be missing out on care and support that religious older adults receive.

Drawing on a three-year ethnographic project, this paper considers the shifting position of religion in society which may impact upon flourishing in older age and living and dying ‘well’ for the non-religious and those who are not traditionally religious (e.g. those who may describe themselves as ‘spiritual’). Paying attention to this, it is argued, will help us understand more about other-than-religious values, concerns, and beliefs that shape ideas about what it means to live well and die well in later life, alongside understanding what non-religious ethical and cultural values may be taking form.

Religion, Disability and Neurodivergence

Wednesday 16th July, 11.45 – 12.45

**Religion, Disability and Neurodivergence – Reflecting on the
SocRel Response Day 2025**

Led by Renasha Khan and Krysia Waldock, with Naomi Lawson Jacobs

On the 29th March 2025, the BSA SocRel study group held a response day reflecting on the topics of disability and neurodivergence within religion. As Deborah Creamer has argued, the little attention paid to religion within the field of disability is problematic, especially as religion and religious groups can be an important part of disabled people's lives or stories (Creamer, 2006; Eiesland, 2002; Jacobs and Richardson, 2022). Furthermore, attending to disabled and neurodivergent voices in religion, and how we make the field of sociology of religion accessible and inclusive can be argued to be a part of wider calls for decolonising religious studies and the sociology of religion. In this panel, the SocRel EDI officers who led the event will reflect on the themes discussed in the response day, including accessible and inclusive research methods, power and who gets a voice in religious studies and sociology of religion, and the importance of considering other intersectionalities such as ethnicity and class. We will also reflect on the process of running and organising the event with its keynote speaker, Naomi Lawson Jacobs, as a neurodiverse (including neurotypical and neurodivergent) team. Finally, we will discuss future directions within religious studies and sociology of religion, and their parallels to other work (e.g., feminist approaches to religion).

Parallel Session F

Wednesday 16th July, 15.00 – 16.30

Room 007 – Workshop

Embroidery as meditation and as method

Sara Mchaffie

There has been a recent increase in work by autistic women seeking to disrupt stereotypical ideas about our identities, and to strive for epistemic justice (e.g. Limburg 2021). I am drawing on Fraser's concept of 'subaltern counterpublics' (1990) as a way of understanding autistic women's activism and interventions.

A group of eleven autistic participants interested in feminist discussions examined different feminist lenses and compared them against our life experience. One issue for autistic participants was difficulty articulating some of these complex and reflexive responses when encountering feminism. The group elected to learn embroidery in order to use imagery as prompts for discussion, and a means of articulating analysis. These images were then discussed further, enabling greater shared understanding. Participants who already had a meditation practice (from Hindu, Christian and Pagan traditions) engaged readily with this meditative and tactile method. Those who did not meditate also seemed to find it a helpful way to engage in a repetitive and mindful activity while consolidating ideas. One surprising element of the use of embroidery was its ability to create a touchstone for reflection both alone and within a group. It is a slow process and allowed for deep thought in relation to the ongoing project. This was particularly valuable for a researcher with a busy, neurodivergent brain. The workshop discusses this, demonstrates embroidery techniques, holds space for exploration of image-making and creates opportunities to discuss use of these techniques in our own work.

Room W103 – Religion and the Contested Contours of Knowledge

Chair: Ali Kassem

Language and Liturgy: The Latin Mass and the Shaping of Catholic Borderscapes

Caterina Guardamagna

Even if Latin is not the original language of the Bible, it holds a particular status of 'sacred language' in the Catholic Church. The Latin Mass currently exists in two versions: a pre-Vatican II (1570, 1962)

form and a post-Vatican II form (1569-70), with significant liturgical divergences. The Apostolic Constitution *Veterum Sapientia* (1962) praises Latin as a language that connects the present to the past (it is immutable), is shared among Catholics (universal) and is not used for domestic/everyday activities (non-vernacular). This paper investigates some aspects of the so-called Latin Mass “revival” from the viewpoint of ‘borderscapes’ (Tufi 2024), i.e. approaching the notion of border as a method. Weaving together aesthetic, theological, historical, moral and political aspects, the Latin Mass simultaneously tears down borders (national, temporal) and erects borders (e.g. between those conversant with Latin and those who are not; between those who believe that the Mass needs to be ‘understood’ rationally, and those who believe it needs to be ‘experienced’ emotionally; between traditionalist and progressive Catholics; between different social classes). Looking at data from Reddit, the analysis sheds light on how Latin mass goers use language to construct spaces of identity, belonging and exclusion.

Scientization and Modernism in Won Buddhism

Sergei Sevriugin

This research focuses on the scientization process and the distinctive characteristics of modernism in Won Buddhism. Analysing media sources and interviewing 25 followers in South Korea and New Zealand — including university professors, researchers, religious leaders, and former clergy who have grown sceptical of the organisation — I explore how Won Buddhists strategically integrate scientific and academic language, concepts, and reasoning. This approach not only enhances appeal and legitimacy for a modern audience but also serves as a catalyst for internal development. Through a comparative lens, I explore the nuances of this interplay between secular and the sacred, the global and the local, modernity and tradition, superstition and spirituality, the market and the selfhood, commodity, and authenticity in the context of controversial globalization. Through my study, I seek to underscore the in-betweenness of religion and ways in which such discourse reconfigures religious worldview and identity with contemporary rationality. The case of Won Buddhism stands out as particularly noteworthy. It is one of the few religions that emerged in the 20th century and successfully achieved official recognition in its country of origin and globally, with representation in international institutions and a presence in 23 countries worldwide. My research will also shed light on the broader implications of religious adaptation within the framework of an increasingly interconnected and scientifically oriented world, particularly focusing on the Korean and Western contexts. By doing so, I aim to provide new insights into the evolving dynamics between the modern notion of religion and science.

Fifty Years of Negotiating the Cult Wars: A Sociologist of Religion's Tale

Eileen Barker

It was 50 years ago that the focus of my research shifted from science and religion to new religious movements (NRMs) and social reactions to them. I had no idea what I was letting myself in for. At that time the 'cult scare' was just beginning. Middle-class youth, often on a 'gap year', were disappearing into strange movements, quite often giving up promising futures and cutting themselves off from family and friends. The only possible explanation was that they had been 'brainwashed'. The only possible action was to grab or lure them and lock them up in order to 'deprogramme' them for thousands of pounds. Scholars who were studying the NRMs were coming up with different accounts, however. The burgeoning 'anti-cult movement' (ACM) labelled the scholars 'cult apologists' and attacked them in the courts and in the media. The scholars fought back. In 1988, with the support of the Home Office and mainstream churches, I founded INFORM (www.inform.ac), an educational charity offering information about NRMs that is as reliable and contextualised as possible. Ten years later, I started to make friends with some, though definitely not all, of the ACM. The talk describes the international intensification of, then changes in, the cult wars, in North America and Europe.

Room W414 – Author Meets Critic

Chair: Ruth Vassilas

***Growing Up Godless: Non-Religious Childhoods in Contemporary England* (Author meets Critic)**

Anna Strhan, Rachael Shillitoe

This session focuses on *Growing Up Godless: Non-Religious Childhoods in Contemporary England* (Princeton University Press) and will address questions related to the study of non-religion, childhood, family life, values, and emerging worldviews.

Authors: Anna Strhan and Rachael Shillitoe

Critics: Sonya Sharma, Céline Benoit, Metin Koca, Gordon Lynch

About the book:

The number of those identifying as "non-religious" has risen rapidly in Britain and many other parts of Europe and North America. Although non-religion and non-belief are especially prevalent among younger people, we know little about the experience of children who are growing up without religion. In *Growing Up Godless*, Anna Strhan and Rachael Shillitoe fill this scholarly gap, examining how, when, where, and with whom children in England learn to be non-religious and non-believing.

Drawing on in-depth interviews and extensive ethnographic fieldwork with children, their parents, and teachers, Strhan and Shillitoe offer a pioneering account of what these children believe in and care about, and how they navigate a social landscape of growing religious diversity.

Moving beyond the conventional understanding of non-religion as merely the absence of religion, Strhan and Shillitoe show how children's non-religion and non-belief emerge in relation to a pervasive humanism—centering the agency, significance, and achievements of humans and values of equality and respect—interwoven in their homes, schools, media, and culture. Their findings offer important new insight into the rise and formation of non-religious identities and, more broadly, the ways that children's beliefs and values are shaped in contemporary society.

Room W010 – Non-religion and the Changing Role of Religion

Chair: Victoria Cluley

Unlearning Religion

Lucy Potter

Scholars have critiqued the sociology of religion, asserting that the concepts of 'religion', 'non-religion', and 'secularism' are rooted in Western imperialism. This narrow historical view often neglects religious or belief systems outside this dominant paradigm. Consequently, interpretations of religion and belief risk appearing ethnocentric as they frequently employ a Western European perspective to analyse other belief frameworks. Apostasy, the act of leaving a religion, holds significant sociological importance, yet it has typically been marginal in sociological investigations. Much of the current research on apostasy tends to convey a Western European perspective, depicting it as a voluntary decision and breaking down the departure process into distinct phases. However, for individuals labelled 'apostates' in regions with stringent anti-blasphemy or apostasy laws, the identity formation experience is notably different and frequently unaddressed in academic discussions. This paper presents empirical data derived from qualitative analyses of fundamental human rights legislation and Home Office policies, supplemented by accounts from 12 asylum seekers in the UK and insights from 22 human rights advocates assisting them. The findings advocate for a refined sociological examination of apostasy, suggesting that we view the act of leaving a religion as a dynamic process of both 'unlearning' and 'learning'. As an apostate unlearns religious behaviours and practices, they find new opportunities to learn non-religious alternatives. This learning journey signifies individuals' efforts to cultivate a sense of belonging and positive self-embodiment. Overall, this paper introduces new viewpoints on non-religious identities and enriches ongoing conversations about secularisation, belief, and belonging in today's society.

Love for and Intimacy with Allah: The Dynamics of Religious Affection within a Muslim Sisterhood Community in Istanbul

Rumeysa Ertuğrul

In the context of my ethnographic research, I examine a Muslim sisterhood community in Istanbul, Turkey, with which I have been affiliated since my childhood due to my mother's and aunt's involvement. These women have actively upheld their collective endeavors for nearly forty years, having united during the post-coup period of the 1980s, a time characterized by strict limitations on the public manifestation of the Islamic way of life. They have actively participated in halaqas, charitable activities, and educational initiatives to lead their lives as conscious Muslims while endeavoring to disseminate Allah's word in the most effective manner possible. Furthermore, a significant aspect of the findings reveals that the primary motivating factor behind their communal efforts is their "religious affection," a synthesis of "divine affection" and its extension as mutual love for one another. The divine affection, expressed through their love for and intimacy with Allah, fosters love, trust, and tolerance among these women, which in turn reinforces their relationship as members of the same community. In essence, "divine affection," coupled with the "down-to-earth affection" shared among these sisters, is the solid foundation for their enduring collective identity. Another observation is that this sisterhood markedly diverges from predominant sisterhood narratives within feminist theory. While political circumstances were influential in forming the community, the religious affection they experienced—not political solidarity in pursuit of improved conditions for women—genuinely united and sustained their longstanding togetherness. In short, my research suggests that creating pious subjectivities goes hand in hand with "religious affection" when forming and maintaining a community. This contributes significantly to understanding the intricate relationship between emotions, sisterhood, and collective action.

Boundedness and porousness for non-theist members of Twelve Step Fellowships in London

Lucy Clarke

Much sociological and anthropological work on the secular has characterised the secular self as bounded or 'buffered' [Taylor 2007]. For the secular person, their mind is completely theirs, bound off from outside forces. If they hear voices, it is a sign of their own mental health concerns, not of Gods, demons or spirits (Luhmann 2016). If they feel pain, it happens within the privatised self, in a 'sealed off' body, inaccessible to others (Asad 2003: 75). Thoughts and emotions are a reflection of the self and emerge from the autonomous self.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this talk is interested in how such a framework fares in a situation where something seems to invade and take over the self. According to many members of Twelve Step Fellowships (TSF's), this is the experience of addiction. Addiction overcomes the self, it affects

a person's thoughts and emotions as they struggle to understand their own behaviour. The experience seems to defy the concept of the agentive, autonomous, decision-making mind. The self is thus understood to be porous, vulnerable to the infusion of 'addict' sensibilities.

This talk asks how secular TSF members negotiate being variously bounded or porous selves, how this impacts their recovery, and which forms of affect or behaviour are rendered aspects of the self, are externalized as not-self, or are understood as somehow both at once. I suggest that a future path for the study of nonreligious identities could be in exploring how secular selfhood, as lived, can shift and change.

END