

Loss, creativity, and social class shape young people's religious and spiritual encounters in deprived neighbourhoods



Attendees looking at the project's exhibition at the Young People and Religion Conference

Since 2000, research on youth and religion has increased on both sides of the Atlantic, often with a strong middle class bias. With increasing inequality in the UK and other Western societies, the experiences of young people growing up in areas of deprivation demand greater attention. In the UK, these young people might not engage in traditionally structured religious practice, but this does not make them irreligious. This is one of the findings from Elizabeth Olson and her team's project, which tackled two neglected factors in the study of religion: class and age.

Between 2009 and 2011, funded by [Religion and Society](#), they 'hung out and hung on' in areas of deprivation in Glasgow and Manchester, conducting over 100 interviews with young people, neighbourhood elders, community service providers, faith leaders, and going along with youth workers on the streets and at youth groups, centres and programmes. Teams of young people in both cities were trained in video production and photography, leading to the production of two films and a travelling photography exhibition. Their aim was to understand how the characteristics of these places shape and inform youth religiosity.

The team found that whilst community faith-based organisations are inspired to provide services for young people, the faith groups do not necessarily develop religious relationships with them. Young people perceived local churches as middle class spaces for people who live 'better lives', which contrasted with their own experiences of growing up in areas of urban deprivation. Many young people didn't feel 'good enough' to engage with religious organisations in their communities. In contrast, secular youth clubs were not seen as welcoming places for discussing some of the issues central to young people's curiosities and concerns about life and death.

Some young participants did embrace aspects of 'traditional' religion in nontraditional ways. Many described deeply cultivated religious identities, evidenced by prayer, meditation, or practices that focused on traditional and new sacred spaces. For some first or second generation migrants to the UK, the perceived secularism of their peers was viewed as emblematic of broader social problems. But for others, religious identity was not taken for granted and the British religious landscape provided new opportunities for spiritual exploration.

Belief in ghosts and spirits, ongoing bonds with lost family and friends, and the power of blessings and rituals, as well as atheism, were prevalent, once the researchers found an appropriate way to talk and listen to these young people about such subjects. Many had had early encounters with death and illness, often of a family member or close friend, and lived in insecure circumstances. Some reported feeling unable to cross certain streets or access certain areas such as the park in their neighbourhood due to gang boundaries and risk of violence. Their options for accessing religious and spiritual resources, or finding a space where belief could be discussed without ridicule,

were restricted in comparison to the young socially included Christians interviewed for the team's preceding project, which inspired this research (see below).

The films produced by the two groups of young people 'Being' and 'Daisy Chains' were screened at a feedback workshop bringing together researchers, policy makers and practitioners with young people in Edinburgh in January 2011. Two of the participants involved in making the films continued to study film and photography and one said: 'The adults [involved in making the film] let us express what we felt about religion and spirituality. They kept the paperwork to a minimum and didn't take over. We learnt by talking to ourselves and others, brainstorming ideas and taking pictures.'

Find out more...

- Visit the project's website: <http://youthandreligion.org.uk/>
- Access podcasts from an interview with project leader Elizabeth Olson about the research: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/marginalized_spiritualities_complete_conversation
- Look up the case study from the project by Giselle Vincett and Elizabeth Olson in *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (Routledge, 2012, pp. 196-202): <http://www.routledge.com/cw/woodhead-9780415575812/>
- Read a summary of the findings from the first Religion and Society project the team undertook with socially-included young Christians in Glasgow: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2012_08/1344270299_Olson_Phase_1_Small_Grant_Block.pdf
- Consider arguments about the significance of these young people's experiences for how we think about the ethics of austerity and human suffering in a forthcoming book chapter by Elizabeth Olson in *The Sage Handbook of Human Geography* (email: eaolson@email.unc.edu)
- Request copies of the films produced by young people by contacting Elizabeth Olson (eaolson@email.unc.edu)
- Keep an eye out for the chapter about the project's methods forthcoming in *How to Research Religion* edited by Linda Woodhead (Oxford University Press) and arising from the 2010 'Innovative Methods in the Study of Religion' conference co-organised by the Religion and Society Programme: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/innovative_methods_in_the_study_of_religion

You might also be interested in...

- Reading about the project about Christian young people volunteering in Latin America led by project team member Peter Hopkins & also funded by Religion and Society:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2011_01/1294656994_Hopkins_Phase_2_Small_Grant_Block.pdf
- The report from the one-day Religion and Society conference on youth & religion which featured Elizabeth Olson and Giselle Vincett speaking about the research as well as its photographic exhibition:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/young_people_and_religion_event
- Reading about the 'Innovative Methods in the Study of Religion' conference at which the project was presented. The team have contributed a chapter to the book from the event due to be published by Oxford University Press in 2013:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/innovative_methods_in_the_study_of_religion

Award Title

Marginalised Spiritualities

Team

Principal Investigator: Dr Elizabeth Olson

Co-Investigator: Professor Peter Hopkins

Co-Investigator: Professor Rachel Pain

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University

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Arts & Humanities
Research Council



Research Partners

Youth centres and places of worship in Glasgow and Manchester

Church of Scotland Urban Priority Areas Committee

YMC Scotland

Award Type

Phase 2 Large Grant

Key terms

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