BELIEVING IN BELONGING: RELOCATING BELIEF TO THE SOCIAL

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This paper draws on empirical research exploring mainstream Christian religious belief and identity in Euro-American countries:

- The research explored religion without asking overtly religious questions or selecting people on the basis of their interest in religion or spirituality.

- The aim was to probe beliefs amongst three generations of people from a wide cross-section of society. Starting from that qualitative study based in northern England, and then broadening the data to include Europe and North America, it is argued here that many people ‘believe in belonging’.

- This contrasts with much established theory that asserts that most people are ‘unchurched’ or ‘nominalist’, ‘believing without belonging’, while privately maintaining beliefs in God and other ‘spiritual’ phenomena. Those approaches are sustained by certain assumptions about belief that remain strikingly unexplored.

- The findings here help explain apparent anomalies where, for example, three-quarters of the UK population selected ‘Christian’ as their religious identity on the 2001 national census (the first time it had been asked on a census), yet fewer than eight per cent attend church regularly or participate in other Christian rites such as baptism, confirmation, weddings and funerals.

- Through a nuanced exploration of belief, it is argued here that many people who self-identify as Christian when asked (and often only when asked) may not believe ‘that’ God or Jesus gives meaning to their lives, but they believe ‘in’ Christianity as an institution that symbolises their perception of their roots, their ‘culture’ and other social forms of belonging. Exploring in particular the experience of young people, the paper concludes that how young people discuss their beliefs reflect where they define and locate legitimate sites of power, meaning and authority.

- For many young people today, religion is an insufficient source and mode of belief and belonging. The findings discussed here suggest an orientation to family, friends and other social relationships as legitimate and sufficient sites for locating belief, authority and transcendence. It is argued that the young people studied do not hold beliefs to be ‘true’, in that they are propositional creed-like statements.

- Young people have shifted the meaning of belief to describe affective relationships in which they feel they belong. Such a shift necessitates a relocation of the transcendent to the everyday and social. That shift is particularly evident as young people discuss how they continue their relationships with deceased loved ones.

- In conclusion, one of the main implications is to reconsider how religion and belief are defined. The study of religion often implicitly assumes a definition resting on Tylor’s theory that belief has an explanatory function to account for ‘spirits’, or a Weberian view that religious belief reflects a universal search for meaning. By relocating belief to the social, this paper, in contrast, suggests a Durkheimian turn.
Suggested Reading


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

--- and Coleman, S. (eds.) ‘Broadening the Boundaries of Belief’, *Culture and Religion*, 11 (1), 2010


http://www.trincoll.edu/Academics/AcademicResources/values/ISSSC/publications/

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- **AKC Forum** end of term seminar with the Dean, Dr Marat Shterin and others. Monday 22nd March, Room G.72, Waterloo campus, 17.00-18.30 (refreshments provided)

- **AKC Exam**, Thursday, 1st April 2010. You will have seen that your OneSpace portal has now changed to show your AKC course alongside your main degree course studies. The Exam Registration will go live on your OneSpace Student Record from 5th - 16th March inclusive. Follow on screen instructions. If you have a good reason why you will be unable to attend the exam on 1st April, you will need to apply to take the Alternative Assessment Procedure in writing to Elizabeth, dean@kcl.ac.uk asap. Please state your reason, providing full details. Please also provide the name of your Tutor and any other evidence that might help your case.