

Youth, Religion, and Identity: A Canadian and International Workshop
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University of Ottawa
Workshop Report by Spencer Culham Bullivant and Paul L. Gareau

“Youth, Religion, and Identity: A Canadian and International Workshop” was a workshop funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) with additional funding from the Religion and Diversity Project, directed by Lori Beaman, Canada Research Chair in the Contextualization of Religion in Canada as well as the University of Ottawa’s Research Development Program and the Faculty of Arts. The workshop gathered scholars from Canada (Alberta, Ontario, Nova Scotia, and Quebec), England, Germany, and Australia. The purpose of this workshop was to examine the ways that youth interacted with, formed, and expressed conceptualizations of religion and how religion affected identity. The workshop was organized into five sessions. The first session consisted of a plenary presented by Elisabeth Arweck, University of Warwick (England), and each of the following sessions addressed a particular theme within the study of youth, religion, and identity.

Elisabeth Arweck’s presentation, titled “Religious Diversity in the UK: How the Attitudes and Views of 13–16 Year-Old Students Interact with their Own (Non-) Religious Identities” opened the workshop. This presentation was open to the public. Arweck opened her paper with an outline of past and current theoretical perspectives regarding youth, religion, multi-culturalism, and inter-culturalism in order to better understand how 13-16 year-old students in the United Kingdom view diversity. She noted that there has been a recent shift in the populations of schools in the UK due to increases in migration and immigration and that these shifts are forcing schools to adapt. Arweck found few mentions of the term diversity from the students, and that the discourse is now focused on “modern plurality.” The main conclusions of

Arweck's paper were that young people reflect a wider diversity in both roles and practices as well as how they understand belief. Her research also found that children most often reflect the traditions that they were brought up in. Arweck mentioned that scholars are not yet sure what children mean when they use terms like "atheist" or "agnostic," and that there are multiple in-between categories that are not encapsulated within these rigid terms. Finally, Arweck's data points out that young people could manage any needs required by diversity as long as any solution involved mutual respect.

Session two, "Institutional Norms and Perceptions," was the first thematic session of the workshop and featured papers by Anna Halafoff (Deakin University, Australia), Giomny Ruiz-Fernandez (Université de Montréal), Marie-Paule Martel-Reny (UQÀM), and Spencer Culham Bullivant (University of Ottawa). In her paper, "'Whatever': Religion, Youth, and Identity in 21st Century Australia," Anna Halafoff asked how youth view religious and non-religious identities through participation in interfaith activities and inter-religious education. Her research also problematized the perspective on youthful ambivalence, finding that Australian youth are more tolerant of religious diversity than perceived by the former generation. She argued that Australia's geographical proximity with Asia may have an impact on the shape of Australian public discourse on diversity. This paper was followed by Giomny Ruiz-Fernandez who studies Cuban immigrants in Montreal. Ruiz-Fernandez's "Cubanity Under the Lived Religion Approach: Dialogue between Gods and National Identity among Young Cuban First Generation Migrants in Canada" found self-identification of Cuban migrants that, under a traditionally conceptualized framework, would be termed religious. However, he problematizes the standard view of religion using the theoretical lens of Lived Religion to engage the more subjective concept of Cubaness, which does not fit the standard definition but is discussed by young Cubans

to reflect their religious identity. Ruiz-Fernandez found that this phenomenon has deep roots in Cuban culture and identity, even before Communism, and is manifested through a distrust of both government and institutions. This has resulted in a religious identification that defies structural and traditional definitions and categories.

Marie-Paul Martel-Reny's paper, "The Identity, Spirituality, and Religion of Young Quebecois" discussed the Ethics and Religious Culture Program (ERC) implemented in the school systems in Quebec in order to demonstrate the evolution of the religious landscape of Quebec. Utilizing data gathered from qualitative work with youth in Montreal between the ages of 14-19, her results speak to how young Quebecers are distrustful of religious institutions, and yet open to spirituality. For these young Quebecers, spirituality becomes a resource that allows for positive elements of religion to be embraced without the perceived negative aspects of religious dogmatism and clericalism. This allows for an openness to different ethnocultural religious frameworks, and in the case of the ERC, Martel-Reny remarks that its effectiveness is dependant on the teacher and pedagogical framing. Martel-Reny's paper reflected the difficulty inherent when institutions try to educate youth about religion. Spencer Bullivant's paper, "Youths at a Non-religious Summer Camp: Creating a Non-religious Identity in the United States" presented ethnographic work with youth in non-religious summer camps in the US and brought forward the importance of non-religion when understanding youthful engagement with discourses on identity. This discussion challenges the dominant notions of interactions between youth and religion, finding that with these particular non-religious youths, morality is not inherently tied to religion. Bullivant argues that tensions between these non-religious youths and their religious peers may actually be based on the maintenance of the moral norms of the United States rather than a religious/non-religious conflict.

In the third session entitled “Religion and Spirituality,” Reginald Bibby (University of Lethbridge) presented a paper titled “So You Think You Are Religious or Spiritual But Not Religious: So What?”, which was followed by Solange Lefebvre (Université de Montréal) whose paper was titled “Youth and Religion in Quebec.” The final two papers of this session were papers by Amy Fisher (University of Toronto) entitled “‘Hanging Out with the Poor’: Immaturity as Christian Identity in an Urban Shelter” and Scott Wall (University of Waterloo) who presented “Beyond the Congregation: Accounting for Factors of Religious Change among Evangelical, Chinese Canadian Young Adults.” Reginald Bibby’s paper offered important quantitative data and exposition on teens and religion in Canada. Bibby reported on levels of religiosity in youth, speaking about how people identify themselves along the spectrum of religion and spirituality. Solange Lefebvre’s paper presented an historical discussion unpacking the discourse of spirituality and young people in Quebec. An important aspect of this paper was Lefebvre’s assertion that scholars understand the prevalence of what Lefebvre calls “systems of meaning” over the religion/spirituality dichotomy when trying to understand youth and their engagement with religion. Lefebvre points to the particular Catholic roots of Quebec’s emphasis on spirituality and argued that this phenomenon was part of a movement within the Quebec Catholic Church towards a more authentic spirituality over institutionality in the 1950s.

Amy Fisher, using qualitative data gathered among workers at a downtown Toronto homeless shelter, investigated the notion of “immaturity” and assessing its value in the study of young people or “youthfulness” and religion. She argued that these grown men act and appear “immature” in order to live more authentically when dealing with homeless individuals. This authenticity is built on the idea that they are “hanging out like Jesus did.” Fisher analysed these actions and immaturity in general, through a comparison of Kant and Foucault, as more open,

accepting, and more relational. Scott Wall presented research on an Evangelical Protestant Chinese youth group in the greater Toronto area underscoring that this group provided a rich religious experience that greatly informed the identities of the participants. Wall argued that this experience would have been overlooked by sociological studies with a congregational focus. A congregational focus that finds youth to be apathetic may actually be ignoring the rich religious life found outside of the congregation. In this way, Wall problematizes the epistemological and social importance of congregations to the construction of youth identities as well to the sociological study of religious engagement.

Session four included papers ““If the Guy is Correct, I Don’t Care About What Religion He Is’: Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Daily Life” by Dörthe Vieregge (University of Hamburg, Germany), “Religion, Youth and Life Stages: Religious Expression of Young Adults of Immigrant Families in Canada as They Pass from Young to Mature Adulthood” by Peter Beyer (University of Ottawa), “Identity and Youth in a Multicultural Context: How Second Generation Muslims Grow up Canadian” by Rubina Ramji (Cape Breton University), and “Apathy or Misunderstanding?: Youth’s Reflections on their Religious Identity in Canada” by Heather Shipley (University of Ottawa). Dörthe Vieregge spoke specifically of socially disadvantaged youth of migrant and refugee background in Hamburg, Germany. Through a cultural studies and Bourdieusian analytical framework, she argued for the importance of subcultural assimilation over the normative religious identifiers to identity construction. Vieregge found a tension between the ideal models or identities of “correct-ness” and the oftentimes harsh social reality of a diverse Hamburg. She is stating that for minorities in Germany, religious identification is less important than the assimilation to socio-cultural norms. She advocated for religious education as a resource for dialogue over youthful experiences of

different forces of socialization. Peter Beyer, utilizing the Cultural and Religious Identity Survey (CRIS) that collected data from Canadians between the ages of 18-45 regardless of background, found that, for youth in Canada, spirituality is more popular than religion. Beyer found a shift in responses during the mid-20 year range in that spirituality acts as a component of religion or complement to religion. He concluded by stating that spirituality is far more prevalent in identification than religion, but spirituality also dominates for those who are religious.

Rubina Ramji's paper spoke to how young Muslim Canadians between the ages of 18-27 negotiate diversity and multiculturalism. She pointed to the fact these youths are building religion somewhat independent from different authorities, i.e. national, filial, and cultural ethnic markers. She underscored that these youth are strongly engaged in individual formations of identity and religion. Ultimately, this work countered arguments regarding the ambivalence of youth to religion and identity. Using qualitative and quantitative research investigating youth, religion, and sexuality in Canada, Heather Shipley unpacked the norms and perceptions we as researchers and adults have of youth and their engagement with religion. Shipley discussed how young people are negotiating institutional norms and perceptions by forming complex and hybrid identities based on multiple religious and non-religious influences. She provided an interesting look at how the "grammar" of gender studies can aid in understanding youth religious identity on the broadest spectrum. Following the work of Elisabeth Ursic, Shipley argued that the introduction of terms like "trans" or "bi" to discourse about religion could add nuance to the discussion.

The final session of the workshop contained papers by Pamela Dickey Young (Queen's University) who presented the paper "Religious Influences on Sexual Values and Sexual Practices among Youth in Canada," Géraldine Mossière and Josiane Le Gall (Université de

Montréal), presented their paper titled “Representations on Gender and Matrimonial Practices among Young Practitioners in the Quebecois Religious Landscape: Sexual Ethics as a Source of Distinction,” May Al-Fartousi (University of Ottawa) who presented the paper “Minority within Minority: Shi’i Muslim Young Girls’ Social Worlds Within Canada and Abroad,” and Paul L. Gareau (University of Ottawa), whose paper “A Crisis of Masculinity: The Negotiations of Gender for Catholic ‘Evangelical’ Youth in a Secular Canada” marked the end of the workshop.

Pamela Dickey Young, using qualitative and quantitative data from youth in Canada, analyzed the ways that Canadian young people think about premarital sex. She argued that these youths have internalized religious proscriptions against sex outside of marriage, but that process involved socialization beyond the religious institutions that have historically promoted these normative frameworks. The power of religion, though religious structures have clearly lost their proscriptive influence about sex and morality, still has an effect over moral perceptions of sexual practices and self. Dickey Young argued that the “odor of religion” remains in the hearts and minds of these youth participants even in the void of religious influence. Géraldine Mossière and Josiane Le Gall spoke from an anthropological framework of the intersections of cultural practices and norms, and dominant social mores. They studied West African Pentecostal and Muslim groups in Montreal and in Africa. Their presentation examines the way in which sexual norms are constructed and experienced within these different cultural groups. These norms present differences or distinctions between the group and the ‘Other,’ i.e. non-believers. Using Bourdieu’s notion of *distinction* that states everyday practices and perspectives serve to create social differences and hierarchies, Mossière and Le Gall spoke of the construction of particular religious and moral identities in each community. Distinction for youth in the Pentecostal and Muslim communities allow for mobility away from traditional strictures of identity underlined

by each ethnic community. Youth in both cases were actively negotiating the boundaries of moral identity while not trying to transgress norms of ethnic identity. Even with conservative religious frameworks, youth are using these traditions that are not of a societal norm to motivate change and shape their identities.

May Al-Fartousi's research on young Shi'i Muslim girls of grade school age in Canada described the different ethno-cultural, moral, and social elements of their gendered identities. From an interdisciplinary and multi-theoretical framework, Al-Fartousi's interlocutions with members of her community raised perspectives on the difficult issues young Muslim girls face like modesty and identity markers as well as methodological issues around insider/outsider research. Her methodological implications included engaging youth where they are. Furthermore, she motioned to the impact of religious socialization related to social geography, community/communal experience, and belonging (e.g. pilgrimage). This brought into focus the importance of experience tied to filial and ethnic identification in the construction of self. Al-Fartousi's self-reflexive paper brought theories from Cultural Studies and Feminism into a discussion asserting and affirming conservative values and religious identity. Paul L. Gareau spoke of the dynamics of masculinity in the construction of religious identity amongst engaged, Evangelical Catholic youth. Through his ethnographic research at an annual Catholic conference in rural Ontario, he noted that these young evangelicals are challenging and negotiating the conventional notions of masculinity. These young men share a moderate distrust of social mores, an emphasis on traditional vision of the Catholic Church that speaks of gendered complementarity and chastity, and the virtue of active religious engagement. Gareau argued that these Catholic youth are substituting social conventions around masculinity (in this case) in order

to build a conceptual frame more prone towards conservative religious values and discourse, all the while asserting an identity politics of minority difference and social marginalization.

The “Youth, Religion, and Identity: A Canadian and International Workshop” created an environment where scholars from diverse countries could discuss how youth were interacting or conceptualizing religion and identity. During this workshop several themes emerged from out of the official workshop themes, three of which held leading importance. The first theme is that both youths and scholars of youth are challenging the conventional conceptualizations of youth, religion, and identity. Previous work on youth, religion, and identity has tended to categorize and analyze youth on theoretical and methodological bases informed largely by adults. What this workshop revealed was that both youths and the academics who study them must come to appreciate that youth speak to and of their own subjectivities and our methods should reflect this.

The second theme that emerged was the importance or impact that living in diasporic communities had on the religions and identities of youths as well as the hybridity that these situations encourage. Migration, immigration, and diaspora have become important areas in the study of identity formation and the ways in which communities adopt and adapt to multiple different social and cultural contexts is an important area for the study of identity and youth. Discussion during the workshop sought to outline and understand the fluidity and mechanics of identity formation regarding notions of *here* and *there*, *self* and ‘*Other*’ amongst youth in different social and national contexts.

And finally, a particularly important theme found during the workshop was how the study of youths further complexify issues regarding ambivalence and agency. Youth are often understood to be dominated by ambivalence; i.e. indifferent, careless and/or ignorant about their engagement with social forces and norms. There is a conventional notion that youth are simply

“unfinished people” who if only they could be molded by the proper forces from society and become moral beings. Discussion centering around these issues offered new ideas about youth being intimately engaged not only with their own religious and spiritual development, but the world around them through ambivalence. Youth agency is in a dynamic tension between social forces based on youth(ful) subjectivities and the ways in which youth engage social structures and normative regimes. From this perspective, ambivalence is a tool used by youth in terms of recognition in social structures dominated by adult discourse. Ultimately, the papers presented and subsequent discussion regarding youth, religion, and identity that took place at this workshop demonstrated the importance of collaborative, interdisciplinary, and international perspectives when studying young people from around the globe.