

Non-religious Christians

Scholars who recently rejected secularisation theses on the grounds that they were insufficiently defined or contextualised now seem to be accepting with unseemly, uncritical haste, the new, in vogue notion of the post-secular. Scholars seem tempted to drop the term 'post-secular' into their papers and presentations as if it is a generally accepted and understood term. It is not and nor, as this paper will argue, is it plausible unless applied to a limited and specific range of phenomena.

What was pre post secular?

Post-, in the English language, is a prefix. Attached to a noun, it changes the meaning of the original word to convey a change in nature through time. A graduate becomes a post-graduate after graduating. A post-script (PS) is what we add to a letter or other text, which is in addition to the previous meaning or information. People attach 'post' to 'modern' to create 'post-modern' and therefore to suggest this is a new and different period. Post is a term of temporality, but it refers to more than simply a 'later' time. It is used to convey a different time from that which went before. We would not, for example, say that January is 'post-Christmas', albeit that it may be after Christmas, unless we are specifically linking the month to Christmas itself, as in saying 'January is a time of post-Christmas sales.'

The term is therefore loaded with value and inference. Assuming 'we' are now in a 'post' era assumes a linear time frame. If this is post, then there had to be a pre. And yet, how are we to account for the fact that according to much scholarly debate, before the post-secular we did not have the secular? I recall David Martin's (1978) fine critique of secularisation theory where he, rightly, demonstrated that secularisation may or may not occur in different countries at different times, depending on their particular histories, sets of practices and legitimations.

Therefore, by definition, to invoke the post-secular is to make an explicit, two-fold statement that 1) there was once a secular and 2) it is no more. What

are we to make of the first statement? Do we now need to accept wholly the theories of people like Steve Bruce (2011) and Detlef Pollak (2008), for example, and dispense with Anders Bäckström *et al.* (2004), Grace Davie (1994) and R. Stephen Warner (1993)? Are we implicitly saying Martin was wrong, and there was, after all, a common period of something called the secular? That would require a complete revisionist account of most of the sociology of religion's theories and tropes spanning the past 40 years or so.

Ideas like secular and post secular are often treated in the same way as 'belief'. Research interventions which assume that belief (and its sub-sets of 'religion' and 'secularity') is a common phenomenon have been insufficiently interrogated: 'belief' as assent to metaphysical propositions is not a universal human phenomenon, but a concept largely deriving from Christian-centric assumptions with limited applicability (Asad 1993, Robbins 2007). Divergent disciplinary approaches can be traced here to effect an inter-disciplinary understanding of how scholars in the field of a social scientific study of religion frame their discussions about belief. A 'genealogy of belief' is proposed, tracing epistemological and methodological approaches over the last two centuries in, primarily, anthropology and sociology (Day 2010).

Presenting empirical evidence from long-term fieldwork in the UK, and suggesting wider Euro-American comparisons, my work centres on a particular practice whereby informants produce a distinct form of Christianity they describe as non-religious, although they never use the word 'secular'. Multi-dimensional, holistic analysis of that phenomenon resulted in a 'performative' understanding of belief and social identity arising from and shaped by social relations. Performing Christian belief and identity is a social action that positions and engages people in their social worlds in specific ways. What is proposed here as 'non-religious Christianity' serves as an analytical tool to explore the particularities likely to produce, under certain conditions, dispositions that are often termed 'religious' or 'secular'.

Secular, non-religious Christians

What we saw in the UK in 2001, and will probably see again in 2012 when results of the 2011 census are published, is that when pushed to make a choice on the decennial census, more than 70 per cent of the population self-identifies as Christian. What they may believe, however, is more complex. Less than eight per cent of the population currently attends church regularly, or participates in obligatory 'Holy Day' rituals; it is obvious that a sizeable propor-

tion of the census Christians assume God won't make good on his promise to punish those who disobey him. Fortunately for them, no Inquisitor will come knocking at their door demanding they declare an article of faith. Indeed, the disjunction between low Christian participation and high census self-identification was brushed over by church leaders who welcomed the census results as evidence of high levels of Christian identity, belief and spirituality. No matter that questions did not attend to either belief or spirituality: as Talal Asad (1993) discussed, approved legitimate forms of being Christian are historically situated and approved by the powerful. Current forms of legitimate belief may be more privatised, less 'creedal', more open to personal variation and even disaggregated from overt allegiance to God or Jesus.

Nevertheless, the question remains: why would people without faith in God, Jesus or Christian doctrine self-identify as 'Christian' in certain social contexts? That phenomenon, often referred to as 'nominalism', is arguably the largest form of Christianity today and the least understood. The term 'nominalism' derives from the Latin word *nominalis*—'of or pertaining to names'—and in philosophy refers to a doctrine that abstractions, or universals, have no essential or substantive reality. Bill Bright, founder and President of Campus Crusade for Christ, describes nominalism both using the Latin-derived definition and a more Christian-centric version, writing:

"Christian" nominalists make up one of the largest mission fields in the world and quite possibly the largest in the United States. . . . a Christian nominalist is one who claims the name Christian, but who has no authentic, personal, sin-forgiving and life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. His allegiance to Jesus is in name, not heart (http://www.greatcom.org/resources/tell_it_often_tell_it_well/chap10/default.htm).

These nominalist Christians are the focus for many evangelising Christians worldwide.

Social scientists, however, are not interested in the theological discussion, but the sociological one. What are the sociological implications of a sizeable portion of the population declaring themselves Christian when asked—and usually only when asked? This has important political implications as census data informs political and resource decisions affecting a range of issues, such as health, welfare, and education. In turn, headline-grabbing results shape discourse, particularly about the 'identity' of the UK. The overwhelming 'Christian' response to the census question can be read partly as a political act, best understood as performative Christianity. Performative nominalism

brings into being a Christian identity through the process of self-identification in the absence of Christian beliefs or participation in regular Christian rituals (Day 2011).

And yet, this has an impact on wider public discourse. People are increasingly concerned about religious identities. Media reports on religion appear almost daily, sometimes focusing on issues such as whether gay people should be allowed to be priests or whether abortion and stem cell research should be banned. Other issues debate links between religion, ethnic identities and violence and whether modernity and religion are incompatible. This debate demonstrates that discussion of secularisation and religion reaches to the heart of Western understandings of who we are.

The most recent national data we have on religious affiliation is the 2001 census, where 71.6 per cent of respondents identified themselves as Christian; the largest single non-Christian religious group was Muslims at three per cent. And yet, if we look more closely, we find curious anomalies: less than eight per cent of the population is in church on an average Sunday, and the number is decreasing each year. All other forms of participation in traditional Christian rites—from baptisms to confirmations, weddings and funerals—are decreasing. Most scholars in the sociology of religion explain this as ‘believing without belonging’, arguing that religion—at least Christianity—is simply changing and retreating from the public sphere, rather than disappearing (Davie 1994, Heelas & Woodhead 2005). Some scholars disagree and say that both practice and belief are declining and the UK and Europe is becoming secular (see Bruce 2011 for an excellent summary).

My challenge in my research was to answer the question ‘what do people believe in nowadays?’ Such an open question demanded an open research method, an inductive, qualitative approach where subjective meanings could be derived from the field, rather than imposed at the outset through a questionnaire. For example, when asking if someone believed in God, it may not be apparent from a survey what people may mean by belief or by ‘God’. The approach characterising my research is ‘symbolic interactionism’: people create meanings in their lives through interacting with other people and reflecting on those interactions. That open research method led me to discovering more about what and how people believe and how that understanding can contribute to theories about religion, secularisation, social change, ideology and practice, particularly through analysis along structural lines of age, class, ethnicity and gender.

Research design

During long-term fieldwork in northern England (2003–5 and 2009–11), I conducted qualitative research with more than 200 people aged between 14 and 83, evenly split by gender and cutting across socio-economic groups. Two characteristics of my research design are somewhat unusual in my field. Firstly, I used a snowballing method where I chose certain people as ‘gatekeepers’ and relied on them to introduce me to others. I presented the research issue as sociological rather than specifically religious, to avoid self-selection on the basis of their interest in matters religious or spiritual. Secondly, I did not ask religious questions, apart from the final question when I asked them how they had answered the religious question on the census (or, would answer in the case of under 18s). My questions, asked in semi-structured interviews, were designed to probe what they believed in: about their moral beliefs, 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 emotions and beliefs came from.

As my research question was partly motivated by why British people identified as Christian, the data would necessarily be gathered from Britain. Also, as I was intrigued by what people believed relative to their apparent Christian census identification, I would not deliberately situate the study in a location which had an unusually high proportion of people from other faiths. A potential disadvantage of any geographic focus would be its possible parochial nature. I was aware that a small-scale geographic focus could reflect an unusual bias towards certain ethnic groups or social classes. I therefore used census data to confirm that the population of the Yorkshire region I studied generally conformed to national averages, particularly related to age, gender, ethnicity and social class.

I began without knowing what I would find. My opening, audacious question was ‘what do you believe in?’ leaving the interpretation of belief open. When respondents asked me, as they usually did, what I meant by belief, I said, truthfully, I didn’t know. This helped the interview proceed, I felt, on a more even footing and allowed them to talk about what was important to them. I then transcribed each interview verbatim and made notes on emerging themes, which I discussed with my supervisors, internal advisors, and colleagues at conferences. Using the same indirect methods in the follow-up study, I conducted semi-structured ‘belief’ interviews, focusing on what they believe now and how their beliefs may have changed relative to their earlier narratives. The way people described beliefs was not typically through coher-

ent, cognitively based belief statements, but stories with real characters, plots, and emotional content: what I termed ‘holistic belief narratives.’ Like Byron J. Good (1994) in his exploration of narratives of illness, I was to learn that rich examples, emplotment, characters, and multiple viewpoints are characteristic of such narratives. People did not typically articulate their beliefs in grammatically grand language or in flat, rehearsed, creedal monotonies; their belief narratives were polyvocal, enlivened with the stories and voices of other people, alive or dead, who meant something to them in whom they ‘believe’.

Following the initial re-interview phase, I created in-depth case studies with several individuals and their wider social networks. People were selected through inductive analysis, considering such significant criteria as age, gender, social class and whether they had moved from the original location. The aim was see how beliefs are shaped, resourced, performed and ‘embodied’.

During the follow-up phase (2009–11) I lived in the same village of many of my participants, and bordered others, and conducted what I have categorised as 54 fieldwork data collection events, of which 22 were formal interviews recorded and transcribed, 32 were visits to people’s homes, social events, places of worship, schools, significant sites (market, shops, cafes, taxi ranks) prompted by informants’ insights and often accompanied by them.

Findings

Some found my opening question, ‘what do you believe in?’ startling because they assumed I had a set answer and often assumed I meant belief in religious terms. How they answered it revealed a lot about the ambiguity of terms like belief and religion and Christianity. I needed to coax people, almost as if I were giving them permission, to talk about beliefs which were not to do with religion.

Believing in belonging. Most people I interviewed believed in ‘treating people right’ and thought those beliefs derived from their childhood, by how they were shown, particularly by mothers, what was right and wrong. They thought they were reinforced by life experience. People mostly said they were happiest when they were with people whom they loved, and most frightened when they contemplated not their death, but the death of someone they loved. It was that insight and similar examples from my research that led me to my thesis: people have relationship-centred and relationship-guided belief systems, informed by experiences and the emotions they (re)produce. They ‘believe in belonging’. Their sense of belonging, however, is quite specific: most

people in the post-18 age group I interviewed believe in belonging to people like themselves. Religion for them serves as a marker to help identify some people as ‘us’ and others as ‘them’. The ‘others’ roughly fall into one of three categories with occasional overlap.

Ethnic others. While often prefacing their remarks by saying that they were not ‘racist’, many informants volunteered comments about what they saw as the threat of other ‘races’ and religions in the UK (see, e.g., Mason 1995 for discussion of ‘race’).

Young others. Older people frequently talked about young people as disrespectful, rude and dangerous (to older people).

Bad mothers. Both women and men denigrated women whom they saw as rejecting traditional roles of motherhood.

I did not find the same ‘othering’ tendency amongst young people I interviewed, aged between 14 and 18. They tended to cite racism as immoral and spoke with love and respect for their families (particularly their mothers) and friends. Their view of family, however, fluctuated amongst the age group and sometimes within the same interview. Members of their ‘family’ were those with whom they had a loving, reciprocal relationship. In contrast to the older generation I interviewed, they did not criticise their lone mothers but often railed against their absent fathers, putting a different complexion on the consequences of family restructuring.

Christian nominalism: them and us

But what about believing in Christianity, as nearly three-quarters of census respondents apparently did? In my interviews I heard people tell me many stories, happy and sad, about their triumphs and their losses, what made them laugh and cry, what gave meaning to their lives. Few people mentioned God, Jesus, religion, the church, or spirituality during our interviews. When I asked people how they’d answered the census question, ‘what is your religion?’ I offered the choices that had appeared on the England and Wales census—None; Christian; Buddhist; Hindu; Jewish; Muslim; Sikh; any other religion, or an option not to answer the question. Thirty-seven of my 68 informants, including those who weren’t even sure God existed, said ‘Christian’. So why did they say that?

Of those Christians, I identified 18 as ‘adherent Christians’. They professed their faith in our interviews; believed in God; attended church (and even if they didn’t attend church regularly they wanted to); believed in Jesus as divine

and believed that they will go to heaven when they die. The other 19 who said they ticked Christian did so for what I have identified as three main reasons: natal, ethnic and aspirational. Natal Christians said they were Christian because they were baptised, relating their identity as Christian to their family and place of birth. Ethnic Christians described their Christianity in terms of Englishness, seeing Christianity as a way of affiliating to an ethnic group and a way to distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups. Aspirational Christians talked about Christianity in terms of being good, or being respectable.

And what of the others, those who didn't tick Christian? There were a few of other religions, in line with national census data where non-Christian religions comprise about six per cent than of the total. The largest second group in my study was people who said 'none'. For them, power, agency and authority were located in the human and secular, with some exceptions: predominantly women who had been disappointed by husbands or lovers. They said they believed it was better to 'go with the flow' and wait for a benign higher power to determine their fate. I also found a fatalistic pessimism amongst some young men.

Varieties of the religious and secular

It is therefore unlikely we are seeing a simple turn to the post, the secular or even back to the religious. What occurs on the ground is far more complex, but what is happening with young people may provide the best indication of the future. While it seems apparent that most young people today are generally less religious than their parents, some people argue that young people today are purposeless, inarticulate individuals without clear beliefs, drifting through an amoral landscape, unsure of where or to whom to turn, particularly in times of change or stress (Smith & Denton 2005, Mason *et al.* 2007). Others argue that young people's relationships give them a sense of belonging that they believe in, that sustains them over time (Day 2009) and that they search, if not for religious truths, then at least for a sense of meaning and authenticity (Lynch 2002).

So, who's right? What do young people believe in and how do they perform those beliefs? Are they really incoherent, or are researchers just asking the wrong questions? Is this the new generation of secularist non-believers? Funded by the UK's AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society programme, an international network of researchers from universities across Europe and the

USA decided to take a different approach to understanding young people and belief. Led by Professor Gordon Lynch (University of Kent), and me, the network met twice and held a 'virtual conference' to discuss specific ideas and their own research projects involving young people. The central aim was to examine whether conceiving of belief and spirituality in different ways as, for example, 'cultural performance', might help us understand and analyse the presence or absence of religion in the life-worlds of young people.

Our findings were drawn from such diverse projects as, for example, Christian Punk rockers in England, Eco-Warriors in the United States, young Muslims and Sikhs in the UK, secular young people in Russia, and young Catholics in Poland.

There is no universal phenomenon called 'belief', shared across time and cultures. We agreed with scholars like Asad (1993), who have argued that religious beliefs are created and promoted in certain times and places, often to meet the objectives of religious leaders. We should therefore consider more critically research methods that assume 'belief' to be a common phenomenon amongst all research participants. This also raises critical questions about how notions of belief as a universal phenomenon circulate in non-academic contexts such as Religious Education in schools or the definition of 'religion' in the legal system.

While belief needs to be personally meaningful, young people are not individualistic. One of the most common, and striking, findings across the wide range of contexts studied was that young people typically found it important to conceive of their beliefs as authentic, personally meaningful and freely chosen. One of the statements receiving the highest levels of assent (93 %) in a survey on religion, belief and young people in Sweden presented at the workshop, was that beliefs should be meaningful and of one's own choice. And yet, belief comes from and is practised in a variety of relationships. An important relational context for the formation of young people's beliefs is their relationship with parents. It should not be assumed that young people's beliefs are formed in opposition to those of their parents, and parental beliefs (or indeed indifference to religious belief) are more likely to shape those of their children. Belief is also practised through relations with sacred figures, as well as natural spaces and animals, and people not usually associated with young people's spirituality—volunteer 'street pastors', for example, discussing young people's beliefs and problems at 2 a.m. outside a club. Beliefs are not always statements about truths, but lived and often performed realities. For example, researcher Daniel Nilsson DeHanas, Bristol University, interviewed sixty youths, age 18 to 25, in the Brixton and Whitechapel areas of London

who were involved in hip hop. Hip hop is a global cultural phenomenon that includes rap music, dance, graffiti art and fashion, as well as particular racial identities and ways of being. Some of these young people enjoy writing and performing their own hip hop raps. DeHanas was surprised to find that (even though he had made no mention of religion) most of the raps young people shared made some reference to God or to religious beliefs. Important to hip hop is ‘keepin’ it real’, or being authentic and skilled in representing real-life experiences. For some young people, the rap expresses how he is ‘real’ with his listeners about the dangers of street life and also about the hope that can be found in God. Belief is therefore often inseparable from practice.

Emotion is also an important component of belief. It can at times be constructed as a sign that one is believing in the ‘right way’. One young Christian, for example, was quoted as saying ‘I know that I am properly committed in my relationship with God because I am happy.’ Researcher Amy Wilkins examined identities among evangelical college students in the northeastern United States. The students in her project were members of a Protestant parachurch organisation she called University Unity. Wilkins found that for the evangelical students in her project, feelings were the most important marker of authentic Christianity. Participants believed that they were truly Christians when they experienced good feelings: happiness, peace, joy, and so on. Participants learned how to be happy through group emotion practices that encouraged introspection (journal writing, studying the Bible, prayer, etc.) and that taught participants to transform bad feelings into good feelings.

Sometimes, beliefs need to be expressed in hyper-rational ways, while also being relational. In her study of British contemporary conservative evangelicals, Anna Strahn, University of Kent, noticed that young people were encouraged to adopt a disciplined and academic approach to belief, studying the Bible and sermons in a logical, rational way. They distinguish between themselves, the disciplined true ‘believers’ and other more emotional or experiential ‘unbelievers’. And yet, there were some forms of emotional relationships that were encouraged: those with God and those with fellow family members and friends who attended their church.

Belief can be an important marker of identity. In a project exploring the transmission of Sikhism among young British Sikhs, Leeds University researcher Jasjit Singh found that young Sikhs used belief as an important marker of identity. For example, one young Sikh felt that ‘for someone to understand me, they would have to be aware of my religious beliefs’, as ‘an explanation of our key beliefs will help people understand why I may have certain opinions, or not eat certain foods’ (see also Singh 2010). It is conse-

quently becoming more important for many young Sikhs to learn about their beliefs, 'so that we know where we came from and what we believe in'. This may help explain the evolution of the large number of events now being run across the UK which aim to teach young Sikhs about Sikhism.

The network found that understanding different contexts of belief and the different ways people experience, understand and perform belief demands flexibility and innovation from researchers. Different methods need to be considered, whether survey, interviews, observation or a mix. Some young people who adopt a truth or fact-based approach to belief are more likely to state these beliefs in ways that can be captured by surveys or structured interviews. Young people who do not hold beliefs in those forms are more likely to state their beliefs by illustrating them with examples or stories about what they think it means to live a good life. Researchers need to be able to adapt their methods accordingly. Assuming that young people are inarticulate or incoherent may say more about the researcher than the researched.

Conclusion

Although many people in my research stated that they were non-religious, and also Christian, I explored the ways in which such a self-applied label took on complex and diffuse ideological forms. My work therefore contradicts 'privatisation' theses which dominate the sociology of religion. I found that far from disappearing, religion is often used publicly as a marker of group identity. This is not a return to religion, or a resurgence in spirituality, but a fluctuating form of contextualised religious identity.

Christian nominalists may not believe in God or Jesus, at least if belief is understood as 'faith'. It would be incorrect, however, to dismiss them as 'unbelievers', or their nominalist beliefs as not having essential or substantive reality. They believe in many things, usually related to 'belonging'. By closely examining people's sense of Christian 'belonging', we find other more subtle, interwoven 'belongings' related to, for example, history, nation, morality, gender, and 'culture'.

A major methodological finding was that existing sociological and anthropological methods required development to allow data to be gathered and analysed holistically, to understand what belief means to different people in different places at different times. The five-part model developed during my initial work focused not just on the content of belief (usually dealt with by sociologists by asking short questions such as 'do you believe in God'), but be-

belief's *resources, practices, salience and functions*. To study belief longitudinally, new elements of *place and time* were incorporated.

This holistic, organic, multi-dimensional framework developed the research beyond standard sociological techniques to an enhanced anthropological approach introducing my performative, dynamic model of belief. A process I termed 'performative belief' refers to a neo-Durkheimian construct, where belief is a lived, embodied performance, brought into being through action. Within a social context are social relationships: performative belief plays out through the relationships in which people have faith and to which they feel they belong. Belief in social relationships is performed through social actions of both belonging and excluding.

References

Asad, Talal

1993 *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Bäckström, A., N. A. Beckman & P. Pettersson

2004 *Religious Change in Northern Europe: the Case of Sweden*. Stockholm: Verbum.

Bruce, S.

2011 *Secularization, in Defence of an Unfashionable Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davie, G.

1994 *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Day, A.

2009 'Believing in belonging: an ethnography of young people's constructions of belief.' *Culture and Religion* 10 (3): 263.

2010 'Propositions and performativity: relocating belief to the social.' *Culture and Religion* 11 (1): 9–30.

2011 *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Good, B. J.

1994 *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Heelas, P. & L. Woodhead (with B. Seel, B. Szerszynski & K. Tusting)

2005 *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lynch, G.

2002 *After Religion: 'Generation X' and the Search for Meaning*. London: Darton, Longman, and Todd Ltd.

Martin, D.

1978 *A General Theory of Secularization*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Mason, D.

1995 *Race and Ethnicity in Modern Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mason, M., A. Singleton & R. Webber

2007 *The Spirit of Generation Y*. Melbourne: John Garratt.

Pollack, D.

2008 'Religious change in Europe: theoretical considerations and empirical findings.' *Social Compass* 55 (2): 168–86.

Robbins, J.

2007 'Continuity thinking and the problem of Christian culture.' *Current Anthropology* 48 (1): 5–17.

Singh, J.

2010 'British Sikh youth: identity, hair and the turban.' In: S. Collins-Mayo & P. Dandelion (eds), *Religion and Youth*. 131–8. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Smith, C. & M. Denton

2005 *Soul Searching: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Warner, R. S.

1993 'Work in progress towards a new paradigm for the sociological study of religion in the United States.' *The American Journal of Sociology* 98 (5): 1044–93.