

Sociological theories on religion in Britain

Sociologist Dr Rachael Shillitoe describes some important theories about religion in Britain and Europe.

Grace Davie: *believing without belonging*

Professor Grace Davie is a leading British sociologist of religion. Her work has shaped our thinking and understanding of religion in society. In the early 1990s she developed the concept 'believing without belonging' to describe the trends in the religious landscape of Britain at that time.

This concept addresses the difficulty of balancing hard and soft measures of religious life in Europe. In other words, how do we observe religion in society? Is it by practice and the numbers of people attending church or is it more personal and about individual belief?

'Believing without belonging' was an attempt to capture a trend in society which still saw high levels of belief while also recognising church attendance is declining. It helps to explain how there can be religious belief without active engagement or regular commitment to organised religion.

It is important to note that this change in the religious landscape does not only apply to religion. Professor Davie points out in later writings that the shift between active and inactive commitment in religious life can also be found in other areas of social life. Even in secular life, you constantly find drops and increases in attendance and engagement in activities such as political parties, sports or other social groups.

Grace Davie: *vicarious religion*

Professor Davie later refined this line of thinking and developed another concept, *vicarious religion*. This is a way to describe how a significant proportion of the European population continue to be attached to organised religion, whether or not they attend regularly and actively. Davie concluded that in this way, for many people, religion is *vicarious* in that it is 'performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing' (Davie 2011, 2¹).

Glossary

Hard and soft measures: hard measures here include things that can be clearly measured, such as participating in worship, reading sacred texts or praying, or stating beliefs from official creeds. Soft measures explore more fuzzy ideas or attitudes, such as statements that there is some kind of God or spirit.

Vicarious: this means doing or feeling something on behalf of others.

Abby Day: *believing in belonging*

Professor Abby Day is another leading British sociologist whose work is significant for understanding belief and religion in society. Professor Day's work came after Grace Davie's 'believing without belonging'. It seeks to understand the nature of belief in our social lives and what this meant in terms of religious or non-religious identity.

Professor Day considers how people 'believe in belonging', drawing on an ethnographic study of a town in northern England. She uses this concept to explain how people choose religious identifications in order to fit with other forms of belonging in their lives.

Professor Day develops this concept and describes different approaches to belief. One example is '*performative belief*', which explains how non-religious individuals can show some relation to a Christian identity due to their other social belongings. For example, some people interviewed identified as Christian, because grandparents or other family members identify as Christian, even though at the same time they would be non-religious in terms of their beliefs.

Professor Day's work brings us closer to understanding the intricate web in which belief and religion are placed, in terms of people's relationships, families and nationalities. In this way, she helps to add substance and detail to the category of people labelled 'nominally religious' – a large but otherwise rather empty category. Professor Davie's theory that many people don't attend church but still hold private beliefs in God is made more complicated by Professor Day's work. She demonstrates that belief is often rooted in social relationships.

¹ From earlier publication: Davie, G. 'Vicarious religion: a methodological challenge', *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* ed. Nancy Tatom Ammerman (OUP 2007, p. 22)