

Believing in Being Human

Abby Day says most people in Britain are now human-centred, while ‘Generation A’, the many laywomen volunteers who keep the Church of England going, are dying out.

The nature of religious affiliation in the early 21st century is becoming increasingly complex and important. Is it acceptable for a woman to cover her whole body and face with a veil? Should we allow Church of England schools to discriminate on the basis of religion? What is the definition and nature of religious ‘extremism’?

These are questions which are debated widely today and whose outcome will shape the nature of our society. Britain is formally a religious country in a way that many modern states are not. There is a willingness to countenance religious involvement in the machinery of government: the Church of England is represented by a number of its bishops in the House of Lords; many children are refused entry to popular Church of England schools because their parents do not attend church (or refuse to attend to get their card stamped every Sunday in order to qualify: Starbucks loyalty system without the good coffee). The Head of State is also the Head of the Church of England. And yet, Britain is often described as a secular country.

The term ‘secular’ might for many people be associated with the mission of the National Secular Society, which is overtly atheistic rather than merely opposed to giving religion a public role. For example, the society maintains that ‘supernaturalism is based upon ignorance and assails it as the historic enemy of progress’; see <http://www.secularism.org.uk/generalprinciples.html>). They neglect the many atheists or otherwise non-religious people who believe in ghosts – particularly the spirits of their deceased relatives.

But, what are ‘we’ as a society, and what do ‘we’ believe in nowadays?

Understanding belief

Every ten years a national census is taken, asking people questions about their age, jobs, gender, where they live and so on. In 2001, for the first time in England and Wales a question asked people to name their religion. (There had been such questions before on the Northern Ireland and Scottish versions.) In response, 71.9 per cent said ‘Christian’. Sixteen per cent stated that they had no religion. This category included agnostics, atheists, heathens and Jedi Knights. Six per cent identified themselves as members of other religions, the largest single group being Muslims at three per cent, and all others accounting for less than one per cent each. The remainder chose not to answer the question.

The high percentage of Christians may seem surprising, considering that less than three per cent of the population attends church on an average Sunday. That number has been declining markedly during the last 50 years. Further, the age of church-goers is much older than the general population. All other forms of Christian public participation – from baptisms to confirmations, weddings and funerals – are decreasing. Those data suggest that the UK is an increasingly secular country.

Many scholars within the field of Religious Studies and Theology would, however, disagree. They argue that religion is not disappearing but simply changing and retreating from the public sphere. Those theorists, like many philosophers before them, believe that religion has an *a priori* existence and cannot be reduced to anything else: it is and always will be inherently part of human existence. They describe the gap between private religious belief and public observance as ‘believing without belonging’. Sometimes, they

say, this religious impulse may not appear in the form of institutionalised religion, but rather as personal spirituality.

My doctoral research at the University of Lancaster concluded that when people affiliate to Christianity, most do so only when asked on an official form and then they do it mainly for ethnic or familial associations. So, when people in the UK claim they are 'Christian' many may be saying they are 'White English'.

As always, the debate is shaped by methods of data collection. My research probed religious belief without asking overtly religious questions. My questions were influenced by philosophical, theological and sociological theories about the nature of belief and religion, particularly questions provoked by Aristotle, Aquinas, Hume, Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Through semi-structured interviews with people from a variety of ages and backgrounds, I asked what they believed in. Here's an excerpt from an interview I had with a 15-year-old student. I'll call him Jordan (not his real name):

Abby: What do you believe in?

Jordan: Nowt.

Abby: Sorry?

Jordan: I don't believe in owt. I don't believe in any religions.

Abby: You don't believe in any religions.

Jordan: No. I'm Christian but I don't believe in owt.

This apparent contradiction between 'Christian' and 'belief' ran through many of my interviews. What I discovered was that Jordan and many other people may not believe in religion but they do believe in 'owt'. My other questions provoked those beliefs – about morality, about what was important to them, how life began, how it might end, what, if anything, life means to them, what frightened or delighted them and where those beliefs came from. Few people mentioned a god or any religion. Young, old, rich, poor, most people's sense of meaning in life was attached to the people with whom they had important relationships: their families, partners, friends, lovers. From them, people developed their morality, reinforced by schools, life experience and wider society. It was to their loved ones – not a god – they turned when they were afraid,

and it was from them they derived contentment and joy.

One surprising finding was how frequently people described supernatural experience – even self-declared atheists see ghosts, and many non-religious people experience 'life after death' through sensing the presence of a deceased relative. Here, my research conflicts with other scholars who defend enduring religiosity or 'common religion' by citing surveys where people say that they believe in such things as life-after-death. It also challenges hard-line definitions of atheists as people who only believe in that which can be empirically proven.

What those definitions and surveys do not reveal is what such phenomena and concepts mean to people. I discovered through an open-ended, conversational method that such concepts could mean pre-destination ('we can't change fate') or random events ('bad luck') or self-determination ('I am master of my destiny'). I also discovered that experiencing transient supernatural phenomena is ubiquitous and unrelated to beliefs in religion or spirituality. What was important to many people was their belief that inexplicable events will one day be explained by science; meanwhile, power, agency and authority remained for them firmly located in the human and secular.

Believing in belonging

My thesis, 'believing-in-belonging', argued that human relationships can be the main sites for people to source and experience emotion, morality and 'transcendence'. A minority in my study (and, I would argue, in Britain) are faithful, adherent, theocentric Christians whose religious beliefs play an important part in their lives. The majority are anthropocentric, locating meaning, power and authority in themselves and other humans.

At the end of each interview I asked people what they had said (or, in the case of young people, what they would have said) in answer to the census question and why. Like the census, my study found most people said 'Christian'. About half of these Christians would be ones whom I would term faithful Christian adherents. They

may not always go to church, but most would like to. In our interviews, their faith was embedded in their answers: God is important to them and the source of all love and goodness in the world; Jesus is a friend; they will reunite with their loved ones in heaven. Most other 'Christians' were ambivalent about a god who may or may not exist, but either way plays no part in their lives. Some were even openly hostile to religion. They explained they would say 'Christian' on the census because they were not members of another religion, such as Islam, or because they were baptised as a child. They often reinforced the idea of English cultural identity throughout our interview and frequently identified immigrants as the source of the country's problems. I argue that for them Christianity is a powerful marker of ethnic or familial identity.

Following the early 20th century sociologist Émile Durkheim, this is a functionalist interpretation of religion. He proposed that while the forms of religion may change, becoming more complex over time, religion will always be with us due to its 'ever-present causes' and its continuing function of social stability. Durkheim rejected the idea that religion presupposes a belief in the supernatural or in divine beings. Religion, he argued, has been with us for as long as people have gathered in groups, because its source is the intensity of group activities. The feeling people sometimes have of 'something else' is, he argued, the overwhelming feeling of belonging to a group.

A few years after I completed that research, I returned to the field to revisit many of my participants. The 2011 census had just been taken, which would reveal that the number of people who selected 'Christian' dropped to 59 per cent; those selecting 'no religion' doubled. Other religions grew slightly. Reasons are undoubtedly complex, but I suggest had a good deal to do with Britain's aging profile where the older generation of Christians are dying out and the younger generation is less religious.

This thought led me to decide to research in depth that older, Christian generation, particularly their loyal cohort of women. Writing about the UK religious landscape in 1994, Davie (1994, 2)



Novelist Barbara Pym (1913-1980) wrote social comedies about 'Excellent Women'

made two statements that caught my imagination when I conducted my doctoral research:

The churches attract an audience which is disproportionately elderly, female and conservative [...] the nature of family life, including the traditional codes of morality, is altering rapidly [...] Changes in gender roles have, for better or for worse, penetrated the churches and influenced theological thinking.

The women of Generation A were in their sixties when she wrote, and were then witnessing the kinds of changes she was writing about.

In November 2015, launching a programme to reverse church decline, the Church of England director of finance, John Spence, said that the evidence for decline was 'indisputable' (www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/21/justin-welby-church-england-new-synod):

Twenty years ago the demographics matched the population as a whole. Now we're 20 years older than the population. Unless we do something, the church will face a real crisis.

While I agree that the evidence is clear, I will be less optimistic that the church can reverse such a trend. In my research, the picture I create is one of an institution not simply divided by an age gap, but by significant values and practices.

Loss of 'Generation A'

Many forms of research show that the Anglican Church faces a demographic time bomb as its last generation of active laywomen starts to die out. The prevalence of laywomen in mainstream Christian congregations is a widely accepted phenomenon that will cause little surprise amongst the research community or Christian adherents. What is surprising is that we know so little about them and therefore about how their beliefs, behaviours and patterns of religiosity can inform us about the character and changing nature of

contemporary and future religion. This is the generation who have sometimes been seen to lead a parallel church. They attend the mainstream churches every Sunday, polish the brasses, organise fund-raisers, keep the church open on week-days, bake cakes and visit vulnerable people in their homes. Their often invisible labour not only populates the physical space of the church but helps ensure its continuity and enriches it.

The loss of these women, currently estimated to number in the region of 70,000, will have serious consequences for the Church's ability to function into the future, and for vulnerable people who depend on the Church for support, social engagement or simply company.

In *The Religious Lives of Older Laywomen: the last Active Anglican Generation*, I set out how the financial and social structures of the Church of England are kept afloat by a shrinking band of committed women who are now entering their eighties and nineties. Using the ethnographic method of participant observation and immersion, I worked closely with laywomen in

Britain while researching my book. Thanks to funding from the Economic and Research Council, I was able to enrich the story of those women through a study carried out, half-time, over two years. My objective was to begin by immersing myself in the daily routines of one mainstream Anglican church in southern England, where I would identify key themes. I would then elaborate and interrogate those themes by comparing them through study visits to other UK and international churches.

I found that their unpaid labour in cleaning, furnishing, catering, fundraising and supporting midweek services effectively keeps the church from collapse – but there is no evidence that they will be replaced by new generations.

These laywomen I identified as 'Generation A' – women born in the 1920s and 30s – are the generation and often the parents of the baby boomers who came of age in the 1960s, and thus

were the last generation whose values are centred on nation, family and God. Their devotion to organisations like the Church has in succeeding generations been surpassed by other forms of identification and activism, leaving the Church devoid of new recruits to form an active laity.

I have argued that the prognosis for the Church of England is grave. While elderly laywomen have never been given a formal voice or fully acknowledged by the Church, they are the heart, soul and driving organisational force in parishes everywhere. Their loss will be catastrophic.

Irrespective of one's religious viewpoint, it's impossible to deny the role the Church of England has played in providing informal social care, and a unique unconditional space for those



Church helper at St Mary the Virgin, Hayes

who often have nowhere else to go. As the Church itself vanishes through lack of organisational support, it's inevitable that addicted, homeless, bereaved or socially isolated people will lose out.

Conclusion

The above discussion has summarised some of the evidence we have about religious affiliation in Britain today, and suggested different theoretical approaches which can help us interpret the data. I suggest that today the predominant belief system in the UK is 'believing in belonging' where religious belief serves to reinforce ethnic or familial identities. Whichever theory or argument we might eventually accept, the most important conclusion from my research is that we need to expand our understanding of the term 'belief' to incorporate not only faith and reason, but emotion and ideology as well.

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Further Reading

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