

'It isn't cool to be Christian'- study of Generation Y faith in Glasgow reveals change



It seems that being a young Christian in Glasgow today is not easy. Far from being the norm, being a young Christian means having to explain yourself. Moreover, sectarianism between Catholics and Protestants continues to be part of the experience of young people, particularly for the Catholic participants, though most distinguish between sectarianism related to football (Celtics and Rangers) and religious bigotry. But there are compensations; above all, the sense of relationship which religious belonging brings – both with other people, and with God.

These were amongst the findings from a one year project led between 2007 and 2008 by Elizabeth Olson at Edinburgh University and funded by the [Religion and Society Programme](#). She and her team worked with six groups of young people recruited via various Christian organizations in Glasgow, carried out in depth interviews with sixteen individuals, complemented with paired interviews with the young participant and a parent or guardian, and surveyed more about Christian meanings and belief.

The study left no doubt that religious identity has changed substantially; this generation tends to hold very different views from their parents. They emphasize the importance of being an 'authentic' Christian, or a person who lives their faith in all spaces and at all times. Most believe that it is difficult to be a Christian today. Some voiced concerns about a society which is seen to protect minority religious identities, but not Christian identity. Nonetheless, for those young people who are very active in their faith, Christianity functions as a core identity and a significant way in which they distinguish themselves from secular society, and even from 'Sunday' Christians who limit their engagement with their faith to more formal or prescribed church events.

Parents continue to influence the religious commitments of their children, but the 'transmission' of faith runs in sometimes unanticipated directions. Young people influence their parents, parents engage in debates with their children, and in contexts where young people feel that their parents are not adequate religious mentors, they confidently seek new relationships and communities. As such, Generation Y appears to be constructing religious experience and practices in different ways than previous generations. The internet and peer groups, real or virtual, are very important. Some who consider themselves Christian may not attend a service on Sunday or be a member of a church at all. 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 packages.

This has important consequences for how we talk about and measure generational religious change in the UK. As young people construct new spaces and ways of being Christian, many aspects of the religion start to change. Indicators such as church membership and attendance, or even self-identification using traditional conceptions of religious groups, may no longer adequately reflect the practices of young Christians. This does not necessarily

imply that all young people are creating individual religious experiences, or superficial approaches to faith and the immediate benefits it can offer. In the USA some studies have suggested that Generation Y has a watered down version of faith, which is mainly about being happy and successful in life. Perhaps because of the more counter-cultural nature of Christianity in the UK, this study found that young people do not shy away from challenging aspects of their religion. Instead, having a faith which you have to defend, and taking seriously its difficult demands, are regarded by many as marks of 'authentic' Christianity.

Find out more...

- 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
- Look up the article 'Mapping intergenerationalities: the formation of youthful religiosities' in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Volume 36, Issue 2, pages 314–327, April 2011, written by the team: Peter Hopkins, Elizabeth Olson, Rachel Pain, and Giselle Vincett,
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/tran.2011.36.issue-2/issuetoc>
- Look up the article 'Young People and Performance Christianity in Scotland' in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Volume 27, Issue 2, pages 275-290, April 2012, written by the team: Giselle Vincett, Elizabeth Olson, Peter Hopkins, and Rachel Pain,
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13537903.2012.675741?journalCode=cjcr20#preview>
- Look up the article 'Re-theorizing the postsecular present" embodiment, spatial transcendence, and challenges to authenticity amongst young Christians in Glasgow, Scotland' forthcoming in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, written by the team: Elizabeth Olson, Peter Hopkins, Rachel Pain, and Giselle Vincett. <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/raag20/current>
- 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

You might also be interested in...

- Elizabeth Olson's Religion and Society Phase 2 Large Grant 'Marginalized Spiritualities' extending and deepening this research and involving the same team: <http://youthandreligion.org.uk/>
- The Religion and Society-organised event 'Young People and Religion' held on 18th May 2011 at King's College London at which Elizabeth Olson and Giselle Vincett presented findings:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/young_people_and_religion_day
- The final report from member Peter Hopkins' own project funded by the Religion and Society Programme 'Youth transitions, international volunteering and religious transformations':
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010_09/1284991111_YCLAEnglish_Report.pdf

Project Details

Award Title

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

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

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

Award Type

Phase 1 Small Grant

Key terms

youth, Christianity, Scotland, city, sectarianism, identity