

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 13 July 2018



## Young People and Religion in a Global Perspective

Podcast with **Marcus Moberg and Sofia Sjö**. (14 January 2019)

Interviewed by **Christopher Cotter**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/young-people-and-religion-in-a-global-perspective/>

**Christopher Cotter (CC)**: *I am at [the European Association for the Study of Religion's Conference in Bern](#), and I'm joined today by [Marcus Moberg](#) and [Sofia Sjö](#) of the Åbo Akademi University. And they are both senior researchers on a massive project called *The Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective project: the [YARG](#) project*. And I thought this would be an excellent time for us to sit down and talk about this multi-national, multi-researcher, poly-methodical project – which will sit nicely with our interview, a couple of years ago, with Naomi Thompson on [Religion, Youth and Inter-generationality](#). So, first of all: Marcus and Sofia, welcome to the Religious Studies Project!*

**Sofia Sjö (SS)**: Thank you.

**Marcus Moberg (MM)**: Thank you.

**CC**: *Thanks for making the time, after your two intense panels this morning, and on this third day of the conference – after what was an excellent night out last night, I thought!*

**SS**: We, of course, went to bed really early.

**CC**: *Exactly. Of course. So just before we get into the broader topic, I've said you're working on this massive project but you both are individuals in your own right, who do other things. So maybe you could take a moment just to say who you, are and your broader research interests, and that sort of thing.*

**MM**: Well, I do most of my personal off-project research, really, in the area of the Sociology of Religion, and Religion in Media, and also Religion, Language and Discourse. I try to combine these

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and have different perspectives and approaches cross-fertilise one another, if you will. And some of these things I also bring to this project that we are now involved in. And this has been very much a team effort. And so none of us are that firmly, personally connected to this project, in terms of research profile. So we each bring our own research profiles to the project. And that makes it quite unique. And it makes the team dynamic – a bit different from what these types of projects usually are, or how they end up being.

*CC: Wonderful. And Sofia?*

**SS:** Well, I have a background in Religion and Media and Public Culture research, but I've also worked a lot with Religion and Gender. And, as Marcus was mentioning, that's bringing a very different aspect into it. Because the last couple of years it's the young adults that have been very much in focus for our research.

*CC: So, before we get into the broad topic, then, of young adults and religion, let's just . . . tell me about the project. How long has it been going on? I know it involves multiple researchers, multiple sites, and multiple methods. So, can you give the Listeners a flavour?*

**SS:** The short version . . . this is the fourth year – of course it was planning before that as well, and applying for funding and all of that. There are thirteen contexts that we are studying, and I think we have forty to forty-five researchers and research assistants, worldwide.

*CC: Wow!*

**SS:** And we're using the multi-method approach. And Marcus, go ahead and explain that!

**MM:** Well . . . we do call it the mixed method approach.

**SS:** That's right.

**MM:** We are that ambitious, because not only do we use multiple methods, quantitative and qualitative – and in-between quantitative and qualitative types of instruments like the [Faith Q -Sort](#) that we have developed – but we also correlate the results of these methods and these instruments, directly to one another. And so the combination allows us to get a type of data that would not otherwise be possible. And, yes, so it's a four-year project and we're three-and-a-half years in, now. And it took about one, one-and-a-half years in the making before this. We started planning this already a year or so prior to applying for the funding that we eventually managed to land for this one. So it's been a long ride.

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**SS:** It's been a part of our lives for quite some time.

**CC:** *Yes. And you're just getting to the point of, maybe, exorcising it – getting the publications out?*

**SS:** That's what's on the table, yes. Writing, writing, writing!

**CC:** *Excellent. So I note – I'm quite pleased – that there's no UK case study in there. Again, Listeners, check out our [previous podcasts](#) for that. (5:00) So, there're multiple nations: could you give us a hint of some of them, and what the selection process was? You know, you presumably tried to get quite a broad spread, and various demographics and things?*

**SS:** We really started with trying to get beyond research that already exists. There is so much focussed on the Western contexts. So we started to try to use the networks of researchers in other parts of the world. If I'm going to list the countries, you're going to have to help me!

**MM:** Well, it was also to some extent, I mean in the most general of terms, it was the selection of countries was also based on the Welsel-Ingelhart's [World Values Map](#). Because the project has this basis in value studies and worldview studies. So they have constructed, basically, a map of the whole world based on regions that are characterised by different types of main value profile. So, for example, people in some regions in the world tend to be more self-focussed, perhaps, and more interested in developing themselves, whereas others are more traditionally-oriented and more security-focussed. And so we got one country from each of these regions on this theoretical map.

**SS:** Which we were very happy about getting because, like I said, we started trying with the challenging cases. But we do have a lot of European countries, still. We have Finland and Sweden, Poland, Russia, Turkey. No good! I have to have a world map in my hand, when I do this.

**CC:** *Brilliant, yes!*

**SS:** Israel, Ghana, Peru, the US, Canada, China, Japan, India. Is that it?

**CC:** *Well, it's a pretty good stab at it. If you remember any more later in the interview you can just start shouting out the names of countries. But that's an incredibly broad potential data set, I guess. So I imagine there were lots of issues in terms of managing to do a cross-national study, in that sense of translatability of terms. Or are you rooting studies very much in their own context? How generalising are you trying to be across these contexts?*

**MM:** Well to connect to what Sofia was saying earlier, we also had to set up the project on the basis of

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the contacts that we either already had, or that we were able to get in each of these countries. And, of course, the main idea is not to be representative or to make any generalisations whatsoever but to see what kinds of data can be used to the different purposes we can generate, with this particular methodological approach that we have. So it's about implementing a certain approach and to be able to compare different contexts, and also to develop the Faith Q –Sort, which is rather a new method in this context. And, yes.

**SS:** Definitely a big part of it has been to translate the methods and the different material that we use to get it to work in different contexts. And, I guess, some of the most challenging part was this Faith Q –Sort – which is this new method developed by Professor David Wulff and further developed by the project. Because there are 101 statements that relate to worldviews, and getting those translated into different languages, and the challenging . . . Like [Mika Lassander](#) mentioned earlier in our session, with a concept like transcendence – that might make perfect sense in a Western contexts, but even finding a word for it in some of the languages is really difficult. So at the start of the project we did do a lot of work using this double translation process, which had a fancy name – what is it?

**MM:** Double . . . Forward and Back translation. Which means that you translate and then you come up with another version and then you do it all over again, and see if it changes. But the idea was, basically, to replicate the study in more or less . . . or in as similar a way as possible, in every location. So we brought the research assistants over to Finland for ten days, or something like that. We went through all the methods and had them practise and then sent them back out in the world.

**CC:** *Fantastic! (10:00) So, you presumably entered the research field here with a number of questions – maybe a number of assumptions? Maybe you can lay out some of the groundwork on what existing research would maybe tell us about young adults and religion, and then we can maybe get into some of the exciting findings coming from your comparative research.*

**SS:** Well there's a lot of previous research but, as I mentioned, it's very Western. It's the US, or the Nordic Countries, or the UK, for example. But there is of course a large interest now – not just in the field of religion but in other fields as well – to try to understand the current young generation. They're coming into the workforce: how can we handle them? How can we deal with them? Those sorts of issues coming up. Generalising very much, the trends that have been highlighted in the Western research is, of course, that we see a decline in both religious self-identification and perhaps even more so in religious practice, in this group. And this has been related both to young adults as being a “phase” in life (in which they are) less connected to religious organisations; but also to (young adults as) a “cohort” : that this is a new generation because of their experiences of life, what is happening in

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society, connecting to media, values and so on. And they will be, perhaps, less interested in traditional forms of religion and traditional ways of being religious.

*CC: And do you find that that sort of model of this phase, does it hold in different contexts or is that model perhaps quite Western?*

**SS:** Yes and no. The idea with the Faith Q -Sort is to get at the over-simplifications of talking about religious and spiritual or non-religious. I really see that there are variations. What this method captures is perspectives on religiosity that shows that, in a context, there might not just be one way of being religious, there are very different ways of doing it, or relating to it, or having a worldview. So we get the complexity. We do definitely see the decline to some extent as well. We have, in the survey, questions where you are supposed to identify how religious the family you grew up in was, and then identify how religious you consider yourself to be. And here we can see a decline. But then, going into the interviews and also the Faith Q –Sort, we see that there's a complexity in it. There's this idea that runs through the material – quite, I would say, independent of context – of a freedom of choice. But then again, what does this mean in different contexts and where does this come from? Is it actually the young generation, or does it come with their parents? Where does this come in? So we get some trends that we were expecting, but there's also complexity. And we see that we need to understand the context of the cases. Because it does look different in different contexts.

**MM:** And I might add that more on meta-theoretical level the project is also based on the assumption that values play a much larger role in affecting how people think about their religious engagements, and engaging religiously, than was previously presumed. So perhaps the project . . . this is to simplify what you might say: that instead of regarding religion, or religious beliefs and ideas as something that would affect and direct the values of a person, the project is more based, or *rather* based, on a perspective that has it the other way around. So that it is actually values, people's value profiles that affect their religious choices. And so there is that additional element to it as well.

*CC: Excellent. Before I prod you for some juicy specifics, I should ask, who are these young adults that you're speaking to? I gather there's quite an age variance? Maybe just . . . Who are they? Who's been participating?*

**SS:** We're focussing on university students which, again, immediately this is a limitation – everyone else is doing it as well. But we're doing it in so many contexts. We actually gave a paper on this just in the previous session. And what we see, we've aimed at 18-30 so quite a broad range. But of course as we're focussing on university students and university life, it's quite different in different contexts. The

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ages vary a bit. The variation means that the mean age is between twenty to twenty-four – so this is the main focus of the groups.

**CC:** *So I guess that's worth emphasising. (15:00) It is young adults, rather than young people, or youths, I guess, in that sense. So I don't know which aspects you might want to pick out. I know Marcus, here, was speaking earlier about the use of the internet and social media and things like that. That might be something. But I'm happy just for you to throw some interesting contextual findings at me.*

**MM:** We had three basic, broad research questions that we've been working with, since the very beginning, one of which was socialisation, so: What can our data tell us about . . . ? What new things do we learn about processes of religious socialisation across different national contexts and cultural, social and religious contexts? And for people in this age? And we also add a focus on media uses from the very beginning. There is a widely held assumption in many strands and fields of research that the media environment and the internet in particular, as digital technologies continue to develop, that this will have a particular impact on younger people. Because these are the people who never knew anything else. They have grown up in this environment. So there is this assumption that it will affect their religious lives and their worldviews as well. And so this allows us to see how that actually plays out among our limited sample . . . but in a wide range of different contexts. And then thirdly, we have this idea of . . . presumption really, about rising levels of individualism across social and cultural borders. And that we had assumed it was really a research question in the true sense, that we wanted to find out whether people would be more, or our sample would be more inclined towards making their own decisions when it comes to religion and religious commitments. And to get into finer detail, perhaps, to see how they actually would describe that kind of a way of looking at things, if they indeed did, and so on. So we had those three things that we had around from the very start.

**SS:** And then the findings . . .

**CC:** (Laughs) *Nice and easy!*

**SS:** Ease into the thing, yes! I could talk about the socialisation. We're doing a special issue on that for **Religion**, which will be coming out early next year, hopefully. It's still in the making. And we're looking at socialisation very broadly from very different perspectives. We're looking at minorities, we're also looking at media how it comes into it, and relating to this individualisation. I think, also, because of the question of religious decline, we see the need to have a very broad understanding, I would say, of religious socialisation and an awareness of the many different types of agents that are a

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part of these young people's lives. So looking at the university contexts – which has of course also been studied before – but the importance of peers for this age group, and media – how it comes in. And I think what most of the articles that will be coming highlight is when we talk to them about their own upbringing, what they consider have affected it. It is really a complexity and relating to previous generations, relating to . . . in some contexts we can definitely see grandparents can come in as very essential, and other aspects. And this is of course the richness of a comparative approach. There've been some similarities, but then also uniqueness in some cases.

**MM:** Then there's also the data that comes out of the Faith Q -Sort in these different countries. And that data generates what is called prototypes of people. So certain main ways, you might say, of sorting the cards that we have in what we called the Q set. So it generates prototypes of religiousness or non-religiousness or anything in between. And what is interesting for me, for example, is to see some of the people, or the people in these different countries who would fit into a . . . let's say, a non-religious – in whatever way we define that in the non-religious prototype – how similar they are to each other, or how dissimilar, they might be to each other. So it also allows us to focus on the fine detail of what it might mean to be non-religious – or religious, for that matter, so . . . **(20:00)**

**CC:** *Yes. So it allows that sort of questioning of: is religion the same in different contexts? Or, should we be speaking of different forms of Christianity, different forms of Islam? Or, does it make sense to have this religion-non religion spectrum?*

**MM:** Well, yes. At the very least the data we have allows us to ask those questions – it forces us to ask those questions. But then again, each context should be . . . or each national context should be understood primarily on its own terms. But on a higher level of abstraction and generalisation we can still make comparisons between different countries and different prototypes that the data generates.

**CC:** *And are you finding . . . Obviously you're only studying in this case this young adult group, but are you finding some insights that you think are more universal than just in the group? Or . . .*

**SS:** That's a big question. I would say, not to simplify . . . I think the media aspect, that it . . . If you want to find similarities, they all seem to be using media – surprise, surprise! But how they use it, how they experience it, even there we see variations. So I think there is definitely a need to not generalise too much, to realise that there is a uniqueness in context. But, of course, within the context we see the variations. That also comes out of our method. Because the idea with the Faith Q -Sort is really to capture the variations, rather than to see what can be generalised about those, to see more of the variations. But I think that is at least what my experience of working with the interviews . . . Of

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course, we have certain stories that come again and again. This is related to being a young adult and related to being a university student. But, depending on context, some of the contexts that we are studying see political struggles going on; some of them – like Ghana, of course – compared to the other contexts is very, very religious. Religion is a part of daily life. That's what one of our research colleagues pointed out. There's not really a secular space – it's all religious space. And this will shape your experience. And, as Marcus mentioned with the non-religiosity, we find non-religious people in all these contexts. But it's different if it's in Turkey – a very religious context, than in Sweden, where you almost have to explain if you're religious. It's sort of the other way round.

**CC:** *Yes. That's excellent, yes. And that's . . . . You'll both know that's one of the many reasons that I'll be particularly interested in the results of this study. So it seems that you've hopefully managed the impossible, in the sense that you've got a critically-engaged worry about generalising and about reifying categories and everything. And you've managed to take that sort-of critically plugged-in approach and then massive scale research. So . . .*

**MM:** Yes, well it's like Mika Lassander – who is one of the main promoters of this project – said in his presentation, earlier today: that we have a *good enough* result. It allows us to do a lot of things. It also has its limitations. But considering the operation that we had going in these different countries – with all that involves in terms of . . . we're already into translation, but other types of logistics – we ended up with a pretty good result that we are happy with, I would say.

**SS:** Happy enough. Yes. It's been good both on national teams – that's been fantastic – and the head of our project, Professor [Peter Nynäs](#), has also done a great job with keeping it all going. So I think we're satisfied . . .

**CC:** *Good. Because a lot of scholars might hesitate . . . just not go near quantitative, comparative . . . “No, let's not do it. It's too risky!” But it's great that you've gone in with critical engagement, too. So we're just about coming up to time. But obviously this will just skim the surface and make the Listeners think: (25:00) “Wow there's a lot of data there! I'm really looking forward to all the in-depth publications and everything!” Can you tell us – you've mentioned a special issue of Religion - what are the other outputs, I suppose, from the project?*

**SS:** We both have a **main volume** that will be coming out with Springer in 2019, which is the main findings. A lot of focus on the Faith Q -Sort, but also trying to cover the different material that we have. Then me, and Marcus, and [Mia Lövheim](#), we're editing a volume of **Religion** on young adults and social media. Do you want to say something more about that?

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**MM:** Yes that's just to pick up on the media use and social media use among our respondents. Because that is something that we can gather a lot of data on. And our examples . . . let's say that there are not many similar samples around, so it allows us to compare and relate our results to previous research. And that's the way that we aim to branch out, to see what . . . to try to make a contribution – sometimes a larger one, a more substantial one, sometimes a smaller one – but to other fields, also. We try to use the project data to get into conversation with ongoing research in other fields that relate to the fields that we have been focussing on.

**CC:** *And will there be – I know there's . . . currently things are sort-of hidden a little bit, online. So will there be a sort-of – when everything's complete – a web presence for the project?*

**MM:** Yes, I think that has been the plan, but our university recently decided to reorganise its webpages and so all of the info is hidden behind an intranet password wall. So hopefully. . .

**SS:** This Fall, they promise we will get this fixed!

**CC:** *Well it is June when we're recording, but it could be that the website will actually be there by the time this is broadcast. So hopefully we won't have long to wait, Listeners! Well, we've talked very much around that project, there. I think we should call it a day, so we can all go and get some coffee. Thanks so much Marcus and Sofia.*

**Both:** Thank you.

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at [editors@religiousstudiesproject.com](mailto:editors@religiousstudiesproject.com). If you would be willing to help with these efforts, or know of any sources of funding for the broader [transcription project](#), please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

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