

'Abby Day's Believing in Belonging: Review'

Date: 2013-06-30 15:16:07+02:00

Here's my review of Abby Day's *Believing in Belonging* which appeared in last year's edition of the [Journal of Religion and Society](#). Though I didn't quite buy the theoretical argument of the book, I thought the substantive work on people's attitudes towards institutionalised religion, gods, ghosts and fate was fascinating.

The commentary on the census is also very useful. I referred to that aspect of the work in a [previous post](#), where I questioned an evolutionary explanation of religion that relied on data from historical censuses.

Review of *Believing in Belonging* by Abby Day

[Religion and Society: Advances in Research](#), Volume 3, Number 1, 2012, pp. 211-241(31)

Believing in Belonging is a study based mainly on a series of interviews conducted in the early 2000s in the north of England. Suspecting that sociological studies of religious affiliation were failing to capture something important, Day asked her interviewees instead about 'belief'. In the substantive chapters she outlines the main issues that emerged from these conversations: community and identity, relations with kin, enduring relations with the dead, the operation of fate or providence, and the importance of morality.

The most interesting finding relates to a puzzle about contemporary religious belief. In the 2001 census, which was the first to include a question on religious identity, 72% of respondents identified themselves as Christian. This was interpreted jubilantly by many, Day notes, as a refutation of the secularization thesis. The census was not the first survey to show that a high proportion of British people continue to identify themselves as Christian, but it added to a longstanding sociological puzzle: while a high proportion of people in postwar Europe are still willing to call themselves Christian, other markers of religion, such as participation in acts of worship, show a dramatic and continuing decline.

There are two established explanations for this discrepancy. One is that many of the self-identified Christians are 'nominal' Christians, who identify themselves as Christian if asked, and may attend church for weddings and funerals, but otherwise do not think twice about belief. On this interpretation, the high rates of religious identification in surveys such as the census tell us little or nothing about the decline of belief in religion. The other explanation, most influentially advanced by Grace Davie, is that the phenomenon is just another aspect of the individualization of western societies, in which traditional communal institutions have lost their authority and people engage with culture on their own terms. On this view, the fall in church attendance cannot be taken as evidence of a corresponding loss of belief, rather, people continue 'believing without belonging'.

Day's research supports neither explanation. She finds that her interviewees can be divided into 'theocentrics', who see a relationship with God at the center of everything they do, and 'anthropocentrics', who do not. Theocentrics tend to be quite hostile in their evaluation of anthropocentrics, and vice versa. But the surprising and significant finding is that the boundaries of these groups do not coincide with the boundary between those who identify themselves as belonging to a religion and those who do not. About half of the interviewees who identified themselves as Christian were 'anthropocentric', and many of those were assertively atheist as well as rejecting the authority of institutional religion.

This is a problem for the 'believing without belonging' school, because it suggests that little can be assumed about people's acceptance of religious beliefs on the basis of their self-declared religious identity. On the other hand, many 'anthropocentric' respondents, whether or not they felt they belonged to a particular religion, did believe they had experienced ghosts, and that the hand of fate acted in their lives. This means that neither falling church attendances or even outright antipathy to religion can be taken as clear evidence of rationalization of society.

Day's own interpretation of her findings is that claiming, or 'performing', religious identity through surveys and narratives is a way of asserting a sort of ascribed cultural heritage, and simultaneously excluding ethnic others from it. Beliefs about other things—values, the dead, and so on—are used in the same way to express the importance of various social relationships, and often to exclude weak groups including women and children. Day's 'neo-Durkheimian' conclusion is that belief is ultimately a matter of 'the social': 'believing in belonging'.

Much of the detail of Day's interviews is of interest. For example, the way in which informants sometimes reveal their own awareness of having decided to believe that they can speak to their kin beyond the grave, because the alternative would be unbearable, or the fact that ghosts are experienced in an embodied, sensually rich way, but rarely visually, or that among her respondents, only deceased kin were experienced in this way, not friends or unrelated strangers. Interviewees say they believe morality is doing to others as one would be done by, but in practice, they mean 'doing to' people like themselves, and various ethnic, or gendered 'others' turn out not to merit the same treatment. Many 'anthropocentric' people say that being culturally Christian means that their values are based on the Ten Commandments, and do not notice that they have tacitly edited out Commandments I – IV, which stipulate proper behavior in relation to God.

This material alone makes the book a valuable contribution to the literature. However, in terms of its theoretical aims—to provide a sound basis for understanding belief—the book is less successful. Day is ambitious in this respect and there are theoretical claims throughout. Here space allows me to mention only the most important of them, Day's argument (drawing on Austin and Butler) that belief should be understood as 'performative' in the sense that the narration of beliefs brings about concrete effects. However, the claim is nowhere clearly explained, and Day's usage is slippery: sometimes the effect of performance is the creation of a community of identity or some other object of belief, sometimes it is the creation of the belief itself, sometimes she seems to be claiming that the performance *itself* is the belief.

The reason that defining 'belief' is so important to Day's argument—and this is also the reason it is so difficult to define—is that she seeks to displace the concept of 'religion' from its central position in social scientific work, but seems to want to replace it with an equivalent concept that covers much the same ground, including fate, morality and communication with the dead. But there is no reason to think that the different things the interviewees speak about under the rubric of 'belief' cover, from their point of view, a single field of thought or activity, and therefore no reason to expect to be able to find a unifying definition, or even that a family resemblance relationship obtains between them. Day sets out to replace the survey designers' blunt questions about religious affiliation, which assume too much, with a more inductive approach, but the design of her structured interviews, starting with the question, 'What do you believe in?' incorporates its own assumptions, above all that there is a single, coherent phenomenon that corresponds to 'believing in'. Day's descriptions of the anxiety evoked in her participants by her first question—for instance, 'Sometimes informants demonstrated surprise at the question and needed a few seconds to gather his or her [sic] thoughts. Some physically drew back and looked at me in shock...' (p. 41)—suggest that for them 'believing in' corresponded to no clearly defined or salient category.

Day has not solved the problem of belief, but notwithstanding these limitations, her book is an important contribution to the literature that has significant implications for future empirical and theoretical work, as well as for public policy.