

## A Sociologist among the Spirits

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### Abstract

This article is an academic autobiography of Andrew Singleton, an Australian sociologist of religion whose work focuses on applied, mixed-methods studies of youth religion, religious belief and new religious movements. It starts with a sociology of religion class, describes graduate research that utilised qualitative methods, and post-doctoral work in quantitative methods, and then concludes by discussing recent mixed-methods projects. The career arc of an academic is shaped by the legacy of earlier scholars in the field, key mentors, opportunities for research support and collaborators. The article emphasises the role and importance of these factors in forming an individual's professional profile and the kind of scholarship they produce.

### Keywords

Sociology of religion; mixed-methods research; youth religion; Spiritualism.

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### Introduction

It is a hot night in early January in a small country town a long way east of my home. I am sitting in complete darkness with twenty other

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people, holding hands with strangers on either side of me. We are in the spare bedroom of someone's 1980s brick house. The host has placed the chairs in a tightly bunched semi-circle, so we are all sitting pretty close, legs touching. It is really stuffy in this room, and an air conditioner hums away in the corner. At the top of the semi-circle is a cabinet fashioned out of wood and black cloth, with a chair in the middle. This cabinet is for a spirit medium. I am here as a researcher, about to take part for the first time in a physical séance. Waiting in the dark, holding my neighbour's hands, I'm excited, and a little bit nervous. Before this night, I have taken part in many different kinds of religious rituals, but nothing like this. For me, this is participant observation of the strangest, most beguiling kind.

Notionally, I know what to expect. I have been studying the religion of Spiritualism for several years and have read many accounts of the happenings in darkened séances, some dating back to the nineteenth century (see Weisberg 2004). Objects whizzing around the room, the touch of Spirit in the darkness, furniture moving about unaided, musical instruments that play without human assistance, and the manifestation of ectoplasm from the mouth of the medium are all typical of the classical physical séance (see Brandon 1983). I have interviewed participants in these séances, but finally, this is my chance to sit in one myself—as opposed to writing about these things in a remote way. (The title for this article is a play on the name of the book, *A Magician among the Spirits*, published in 1924 by Harry Houdini, twentieth-century escapologist and investigator of spirit mediums.)

To take my place in the séance room, I first had to find out who hosts these events, explain my research, earn their trust and finally receive an invitation to take part. No longer a staple of the Spiritualist movement, full-tilt physical séances are now rare in Australia, performed by a handful of touring English, European and American mediums. Physical mediums are not well-known compared to international 'mental' mediums like John Edward, who sells out concert halls, or even local stars like Florence King and Mitchell Coombes, who reliably fill Returned and Services League (RSL) clubs. Nonetheless, small séances like these are an important, belief-affirming encounter for many of those in attendance.

Over the course of the next five hours, I take part in the séance, feeling the touch of Spirit on my knee and seeing dim lights whizzing around the room. The medium assumed the persona of his 'control', the spirit of a doctor from another time and place, and gave a long esoteric lecture, speaking in the darkness with a heavy accent. The denouement is the material manifestation of Spirit: after his helper turned on a faint

infrared light, I saw ectoplasm oozing from the medium's mouth. It finished shortly after midnight.

During the séance, I took mental notes of the kinds of people there, the things they said and the themes of the medium's message. The next day I wrote pages of notes. I am glad I did as this has reminded me of important little things I forgot. My research interests include youth religion and spirituality, new religious movements, secularisation and non-religion. Recently, I have been focusing on Spiritualism, and its place in the Australian religious firmament. It is a small movement, but there are still dozens of Spiritualist churches in operation, and other events, like this séance.

People that I tell, friends and colleagues, are curious about what I saw, and invariably ask for my personal opinion about what took place. Mostly I feel fortunate to be there, lucky to have an occupation as varied and interesting as that of a sociologist of religion, and humbled that the followers of physical mediumship allowed me to take part in their ritual. I am grateful too for the training and opportunities this job has afforded me. This article describes my professional journey to that séance room. Rather than discuss my objectivity or positioning (as I would in another kind of research article), I talk about my opportunities and mentors, along with the challenges of becoming a sociologist in what has long been an unfashionable discipline. I am an empirical researcher, and enjoy statistics on religion as much as doing ethnographic observation, so I discuss these different approaches and how this comes together in my work.

### Foundations and Forebears

The path to the séance began in 1990 when I enrolled in first-year sociology at Monash University in Melbourne. One sociology lecturer, Gary Bouma, stood out. He was an American, sang during one of the lectures, and curiously, wore clerical vestments. I can't remember if he talked about religion in that first year (his first-year topic was the family), but he was an intriguing, charismatic character. Two years later I decided to take his third-year elective unit, 'Spiritualities, Religions and Faiths'.

Before then, I had generally been interested in religion. I had had something of a classic Anglican upbringing as a child: born of Anglican parents, educated at an Anglican school, a member of the CEBS (Church of England Boys' Society, a now-defunct fraternal organisation like the Scouts), Sunday School and baptised and confirmed in the Anglican Communion. One of my favourite school subjects was 'Studies in

Religion and Life' (SRL) which explored many of the world's religious traditions in a non-doctrinal way, thrown together with sex education and anything else not covered in the general curriculum. In SRL we had excursions to the local synagogue, Freemason's Temple and local Catholic parish, a great entrée to the religious and spiritual diversity that lived around the corner from my school.

Gary's unit, however, introduced me to a different way of thinking about religion, peering behind what people believe or practise. The textbook for the course was his newly minted *Religion: Meaning, Transcendence and Community in Australia* (1992). (I still have my copy to the present day, albeit in a very battered condition.) In it, Gary outlined his recipe for the sociology of religion:

Before religion there was society. In order to understand religion, it is necessary to understand its social origins, the social milieus which give birth to religion in every age, and the social processes religions use to relate worshippers to that which is beyond (Bouma 1992: 19).

For reasons I can't explain even to this day, this way of thinking about religion resonated deeply with me. Teaching in his uncluttered and entertaining way, Gary introduced me to concepts I'd never heard before, or knew of only vaguely, like secularisation, and the 'sacred canopy'. Importantly, in Gary's classes, we were able to talk productively about religion without getting into arguments about what anyone believed, or the competing truth claims of different religions. Years later, when I started to write my own textbook on religion for SAGE, *Religion, Culture and Society* (Singleton 2014), his was the first book I looked at for inspiration and guidance.

Educated in America, Gary did his graduate studies and was an emerging scholar during the 'golden age' of the sociology of religion. In the late 1960s, German scholar Thomas Luckmann (1967: 18) claimed: 'the sociology of religion consists mainly of descriptions of the decline of ecclesiastic institutions—from a parochial viewpoint'. He argued that the discipline needed to be more outward looking, addressing religion's place in a rapidly changing world. This was something of a clarion call to a new generation of scholars who energised the sociology of religion in the next two decades, a movement described as the 'new sociology of religion' (Lemert 1975: 107). Major works include those by Peter Berger (1967), Meredith McGuire (1982), Eileen Barker (1984), and Bryan Wilson (1966), among others.

Gary was steeped in their work, and encouraged his students to read this scholarship. I liked the works of the 'new sociology' more than

Durkheim or Weber. (I found the ‘founding fathers’ of sociology tedious to read—I still do—although I acknowledge that many of their ideas animate my scholarship.) Most of all, I was drawn to empirical research, books like Eileen Barker’s *Making of a Moonie* (1984). Theory has never been my preference or strong suit.

Gary also set Alan Black’s edited collection, *Religion in Australia: Sociological Perspectives* (1991b), as compulsory reading in his religion unit. This book, which is still on my office bookshelf today, contains chapters by several well-known scholars of that time, including Ken Dempsey, Rachael Kohn and Tony Swain. Flicking through its pages now, I note chapters on Pentecostalism, Islam, Indigenous religions, gender, New Age religions and church decline, all of which are still important topics for contemporary scholars of religion in Australia.

At the time, however, the study of religion was a marginal enterprise in most humanities and social science departments (HASS) in Australia (see Bouma 1992). I presented my first academic paper—on Pentecostals and glossolalia—to a poorly attended session at the 1996 conference of the Australian Sociological Association (TASA). There was no thematic group or even a dedicated conference session on religion, and it would take almost 20 years for this to occur, thanks to the efforts of scholars like Anna Halafoff (Deakin University) and Doug Ezzy (University of Tasmania). Over time, indifference to the sociology of religion in Australian HASS departments has dissipated. We are less isolated as a field of inquiry and even the most anti-religious of scholars recognise the global importance of religion.

Notwithstanding the academy’s indifference, at the end of my undergraduate degree, I decided that that this was the substantive area of sociology I liked the most and I wanted to pursue a higher degree in this area. To me, gods and spirits are the most protean and mysterious part of the human experience, and offer myriad, interesting possibilities for study.

Independent research began with a small-scale survey of teenagers and their religious experiences in my Honours year, but I didn’t stick to the quantitative path. By the time I began my PhD at Monash University in the mid-1990s, sociologists had embraced thoroughly the ‘post-modern’ and ‘post-structuralist’ concepts pioneered in cultural studies and I liked this relative, interpretivist approach. My PhD was situated in that paradigm as I ‘deconstructed’ how people tell stories about their religious lives. Three of the chapters from my PhD eventually became my first journal articles (see Singleton 2001, which is the first, published in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*). By the time I had finished my

formal academic training I had come to appreciate the value and importance of a variety of methodological approaches and their capacity to illuminate different parts of the whole. This sensibility remains integral to my work, though my statistical training really hadn't yet begun—something I explain in the next section.

I was extremely fortunate to get an ongoing academic position at Monash University after two years of part-time lecturing and tutoring. It is extremely hard to break into the academy, and I was simply in the right place at the right time, with staff retirements opening new positions. For a while I veered away from exclusively researching religion, publishing papers on gender, men and masculinity. This dual focus has since fallen away. I felt I could only explain so many times why men don't do their share of housework, whereas studying religion (especially new religions, religious change and spirituality) seemed boundless and stimulating. It presented opportunities for exciting methodological innovations too.

### Counting on Religion

Australia has a long and distinguished tradition of the quantitative study of religion. We have the census, first administered in the colonies before Federation and nationally every few years since. Australian statisticians have been asking about people's religious affiliations longer than almost anywhere else in the world (Bouma 2006). When the Gallup organisation began opinion polling in Australia in the immediate post-war years, they routinely collected quantitative data on religious affiliation and practice, among other demographic variables.

The first major quantitative study of religion in Australia was conducted by Presbyterian pastor and sociologist Hans Mol in 1966, and his findings were published in 1971 as the seminal work, *Religion in Australia* (Mol 1971). Other major surveys of Australian religion followed, many more than people might realise or remember. Alan Black (1991a) presents a list of these studies and the impressive coterie of scholars who did this work, all of whom have since retired or died. While there have been some excellent quantitative studies on religion recently, such as *The Resilience and Ordinarity of Australian Muslims* (Dunn et al. 2015) and the work of the National Church Life Survey team (Pepper and Powell 2018), we are not doing as much of this kind of research compared to thirty years ago.

I am not sure whose idea it was, but in the early 2000s, three scholars, Ruth Webber and Michael Mason from the Australian Catholic

University, and Philip Hughes from the Christian Research Association, decided to do the first national study of teen religion and spirituality. They cast around for a younger scholar to be part of the project and my name came up. I gratefully joined the project, which was eventually called the *Spirit of Generation Y* (SGY) study. The SGY study was a great opportunity for me.

Our broad objective was to study teen religion *and* spirituality, and for that a mixed-methods study design was apposite. The project comprised more than 100 in-depth interviews with teens across Australia and a nationally representative survey (see Mason et al. 2007; Hughes 2006). The qualitative part was well within my area of methodological specialisation, but the quantitative part was a challenge. While I felt comfortable with the survey design (Philip, Mike, Ruth and I all designed the survey), I hadn't done any statistics since my honours project a decade earlier and I had long forgotten how to use SPSS. Michael Mason literally taught me on the job. In 2005–2007, Ruth, Mike and I met weekly to dissect the survey. Ruth was an old-hand with stats, but I learned SPSS from scratch, studying like an apprentice, watching Mike, listening to him explain things and supplementing with my own reading and experimentation. I think that the hands-on, problem-solving approach is the best way to learn statistics and I teach my own students in the same fashion. I remain indebted to Mike for his expertise, shared selflessly. Ruth was and remains a terrific mentor and colleague.

The timing of the SGY study (2003–2007) meant we followed closely behind the influential study of teen religion in America, *The National Study of Youth and Religion* (NSYR) (see Smith and Denton 2005). The leader of that research, Christian Smith, graciously shared with us their questionnaire, enabling easy comparison of American and Australian teens. The funding regime for both these projects illustrates the disparities between research backing on religion here and in America. The NSYR project was funded by a large grant from the Lily Endowment, and consequently their survey could include teens and one of their parents, as well as a longitudinal component. By contrast, our Australian project was funded by a coalition of industry sponsors (various Catholic Education Offices; YMACA; Lutheran Schools among others) pulled together by Philip, Ruth and Michael, and with a budget about 75 per cent smaller than the first-wave of the NSYR project. We applied for an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage grant but were unsuccessful. At that time, we felt the ARC wouldn't countenance a project on religion so we framed it as a study of 'worldviews' but the grant application was a near-miss nonetheless.

I had always hoped to do a follow-up study of teen religion in Australia. A decade after the SGY study concluded, I teamed up with Mary Lou Rasmussen (ANU), Anna Halafoff (Deakin) and Gary Bouma (now Emeritus Professor at Monash) to conduct the *Australia's Generation Z* (AGZ) study (Rasmussen et al. 2017). This is a study of teen attitudes to religious, sexual, gender and cultural diversity, and comprises eleven focus groups in three states with students in Years 9 and 10 (ages 15–16), a nationally representative telephone survey of 1,200 people aged 13–18, and thirty in-depth, follow-up interviews with survey participants. This study is directly comparable to the SGY study in many ways. We were fortunate this time to be funded by the ARC. We used the term ‘world-views’ in the official project title but unlike the SGY team, we were successful. In a little over a decade it had become more evident to policy makers, and the public, that Australia’s religious diversity needs to be understood properly, and several ARC projects on religion and religious change recently have been successful.

The cross-university composition of the team, and its international connections, were instrumental to its funding success, as is the case with other recent ARC studies on religion. While the community of scholars who study contemporary religion in Australia is small, there is a kindness, lack of ego and generosity that characterises this group.

These mixed-methods studies mapping large-scale social and cultural change are an important part of my scholarly repertoire, but that doesn’t explain the séance part. That comes next.

### On to the Afterlife...

Following the SGY study, I became interested in belief and the impact it has on everyday life. The SGY data indicated that in 2005 more than half of teens believed in life after death; a third of teens believed in reincarnation, and about a quarter believed in the possibility of communicating with the dead (Mason et al. 2007). Clearly, teens were responding to recent currents of social change in the West, including a rise in non-Christian ways of thinking about the afterlife; the triumph of anthropomorphic ideas about the hereafter; and the persistence of such beliefs in the face of declining religious observance (see McDannell and Lang 2001).

Questions remained unanswered from the SGY project, particularly in the quantitative data we collected: where, for example, did this belief in reincarnation come from? How did teens understand it? Did it make a difference to everyday life? Consequently, I have maintained a long-term

research interest in beliefs about the afterlife specifically, and religious belief generally. This is because beliefs are so instrumental to the everyday, and because they are an excellent barometer of religious and spiritual change (cf. Smith 2008).

The various projects I have done on afterlife belief are predominantly qualitative, for very particular reasons. In survey research on religion we spend a lot of time asking respondents about what they believe, but we limit their responses, constraining them to the pre-devised answers of the survey instrument. This is a familiar criticism of quantitative methods, but the sociology of religion is particularly susceptible in this regard, because there is so much complexity behind any stated belief or practice. In the process of quantification, we need to ensure we also study the everyday, lived meaning-making that is integral to belief and practice.

Never has this been illustrated to me more clearly than in the recent AGZ project. We had surveyed a teen who had indicated that she attended church each week and definitely believed in God. Ostensibly, this meant she fit the profile of someone quite religious. But an in-depth, follow-up interview revealed something different: a teen required by her parents to go to church weekly and who freely admitted she wouldn't go when she moved out of home.

The study of afterlife beliefs inevitably led me to the religion and philosophy of Spiritualism. (Spiritualists believe that life after death is an empirical fact, that the deceased do not lose their personalities after death, and that specific dead people can be readily contacted by the living.) Teaming up with a linguistic anthropologist from the ANU, Matt Tomlinson, we managed to secure an ARC grant to study Spiritualism in Australia. This project combines participant observation (hence the séances), interviews and archival research.

Our project was deliberately pitched to the Australian Research Council as interdisciplinary, something looked upon favourably by national and international funding bodies, underpinned by the idea that such approaches have the greatest capacity to produce new knowledge. As we wrote in our ARC project description, the sociological component demonstrates how Spiritualism articulates with the wider Australian religious context. Anthropologically, the project examines ritual forms in which Spiritualists aim to speak with the dead. Taken together, we are mapping the production and effect of belief on family, civic participation and ethics.

Working with an anthropologist is an easy fit for a sociologist. The bigger challenge is for sociologists of religion to collaborate with those outside the humanities and social sciences to produce novel research

projects. Perhaps the greatest potential is working with other disciplines to attend to a raft of social and environmental issues that are much more acute than when I started my academic career.

### Conclusion

I would like to think that the academic study of religion has come in from the cold in the past decade. As Australia has become more diverse in recent decades, there is increasing diversity in the cohort of scholars who study religion and spirituality. There has always been great scholars working in the field (they trained many of us), but recent funding successes built on national and international collaborations, media interest in our work, and departments that produce excellent and impactful research excellence suggest a new momentum for the study of religion. In the future, I hope we develop further capacity to conduct survey research on religion and make internationally recognised contributions to the study of the ‘religious nones’, a growing constituency here in Australia and throughout the global north.

Religion is enduringly important both nationally and globally. Scholars in our field are uniquely placed to understand and explain its critical role in driving other human action, whether that be attitudes to the environment, social movements, civic engagement, altruism or the care of other living creatures. This understanding is arguably the greatest contribution we can make in addressing major social problems.

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