

<b>Institution:</b> University of Kent
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 33 Theology and Religious Studies
<b>Title of case study:</b> Developing New Public Insights on the Sacred in the Modern World
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Through a range of media and educational activities, Gordon Lynch has developed public understanding of the importance of morally-charged visions of the sacred and the profane for contemporary society. In his work, the sacred refers not necessarily to traditional forms of religious belief, but to whatever people collectively experience as unquestionable moral realities, whose profanation evokes reactions of outrage, disgust and the search for restitution and renewed moral solidarity. In articles for newspapers, blogs for influential websites, and on-line films for use in secondary schools, he has introduced public audiences to this way of thinking about the sacred and shown its relevance for making sense of contemporary cases involving strong public moral emotion. These have ranged from the UK phone-hacking scandal to public responses to the mass murders committed by Anders Behring Breivik. His work has been engaged with by a global audience of at least 250,000-300,000 people, and has enabled public audiences both to identify sacred passions in the modern world and to adopt a more self-critical attitude towards instinctive moral reactions.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Lynch's work on the cultural sociology of the sacred has been developed through a number of publications since he joined the University of Kent in January 2011, including two monographs (see, e.g., Lynch, 2011a; 2011b; 2012a; 2012b). Through this, Lynch has produced a theoretical framework for understanding the sacred, influenced in particular by the 'strong programme' of cultural sociology, and has explored its analytical value for interpreting contemporary society through different case studies. Cases explored through his work have included the role of sacred meanings of the nation and childhood in relation to public scandals over the abuse of children within the Irish industrial school system and the morally-charged controversies over the refusal by the BBC to broadcast a Disasters Emergency Committee appeal for Gaza in 2009.</p> <p>In his work, Lynch defines the sacred as that which people together take to be timeless moral realities which present an unquestionable moral claim over the conduct of social life. The sacred is thus understood as a communicative structure that makes possible the collective experience of a morally-boundaried society. Understanding sacred forms as comprising symbols, thought, emotion, action and social groups, Lynch has explored the ways in which these elements of sacred forms interact. His work has also addressed the ways in which sacred meanings relate to institutional structures, including different forms of institutional power, as well as the ways in which they can serve to mobilize and legitimize public action. Within this, attention has been paid to how visions of the evil-profane evoke public reactions of abhorrence and disgust, and legitimize public responses that seek moral restitution. He has also argued that public media should be regarded as a key site for public engagement with sacred meanings. He has presented a broad historical narrative of the changing nature of sacred forms from classical societies to late modernity, in which he argues that the dominant sacred forms of modernity are focused around the nation and humanity. Lynch has argued for the need for a reflexive approach to the sacred, which challenges the assumption that acting out of deeply-felt moral certainties necessarily produces moral action and invites a more complex understanding of moral sentiment. This reflects a wider understanding of this cultural sociological approach as a form of 'cultural psychoanalysis', which seeks to establish the nature and significance of sacred meanings in social life, in order to encourage greater reflexivity about the ways in which these can have both positive and harmful consequences.</p>
<p><b>3. References to the research</b> (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <p>Lynch, G. (2011a) 'What can we learn from the mediatisation of religion debate?', <i>Culture and Religion</i>, 12(2), 203-10. [submitted in REF2]</p>

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

Lynch, G. (2011b) 'Public media and the sacred: a critical perspective', in G. Lynch, J. Mitchell & A. Strhan (eds.), *Religion, Media and Culture: A Reader*, London: Routledge, pp. 244-50.

Lynch, G. (2012a) *The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [submitted in REF2]

Lynch, G. (2012b) *On the Sacred*. London: Acumen.

AHRC Fellowship award (Lynch as PI), 'The Sacred in the Modern World: A Psychosocial Approach', (AH/H037012/1), Oct. 2010-June 2011, £66,656.

**4. Details of the impact** (indicative maximum 750 words)

**Impact activities:**

- Ten articles were written by Gordon Lynch for print and on-line media with national and international profiles:
  - a) ['Phone hacking and sacrilege'](#) was uploaded onto the *Guardian* Comment is Free website on 8 July 2011, and reprinted in the Saturday print edition of the *Guardian* on 9 July 2011 (250,000 copies sold). The *Guardian* played a leading role in the coverage of the phone-hacking scandal during that week, following the publication of its story about the hacking of Millie Dowler's phone on 5 July, and this comment piece was one of a select number of opinion pieces chosen for publication by the *Guardian* during the height of public interest in this story.
  - b) [six blog pieces](#) on the relevance of Durkheim's concept of the sacred for understanding contemporary society were published as part of the 'How to Believe' series for the *Guardian* Comment is Free website from 10 December 2012 to 14 January 2013. Comment is Free does not provide details of individual page hits but has said that each post has, on average, 10,000 readers. These articles received a total of 1076 comments on the *Guardian* website by 31 July 2013.
  - c) ['Shamed media: News Corp, the profane and the sacred'](#) and ['Remapping space in the wake of violence'](#) (on the murders committed by Anders Behring Breivik) were published on 13 July 2011 and 29 July 2011 respectively, on *The Revealer* website, a public engagement project run by the Center for Media and Religion at New York University.
  - d) ['Re-discovering values after the English riots'](#) was published on the Open Democracy website on 17 August 2011.
  
- Gordon Lynch was invited by the RSA to give a lecture, on 17 October 2011, with Prof. Jeffrey Alexander on 'The Power of the Sacred' to an audience of more than 200 RSA Fellows. An [audio podcast](#) and [edited film](#) of this event were subsequently uploaded onto the RSA website and the RSA's Youtube channel. Lynch was also an invited speaker at the Hay Literary Festival Fringe, on 4 June 2012, on a panel discussion of journalism after the phone-hacking scandal chaired by Samira Ahmed (BBC), which also included Yasmin Alibah-Brown (national columnist), John Tomlinson (QC for victims of phone hacking) and John Kampfner (former editor of the *New Statesman*), a film of which was subsequently [made available online](#) by the event organizers.
  
- Four on-line films, ['What is Sacred?'](#), ['The Cult of the Child'](#) (on the sacralization of the care of children), ['One Hour to Save the Nation'](#) (on the sacralization of nationalism and human rights) and ['Is Nature Sacred?'](#), were produced by Gordon Lynch in conjunction with Truetube, an award-winning provider of free on-line educational materials for religious education, PSHE and citizenship education at Keystages 3 and 4. These films were uploaded to Truetube's website with associated lesson plans in October 2011. A launch event for the films was held at Lambeth Palace on 1 February 2012, and attendees included the Chair of the RE Council, a representative of the National Association of SACRE's, as well as members of local SACRE's, teachers and journalists who write on on-line educational materials.
  
- On the basis of his lecture at the RSA, Lynch was appointed in 2012 as one of the lead advisers for a research programme on the significance of spirituality and the sacred in contemporary society currently being undertaken within the Social Brain Centre at the RSA

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

(see sources #1). He advised the Centre on a successful application for funding for the project from the Templeton Foundation and his work was cited [in an early article on this project](#) written by the Centre's Director, Dr Jonathan Rowson, in July 2013 for the RSA's quarterly journal. The journal is available online as well as being circulated to its 27,000 Fellows who are based in 80 countries around the world.

**Reach of impact:**

The extent of public engagement with these impact activities is indicated by the following:

- The print version of the 'Phone hacking and sacrilege' article and seven articles for the *Guardian* Comment is Free website alone are likely to have had a minimum of 150,000-200,000 readers.
- Truetube estimate that by 31 July 2013, around 57,000 Keystage 3 and 4 students in the UK had watched the films on the sacred (sources #2).
- By 31 July 2013 the film of the 'Power of the Sacred' lecture had been viewed 9,878 times on the RSA's Youtube channel with 107 'likes'.
- In addition to first viewings of this material, on-line articles and films were re-circulated by users through other sites. Details of the articles in the Comment is Free 'How to Believe' series were, for example, posted 271 times on to individual Facebook pages and 232 times on individual Twitter accounts. In one instance, the third blog in this series, on sacred ritual, was tweeted by Sonali Ranade in India to her 35,537 followers, with her describing it as a 'searing insight' into morally-charged public protest in the context of the mass protests in response to the Dehli rape case in December 2012 (sources #3).
- These figures suggest that a minimum 250,000-300,000 people are likely to have read or viewed one or more of these impact materials on the cultural sociology of the sacred.

**Significance of impact:**

The overall aim of the impact activities was to encourage more widespread use of a cultural sociological understanding of the sacred to interpret contemporary social life. This change was evident in audience responses that indicated that this framework was understood and perceived as interesting, useful and worthy of serious discussion:

- The online films produced in conjunction with Truetube were named 'Humanities resource of the week' in the 17 February 2012 issue of the *Times Educational Supplement*, with the editor writing that the 'films are fascinating and explore how the sacred can be both profound and problematic' (see sources #4).
- In an evaluation of the Truetube films with Year 10 GCSE Religious Studies students, respondents commented that they had learned from watching and talking about the films that the 'sacred is not all about God and religion', 'it allows you to critically think about "religion" and "sacred" and compare what the two mean and whether sacred should always be linked to religion', 'it helps us to see what is important in our lives', it made 'us question what is important, sacred to us', and that 'the sacred can be used to describe a thought or feeling not just an object' (see sources #5).
- Material produced through impact activities (i-iii) above was circulated and re-used on other websites. Lynch (2012a) was cited as a key text on [a resource page](#) on the sacred on the website Philosophy Talk.Org, a public out-reach programme of Stanford University. The RSA film, 'The Power of the Sacred', was also adapted as [an educational resource](#) on the leading American educational website, TED-ED.com. Two of the *Guardian* 'How to Believe' articles on Durkheim were [reproduced in full](#) on the website for the Ash Center for Democratic

## Impact case study (REF3b)

Governance and Innovation at Harvard University which circulates resources for policy-makers and policy advisers.

- Lynch (2012a) was described as a 'lucid reconsideration of the term "sacred"' by Bernice Martin in the *Times Literary Supplement* (see sources #6). The Truetube films were described as 'intriguing and explore how the sacred can be both profound and problematic [in ways that are] accessible for a teenage audience' by the national religious education magazine, *SACRE News* (vol. 12, p. 13; see sources #6) and as 'an excellent resource to kick-start debates in lessons and perhaps unexpectedly bring together the subjects of RE, PSHE and Citizenship by taking a modern approach to asking the question, "what is sacred?"' by [bee-it.co.uk](http://bee-it.co.uk), a leading website for the use of technological resources in the education sector.
- Positive comments about impact materials and activities were also made by other readers. On his blog (19 August 2011), the journalist Mark Vernon [wrote that](#) 'Gordon Lynch has penned an excellent piece for *Open Democracy* on the riots and the habits of virtue', and tweeted this comment to his 497 followers on Twitter. Comments on 'The Power of the Sacred' film left on on Youtube also indicated that many viewers had understood and welcomed this analytical framework. As one respondent wrote, 'the video shows how important the sacred is to our very secular lives. [It] is the unconscious of society.'
- Stuart Porter, Director of Innovation and Development at Truetube, has written that 'the subject matter of the sacred films was extremely interesting to us, and we felt that it would be a strong addition to the RE section of our site. The films took a sideways look at religion and religious behaviour that was a refreshing departure from the usual knowledge-based films we have for Religious Education. The films encourage higher-level thinking in pupils, in terms of understanding the content, in reflecting upon it, and applying it. Pupils sometimes question why they are studying a religion they don't believe in, but seeing the world in terms of what is deemed "sacred" and what is thought of as "profane" helps teachers to explain the importance of deeply held beliefs whether they are religious or secular, and how they might affect a person's or a society's behaviour' (see sources #7). Neil McKain, Head of Religious Studies and Philosophy at John Hampden Grammar School in High Wycombe, similarly commented that the films 'ask profound questions about whether or not religion is the same as sacred and whether or not religions 'own' sacred anymore. The tone of the film on children as sacred clearly engaged my class and, though entertained by it, they came up with some incredibly thoughtful responses afterwards' (see sources #8).

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- #1 Letter from Jonathan Rowson, Director of the Social Brain Programme at the RSA, corroborating Lynch's involvement with the RSA.
- #2 Data on viewings of the sacred films provided by Truetube, corroborating that an estimated 57,000 secondary school students have viewed these films.
- #3 Screenshot of tweet by Sonali Ranade, corroborating the content of her tweet and the number of her followers.
- #4 Screenshot of page on *Times Educational Supplement* website, corroborating the naming of the Truetube films as humanities resource of the week and the content of the editorial commendation.
- #5 Copies of anonymized evaluation sheets completed by students, corroborating statements made by students about the Truetube films.
- #6 Copy of the *Times Literary Supplement* review of *The Sacred in the Modern World* and in *SACRE News*, corroborating quotations from these reviews.
- #7 Testimonial from Stuart Porter, Director of Innovation and Development at Truetube, corroborating his statement about the value of the Truetube films for classroom use.
- #8 Letter from Neil McKain, corroborating the testimonial quotation attributed to him.

Copies of corroborating evidence are held on file at the University of Kent for audit if required.