

LSE Research Festival 2014: Researching Religion

As part of LSE Research Festival 2014, the evening of Tuesday 6 May saw LSE Faith Centre welcome guests from LSE and elsewhere for a panel discussion focusing on the role of religion in academic research. Here, Anna Gavurin of LSE Faith Centre and Josie Lloyd of LSE Research Festival reflect on the event, and explain why events like this are so important.



The new LSE Faith Centre is a reflective space enjoyed by a diverse range of the LSE community – people of all faiths or none are welcomed to engage with each other, and interfaith dialogue is actively promoted. What better setting, then, to hold a discussion on the role of religion in academic contexts. As part of LSE Research Festival 2014, we invited a panel of academics, PhD students and experts on religion and faith to discuss questions such as whether the researcher's own faith commitments should play a role in research projects where religion is being studied, whether the nature of research focusing on religion means that the researcher becomes part of the output, and if there are specific ethical considerations relating to the study of religion. The discussion was chaired by Madeleine Bunting, Guardian columnist and associate editor, who expertly led the dialogue between panellists Nick Spencer (research director at Theos thinktank), Dr Matthew Engelke (LSE's Department of Anthropology), and LSE PhD students Teresa Whitney (Social Psychology) and Magdalena Delgado (International Relations).

A key topic of discussion was the role that the researcher's own faith plays in their work. Madeleine Bunting commented on the fact that many readers of her work found it necessary to ask what she believes, and both Matthew Engelke and Teresa Whitney had faced similar questions. Teresa explained she felt she owed it to those she interviewed to be as honest with them as she asked them to be with her. She did, however, acknowledge that this may have affected their response, commenting that 'it closed some doors and opened others.' Discussion also touched on how far personal beliefs affected the researcher's work. In Anthropology, Matthew explained, one should 'skirt the line between self and other, between subject and object', creating complexities in the study of religion whether it is your own faith being studied or not. For Magdalena Delgado, based in the Department of International Relations, which she sees as a less personal discipline, studying policy focused on beliefs which were not her own meant she felt able to keep herself as separate from it. Matthew questioned whether it was possible for research to be 'purely academic', uninfluenced by the personal, and it was clear that this issue might depend on whether your research involved speaking with your subjects face to face or focussed on historical records, as in Magdalena's case.





Another interesting point, raised by Teresa, was that much academic discussion of religion seems to focus on the Abrahamic faiths rather than others such as Hinduism and Buddhism. While Nick Spencer suggested that this might be due to a lack of knowledge or the comparatively small population of those belonging to non-Abrahamic faiths, Madeleine offered a different response to this question. She felt the non-Abrahamic faiths might be seen to have 'escaped narrow religious labelling', and have perhaps 'in a curious sense been secularized.'

Whatever the answers to these questions, it is clear that discussion on such topics is to be encouraged to avoid religion being under-theorised and over-looked. The Faith Centre hopes to continue encouraging such debate and discussion on the topic of religion at LSE, and with the focus of the Research Festival, we have been able to start drawing on the work of LSE students and academics to better understand the complexities of researching religion.

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