

Young People and Religion: Findings from the latest research and its practical implications

Wednesday 18th May 2011 King's College London

Over 130 people, including academics, members of groups such as the Salvation Army, the Church of Scotland and the Pagan Federation, staff from charities like The Children's Society and Lokahi Foundation, a representative from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and journalists, gathered to hear about new research and debate the issues.

Thanks to the Religion and Society Programme we're now learning more about young people and religion in the UK than ever before. As part of a £12 million strategic research programme, two of the British government funded research councils (the Arts and Humanities and Economic and Social Research Councils) invested £4 million in research on youth and religion specifically. This led to the funding of 21 original research projects across UK universities. These are now starting to have findings: we heard from 8 of these on the day. The event was hosted at King's College London by theologians Pete Ward and Alister McGrath. This is a summary of the presentations and discussion (see below for the conference programme).

The main theme which arose from the research was 'authenticity', with that of 'transitions' also emerging. Young people from a range of religious and class backgrounds, many of whom live with uncertainty and change, seem to be placing a particularly high value on close, trusting relationships. Family remains a strong influence, though parents', and religious leaders', religiosity may be questioned – the question is always whether people can be trusted, whether they are 'authentic'. The inadequacy of a clichéd view of religion as church-like institutional practice for capturing the sheer variety of their experiences was apparent, as were tensions with the secular mainstream. It was clear that we need to be sensitive to young people's religious identities, really listening to them rather than making assumptions. And in the religiously plural environment of contemporary Britain no one trend can be taken for granted as universal.

Religion and Growing up in Britain 1

From their survey of 4198 undergraduates (and counting) in 10 contrasting English universities **Mathew Guest and Sonya Sharma** from Durham University presented the finding that the majority of their sample appears to be Christian (52%) with the second largest group (37%) claiming no religion. They hypothesized that, though vocal, evangelical Christian groups on campus may not represent most Christian students. In fact, there seemed to be reactions against evangelicalism – so the latter plays a key role also for those who *reject* religion or Christianity. They have found so far a surprising stability of religious identities with 75% of respondents having stayed in the tradition they were brought up in.

Next **Betsy Olson and Giselle Vincett** from Edinburgh University pointed out that most of what we know about Generation Y (roughly classified as people born between 1982 and 2001) and religion comes from research with middle-class young people. In contrast, Betsy,

Giselle and the rest of their team worked with teenagers in areas of urban deprivation in Glasgow and Manchester finding that – to the surprise of their own youth workers - these young people are religious/spiritual, just not in ways academics and others have chosen to measure and understand religion. Belief in angels, use of rosary beads, prayer and many other practices were prominent for some. Religion can be a source of help and resilience. But many perceive barriers to entering religious buildings, feeling that they don't belong there; they aren't sufficiently middle class, the churches are invisible in their lives, and it is a challenge to them when God (whom they believe to be interventionist) doesn't seem to care. The researchers screened videos produced with and by young people involved in the project and exhibited images from the project as part of the day.

Young Religious Identities

Nick Shepherd from the Centre for Youth Ministry chaired this session and introduced **Jasjit Singh** from Leeds University who presented his doctoral research looking at the transmission of Sikhism to 18-30 year olds in Britain. He discussed the variety that there is across the 220 gurdwaras in the UK, with the style and provision for young people depending a lot on how the gurdwara is managed – by committee or charismatic individual – with the latter often having more continuity and ability to put on events and encourage young people. Camps are now important for young Sikhs to meet each other, and there are courses to learn Punjabi in 15 days. Some did not pay attention in Punjabi classes as children and now want to learn more. 'SikhiToTheMax' is software developed to instantly translate the Guru Granth Sahib, allowing much more understanding of the text and meaning young people can know more than their parents. They respect elders in the community who are 'authentic', and gurdwaras remain important as the place to pray and be with the guru. There is movement to cleanse 'cultural practices'. There is generational change with second and third generations settled in the UK, but India remains the place for authentic learning about Sikhism: the 'land of the gurus'. So: religion is no longer just transmitted from parent to child – there are other means.

Then **Bereket Loul** from Leeds Metropolitan University also spoke on his doctoral research, which involved gathering the life story narratives, including video diaries, of 16-25 year olds who have experienced forced migration to Britain from a range of countries and faith backgrounds – for example, one young participant is a member of the Apostles religious group from Zimbabwe. At home their religious identities were not significant markers, more of a default part of the norm with many reporting situations of religious homogeneity or harmony, though religion was a push factor for some, e.g. Protestants from Eritrea. In the migration experience it becomes more important and more personal. Bereket is finding a common story of initial culture shock, value conflict and loss of meaning upon arrival in Britain, and especially at school. These young people can be unsettled by the consumerism and agnosticism encountered, and isolated by language. Over time, though, they learn to deal with the situation and find things in common with their peers. They want to continue practising their religion and so customize it to their new context. Family is very important as are supportive neighbours, church groups and teachers, rather than social services. Though these young people have fled trauma and persecution, Bereket has chosen not to focus on their victimhood, but their hope.

Religion and Growing up in Britain 2

This session was chaired by **Sarah Dunlop** who also spoke about her project with Pete Ward involving photographic work with young Polish migrants in Plymouth. An exhibition of these young people's photos of what they find sacred was on display as part of the day. Sarah then introduced **Sarah-Jane Page** who spoke about the first large scale survey in the UK investigating youth, religion and sexuality, complemented by interviews and video diaries, led Andrew Yip at Nottingham University and on which she was a researcher. This found a spectrum of views and experiences amongst young Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs. 74% of those surveyed felt their religion made them a better person, but many felt it sidelined in secular contexts e.g. by health and educational professionals, so practitioners should be more informed about religiosity and not assume that young people are secular. Some of these religious young adults have moved from 'sex in marriage' to 'meaningful or committed sexual expression' as ideal, whilst, on the whole, heterosexuality does remain the ideal (with 52.4% stating this). LGBT respondents did find conflict within their faith, but also accommodating spaces e.g. in Buddhism. Some managed through 'compartmentalizing', especially within conservative religious groups. School-based classes might be young people's only, and limited, source of information about sex and so they then felt ill-equipped to deal with experiences and had few sources of support. Dialogue and engagement within as well as between religions on this often hidden subject could improve the situation. Religious institutions still remain silent around many areas of sexuality.

10,500 11-18 year olds completed another online survey, this one administered within schools in Bradford, Hillingdon and Newham, investigating their attitudes towards religion as part of a project led by **Nicola Madge** at Brunel University who presented the research. A smaller number also participated in discussion groups, paired interviews and/or completed e-journals. Results are still being analysed, but the team is finding a lot of diversity with migration from strongly religious countries. Yet there does seem to be a decrease in the extent to which young people are pursuing organized religion, perhaps indicating assimilation. The picture is complex and contradictory. Family members have the most influence upon religious identities, but only just, with religious teachings and leaders coming a close second and third. Despite much variation between faith groups and non-religious young people, choice, flexibility and response to context are common themes.

Christian Youth Now and Then

Taking Birmingham as her historical case study using the Sunday School Union's archive, and conducting fieldwork with contemporary Christian youth workers, **Naomi Stanton** from the Open University is investigating the shift away from Sunday schools in Britain for her PhD. Sunday schools were at their peak in the early 1900s with 75% of children in England and Wales registered, having been pioneered by Robert Raikes in 1780. From the '60s there was, however, massive decline. Naomi has found that the Sunday school movement grew institutionalized and prescriptive with teachers caught between conflict from the Union and the clergyman. The curriculum was rigidly prescribed. Sunday schools started to decline when moved to fit in with church services rather than being run separately in the afternoon. This contributed to a decline in the number of non-church goers attending who had previously comprised the majority. Today tensions between the demands of churches and clergy and youth workers endure with the former looking primarily to bring young people into the church and the latter focused on social action and support. There is no necessary

linear progression from social club participation to engagement with small cell groups to Sunday service attendance.

There are, though, actively engaged young Christians whose faith informs voluntary work, as **Peter Hopkins** from Newcastle University and his team found in a project looking at young people's experiences of volunteering in Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina and Ecuador with evangelical Christian organization Latin Link. They conducted interviews and 14 participants kept diaries for the project during their trips. On the whole these young people found the experience personally enriching. It helped clarify feelings of vocation, e.g. wanting to go into teaching or social work, and motivated some to contribute more to Christian organisations at home having felt empowered and gained confidence. Such work was important in the transition to adulthood. There were, however, struggles returning to an 'aggressively secular society' having spent time in a context where religion was the norm. The team have recommended Latin Link provide more contextual training prior to trips having encountered a lack of understanding of poverty and inequality on the part of these young people from the West.

Final Session: Practitioners' Panel Session

Andy Burns, the CEO of youth charity East to West, **James Hewitt**, Student Mission Developer for the charity Fusion UK, **Jon Langford**, Director of Youth and Community Work at St Paul's Church Salisbury and **Cat Sweet**, a schools' chaplain, had all volunteered to listen to the presentations throughout the day and provide reflections on what they found useful/striking/interesting. These were prompted by questions from the chair **Alister McGrath**. They were all struck by young people's searching for authenticity and genuine relationships. The importance of really listening to young people and not assuming one knows what's going on was emphasized. Youth was framed as a period of transition; a state of flux, and perhaps practitioners should have more faith in young people's adeptness at adapting. Nonetheless, there is a desire to belong: to have a home. Knowing one isn't alone can help. A lot of young Christians still seem reluctant to state openly that they are Christian in order to avoid preconceptions and stereotypes. A question about cuts to services was raised with opinion somewhat divided. Some felt deep anger at the loss of funding for work with vulnerable young people in areas of deprivation, but the Big Society was also seen as an opportunity for church and other religious involvement.

Report by Rebecca Catto

Speaker Biogs

Alister McGrath is Professor of Theology, Ministry and Education at King's College London. He is a prominent theologian often invited to intervene in public debate who has published books including *The Dawkins Delusion Surprised by Meaning: Science, Faith, and how we make sense of things*.

Sarah Dunlop is a research associate in the Department of Education and Professional Studies at King's College London. She has been the researcher on Religion and Society funded project *Migration and Visual Culture*. Her background is in Theology.

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Mathew Guest is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University. He is Principal Investigator on Religion and Society funded project [Christianity and the University Experience in Contemporary England](#). His books include *Bishops, Wives and Children: Spiritual Capital Across the Generations* (2007, with Douglas Davies) and *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture* (2007). m.j.guest@durham.ac.uk

Peter Hopkins is Senior Lecturer in Social Geography at Newcastle University. He has been Principal Investigator on Religion and Society funded project [Youth transitions, international volunteering and religious transformations](#) and Co-Investigator on *Relational Religious Identities* and [Marginalized Spiritualities](#). His publications include the book *Young People, Place and Identity* (2010). peter.hopkins@ncl.ac.uk

Bereket Loul is a doctoral student at Leeds Metropolitan University working on Religion and Society funded studentship *Deriving meaning in transition: The role of religion for young refugees and asylum seekers* supervised by Professor Simon Robinson in the School of Applied Global Ethics in collaboration with the Yorkshire & Humber Regional Migration Partnership. B.Loul@leedsmet.ac.uk

Nicola Madge is Professor of Child Psychology within the Interdisciplinary Centre for Child & Youth Focused Research at Brunel University. She is Principal Investigator on Religion and Society funded project [Youth on Religion](#). Her books include *Risk & Childhood* (2007, with J. Barker) and *Children These Days* (2006). nicola.madge@brunel.ac.uk

Elizabeth Olson is Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at Edinburgh University. She has been Principal Investigator on Religion and Society funded projects *Relational Religious Identities* and [Marginalized Spiritualities](#). She also helps co-ordinate Edinburgh's Global Development Academy. Her research examines themes of religion, development, and normative ethics. elizabeth.olson@ed.ac.uk

Sarah-Jane Page is ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Durham University. She was Research Fellow on Religion and Society funded project [Religion, Youth and Sexuality: A Multi-faith Exploration](#) *Religion, Youth and Sexuality: A Multi-faith Exploration* at Nottingham University. sarah-jane.page@durham.ac.uk

Jasjit Singh is a doctoral student at the University of Leeds working on Religion and Society funded studentship [Keeping the Faith: The transmission of Sikhism among young British Sikhs \(18-30\)](#) in collaboration with the Bradford Educational and Cultural Association. He is regularly invited to discuss Sikhism on BBC Radio 4 and BBC Radio 2 and recently won a prize for best arts, humanities and social sciences postgraduate poster in the North East.

Sonya Sharma is Research Associate on the Religion and Society funded project [Christianity and the University Experience in Contemporary England](#) at Durham University. Her research has included work on Christian women's sexual identities and her publications include *Good Girls, Good Sex: Women Talk about Church and Sexuality* (forthcoming Fernwood Publishing) and *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization* (2008, co-edited with Kristin Aune and Giselle Vincett). sonya.sharma@durham.ac.uk

Nick Shepherd is Chief Executive & Team Leader Director of the Centre for Youth Ministry. Nick has been involved in youth ministry for over thirteen years, as a practitioner and researcher. His publications a co-edited book on approaches to youth ministry outside of the church: *Church Unlimited: Youthwork and Mission Today* (2008).

Naomi Stanton is a doctoral student at the Open University working on a Religion and Society funded studentship *From Sunday Schools to Christian Youth Work: young people's engagement with organised Christianity in twentieth century England and the present day* supervised by Professor John Wolffe and in collaboration with Christian Education. She co-edits the online journal *Youth and Policy* and is co-organising an [event on faith and youth work](#) this June. n.stanton@open.ac.uk

Giselle Vincett is a sociologist of religion. Her PhD focused on the spiritualities of feminist women and she has been Research Associate on Religion and Society funded projects *Relational Religious Identities* and [Marginalized Spiritualities](#) at Edinburgh University. Her publications include *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization* (2008, co-edited with Kristin Aune and Sonya Sharma). gvincett@staffmail.ed.ac.uk

Pete Ward is Senior Lecturer in youth ministry and theological education at King's College London. He has been Principal Investigator on Religion and Society funded project *Migration and Visual Culture* and published books including *Gods Behaving Badly: Religion and Celebrity Culture* (2010). peter.ward@kcl.ac.uk

Linda Woodhead is Professor of Sociology of Religion at Lancaster University and Director of the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme. She has been commissioned to produce reports on religion or belief for the Equalities and Human Rights Commission and recent books include *A Sociology of Religious Emotion* (2010 with Ole Riis) and *A Very Short Introduction to Christianity* (2004). l.woodhead@lancaster.ac.uk

Full Conference Programme

Lecture Room B5, Franklin-Wilkins Building, Stamford Street, SE1 9NH

- 9.15 **Registration**
- 10.00 **Introduction:** Alister McGrath (KCL), Peter Ward (KCL) and Linda Woodhead (Religion & Society Programme Director/Lancaster University)
- 10.15 **Religion and growing up in Britain 1**
Mathew Guest and Sonya Sharma (Durham University) – *Religion and University Students*
Betsy Olson and Giselle Vincett (Edinburgh University) – *Spirituality and Social Deprivation*
Chair: Pete Ward
- 11.15 **COFFEE/TEA** (Room G73 next to Lecture Room B5)
- 11.45 **Young Religious Identities**

Jasjit Singh (Leeds University) – *The Transmission of Sikhism to the Next Generation*
Bereket Loul (Leeds Metropolitan University) – *Young Asylum Seekers' Religious Identities*

Chair: Nick Shepherd (Centre for Youth Ministry)

12.45 **LUNCH** (Room G73 next to Lecture Room B5)

1.45 **Religion and growing up in Britain 2**

Sarah-Jane Page (Durham University) – *Young Religious People and Sexuality*

Nicola Madge (Brunel) – *Young People's Perspectives on Religion*

Chair: Sarah Dunlop (KCL)

2.45 **TEA/COFFEE** (Room G73 next to Lecture Room B5)

3.15 **Christian youth now and then**

Naomi Stanton (Open University) – *From Sunday Schools to Youth Work*

Peter Hopkins (Newcastle University) – *Young Christian Volunteers in Latin America: What difference does the experience make?*

Chair: Alister McGrath (KCL)

4.15 **Alister McGrath and practitioners panel session and plenary**

5.00 **END**

An exhibition from two of the Religion & Society funded projects is on display all day in Room G73.