

Title

Relational Religious Identities: exploring contemporary meanings of religion among Scottish Christian youth

What this Study Contributes

This study sheds new light on the meanings of religion for young Scottish Christians and the construction of (post) secular societies.

Team

Principal Investigator: Dr Elizabeth Olson (Edinburgh)

Co-investigator: Dr Peter Hopkins (Newcastle)

Co-investigator: Professor Rachel Pain (Durham)

Research Associate: Dr Giselle Vincett (Edinburgh)

University

University of Edinburgh

Award

Phase 1 Small Grant £73,736

Research Partners

Catholic Chaplaincy, University of Glasgow (Father John Keenan); the international Christian College, Glasgow (Graeme McMeekin); Boys Brigade 205th Company, Eaglesham (Tom Mann); Elim Pentecostal Church, Glasgow (Carl Johnston); Junction 12 Youth Group (run and organized by Scripture Union); Cranhill Parish youth group, Church of Scotland (Reverend Muriel Pearson). Additional collaborations have been formed through this research with the Church of Scotland Urban Priority Areas Development Team and Faith in Community Scotland. Similar support was offered by the Transformation Team, Glasgow, Church of Scotland, and YMCA Scotland.

Approach

Group work was conducted with six groups of young people recruited via various Christian organizations in Glasgow involving 64 participants in total. Sixteen young people were then interviewed from the groups, either on their own or with a parent/guardian, and asked to complete a q-sort designed to identify clustering trends in a) the meanings of Christian identity in the context of Glasgow, b) belief, and c) the relative relationship between religious affiliation and spirituality.

Findings

Project finished **30th September 2008**.

The experiences of 'Generation Y' Christians in Glasgow point to several important insights for academics and practitioners. The major areas are as follows:

Religious identity and religious difference:

The meanings of religious identity have changed substantially in Glasgow, and this generation tends to hold quite different views from those of their parents about the meanings of religious difference. Sectarianism continues to be identified as an important and disconcerting experience, particularly for the Catholic participants, though most young people distinguish between sectarianism related to football (Celtics and Rangers) and religious bigotry. Catholic youth are aware and concerned about sectarianism both from personal experiences and from the stories that they grew up with of their parents and grandparents being denied jobs because of their Catholic identity.

Most of our participants believe that it is difficult to be a Christian today. As one young man put it, 'It isn't cool to be Christian.' In some cases, this has elicited criticism of a society which is seen to protect minority religious identities but not Christian identities. Nonetheless, for religious youth who are very active in their faith, their Christianity functions as a central identity and a significant way for believers to distinguish themselves from others. This can also translate into a lack of tolerance for 'Sunday' Christians or those who do not position their faith in a place of central importance.

Religious Practices and Transmission:

We found that a Christian identity is, for young people, increasingly ‘voluntaristic’. That is to say, it is a conscious choice rather than something ‘inherited’ or taken for granted. There is still evidence that parents can have an influence on the religious practices of their children. Young people whose families are very involved in particular churches or denominations might follow the lead of one parent or both parent in selecting what church they attend. Where a parent has switched churches, a young person might also be more open to attending different churches in search of an authentic experience.

However, young people today are constructing their religious experience and practices in very different ways than previous generations. Some young people who consider themselves Christians may not attend a service on Sunday or be a member of a church. Nearly all young people weave together a range of different ‘encounters’ and ‘relationships’ – youth groups, bible study, music events, work, worship at skate parks, personal study or reflection – to create unique religious practices. This has important consequences for how we talk about and measure generational religious decline in the UK.

Meanings and Theologies:

As young people construct new spaces and ways of worship, they accept rules and ethics which came with their choices. Their view of religion and God was not simply to help them be happy and successful in life as some researchers have suggested of their generation. Instead, our informants wanted ‘more than just the blue skies’ (as the song puts it), and their choice to accept the difficult or challenging aspects of faith was spoken of by them as being a mark of ‘authentic’ Christians. We have been especially struck by what we call an ‘ethic of care’ which these young Christians hold, and their practical or relational meaning making. The majority of our young interviewees intend to go into ‘caring’ careers or wish to use their skills to help others, and they frequently spoke about ethics and social justice. We gradually began to realise that what is sacred to these young people is *relationship*, that between themselves and God and their multiple relationships with others.

It was also important that God and faith could be ‘healing’, ‘comforting’, and a ‘friend’. This is a God and a faith rooted in this world, and which helps young people to negotiate the complexities of their world. This was particularly important among un-churched youth. Though their views have often been described as ‘fuzzy’ morality for their lack of theological or ethical language, they understand their relationship with God and structured religion as offering practical guidelines and strength to navigate a difficult world, and to think through ethical dilemmas related to obligations and responsibilities to oneself and the broader society.

Activities and Outcomes

- Presentation of the research at various events, including to the Chancellor of the University of Edinburgh, the Duke of Edinburgh, 12 August 2008, during his visit in honour of the centenary of Geography at the University of Edinburgh.

- The production of academic articles including a chapter co-authored by project researcher Dr Giselle Vincett entitled 'Gender matters: doing feminist research on religion and youth' published in the edited volume *Religion and Youth* published by Ashgate July 2010:
http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&title_id=9263&edition_id=11961&calcTitle=1.
- The successful application for a Religion and Society Phase 2 Large Grant 'Marginalized Spiritualities' extending and deepening the research:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/projects/phase_two/large_research_projects/page:1#Marginalized_Spiritualities.

Further Information

- Podcasts about Betsy Olson's second Religion and Society grant including discussion of this Small Grant are available:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/marginalized_spiritualities.