

## Yoga and meditation offer stillness in the midst of busy urban lives

Modern urban British life is fast-paced, and supposedly secular. Numerous surveys suggest that institutional frameworks of religion are less important to individuals than they used to be. We also know that more people are turning to new spiritual practices – which often draw upon elements of what are very old spiritualities in other parts of the world. Yet the significance of these spiritual practices is disputed. In a one-year project funded by Religion and Society, Chris Philo, Louisa Cadman and Jennifer Lea set out to advance this debate by investigating what place yoga and meditation actually have in ordinary people's daily lives in Brighton and Hove.

Yoga and meditation were found to be offered in a variety of places in the local area. There are dedicated studios and Buddhist and other meditation centres. Gyms, dance studios, church halls, schools and shops and cafes all rent rooms to yoga teachers, and some to meditation groups. Postural yoga tends to be offered in commercial centres and seated meditation in Buddhist or secular therapy contexts. There is evidently a lot of choice and demand. Between 2010 and 2011 the team asked 26 people to keep intensive 'time-space' diaries of their daily spiritual practices in relation to the rest of their lives. They subsequently interviewed 22 diarists, alongside 15 yoga and meditation teachers and centre managers/administrators.

Although often characterised as shallow and consumerist, findings from the project suggest that these forms of contemporary spirituality involve some depth of engagement, and tend to be of quite considerable significance in people's lives. There is variation: some participants are purist in their affiliations and deliberately refuse to 'pick 'n' mix' practices and beliefs; others readily acknowledge and even reproach themselves for a lack of religious-spiritual constancy – but all were found to be genuine in their own sense of seeking an elusive form of well-being which is embodied, mindful and, to that end, 'spiritual' (usually with a lower-case s). Such well-being is considered by all of them a very important aspect, or antidote, to their busy lives, and a counterbalance to constant pressures to earn, perform, achieve, and spend. The practices are felt to give some perspective on life.

Often people had taken up yoga/meditation during a period in their life of transition or crisis, especially related to mental or physical health. They appreciate the relaxation and stillness, the absence of a goal orientation and the integration of mind and body (though some can feel body-conscious and competitive in class). The project found that for some people these practices become meaningful opportunities for 'truth-telling' by oneself to oneself (and to others). Such 'truth-telling' is understood less in terms of grand accounts of religious 'Truth', and more as situated conversations (again with oneself and/or others) about possible conditions for attaining a meaningful perspective on things. These accounts are bound up in respondents' narratives with talk about the absolute centrality of learning to be 'present' in (and 'mindful' of) the immediate here-and-now.



*A project photograph of the Brighton Natural Health Centre*

The importance of consumer capitalism, and its attendant inequalities, as a milieu for these practices was also confirmed. Yoga and meditation are not equally open to all – classes cost (and a certain degree of physical mobility is required for yoga). Some interviewees spoke of competition between providers and even ‘yoga wars’. What is interesting is that late capitalism simultaneously creates the space for this thriving spiritual market to develop, and the practices provide users with space to question and escape some of its demands. By such means retreat is being found in the heart of the city as well as in rural idylls, and fast-paced consumers are attempting to break engrained patterns of life in order to become somewhat slower, more reflective, participants in 21st century urban life.

### Find out more...

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- Visit the project’s website:  
[http://web.me.com/jennifer.simmonds/Everyday\\_Urban\\_Spiritual/Welcome.html](http://web.me.com/jennifer.simmonds/Everyday_Urban_Spiritual/Welcome.html)
- Listen to Chris Philo, Louisa Cadman and Jennifer Lea discussing the research as part of a workshop on ‘new spiritualities’ the project organized in co-operation with the University of Glasgow and Religion and Society:  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research\\_findings/featured\\_findings/workshop\\_on\\_new\\_spiritualities](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/workshop_on_new_spiritualities)
- Read the project report:  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2011\\_09/1316686140\\_Spiritualities\\_Project\\_User\\_Report.pdf](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2011_09/1316686140_Spiritualities_Project_User_Report.pdf)
- Keep an eye out for an edited volume of research from the project to be published as part of the Ashgate AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme book series:  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/news/show/announcing\\_new\\_book\\_series](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/news/show/announcing_new_book_series)

### You might also be interested in...

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- The final conference of the Religion and Society Programme on ‘Sacred Practices of Everyday Life’ at which the project will be presented:  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme\\_events/show/sacred\\_practices\\_of\\_everyday\\_life](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/sacred_practices_of_everyday_life)
- Religion and Society –funded project ‘Landscape aesthetics, meaning and experience in Christian pilgrimage’ also presented at the new spiritualities workshop:  
<http://www.bris.ac.uk/geography/news/2009/136.html>
- Listening to presentations from the event ‘Spiritual Progression in Economic Recession?’ co-organised by Religion and Society, including on spirituality and mental health and amongst urban young people:  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research\\_findings/featured\\_findings/spiritual\\_progression\\_in\\_economic\\_recession](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/spiritual_progression_in_economic_recession)



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



## Award Title

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**The everyday urban spiritual: placing spiritual practices in context**

## Team

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**Principal Investigator:** Professor Chris Philo (University of Glasgow)

**Research Associate:** Dr Louisa Cadman

**External Consultant:** Dr Jennifer Lea (Loughborough University)

## Award Type

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Phase 3 Small Grant

## Key terms

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spirituality, brighton, geography, Foucault, embodiment