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Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging

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ABSTRACT

'Believing without belonging' has become the catchphrase of much European work on religion in the past decade. The thesis that religious belief is fairly robust even if churchgoing is declining is examined using data from the British Household Panel Survey and the British Social Attitudes surveys. The evidence suggests that belief has in fact eroded in Britain at the same rate as two key aspects of belonging: religious affiliation and attendance. Levels of belief are lower than those of nominal belonging. The roles of period, cohort and age effects on religious change are considered; the conclusion is that decline is generational. In relation to the rates at which religion is transmitted from parents to children, the results suggest that only about half of parental religiosity is successfully transmitted, while absence of religion is almost always passed on. Transmission is just as weak for believing as for belonging.

KEY WORDS

belief / cohort effect / intergenerational transmission / religion / secularization

Introduction

'**B**elieving without belonging' has become the catchphrase of much European work on religion in the past decade. Introduced by Grace Davie in a conference paper and subsequent journal article (Davie, 1990) and later used as the subtitle of a book (Davie, 1994), the expression has

spread across the world and beyond the borders of scholarship. While in the United States the main challenge to the idea that modernization brings secularization in its wake comes from supply-side rational choice theories, European critics of the secularization thesis typically offer sociological variations on the theme of believing without belonging (henceforth BWB). In both cases the underlying principle is that faith may change shape but does not fade away.

Davie herself generally takes care to emphasize that the beliefs of those who are not religiously active are unlikely to be orthodox. Many other commentators are less cautious (suggesting, for example, that most Britons are Christian though 'unchurched'). BWB has taken on a life of its own; criticisms of its use are not necessarily criticisms of Davie. The problem is that the slogan lends itself to an unfortunate equivocation. The defensible interpretations of the phrase assert little; the bold versions have high empirical content but happen to be false. Proponents of BWB tend to want both the stature of a strong claim and the self-evidence of a weak one.

The strong version of BWB is that with the exception of a handful of atheists, Europeans continue to believe in God and to have religious (or at least 'spiritual') sensibilities: the proportion of believers is high and has changed little in recent years. People look to the churches in times of personal or public need but usually take their existence for granted. At its most religiously optimistic, BWB can even be interpreted to mean that 'More and more people within British society are, it appears, wanting to believe but without putting this belief into practice' (Davie, 1990: 463), or again, 'The sacred does not disappear – indeed in many ways it is becoming more rather than less prevalent in contemporary society' (Davie, 1994: 43). While Davie makes it plain that she has unorthodox belief in mind, other writers stress the persistence of Christian faith (Avis, 2003). The basic concept, in any event, is that belief in the supernatural is high and reasonably robust while religious practice is substantially lower and has declined more quickly.

Weak interpretations of BWB offer a much more attenuated thesis. First, as noted above, belief is allowed to be non-Christian, vague, and even non-religious. While it is legitimate to count many forms of alternative spirituality as belief in the supernatural, one might be uneasy about what is covered by 'variables concerned with feelings, experience and the more numinous aspects of religious belief', particularly when the *contrasting* category includes 'those which measure religious orthodoxy' (Davie, 1994: 4). The whole idea of BWB becomes much less striking if conventional Christian faith is seen as an aspect of 'belonging' rather than 'believing'. Moreover it does not seem useful to

widen the definition of religion to include questions about the meaning of life, the purpose of mankind's existence, the future of the planet and man's responsibilities to his fellow man and to the earth itself ... the 18–24 age-group may respond to these profound ecological, moral, ethical (and surely religious) issues much more positively than they do to traditional religious instruction. (Davie, 1990: 462)

Such a manoeuvre begs the question; believers may assert that these issues are 'surely religious', but no one else is obliged to agree. If we expand the scope of religion by definitional fiat we obscure the phenomenon we should be studying (Bruce, 2002a: 199–203).

Furthermore, weak formulations of BWB depict it as potentially transitory. Older generations are markedly more religious than younger ones; 'for many young people, disconnected belief is, increasingly, giving way to no belief at all' (Davie, 1990: 462). By implication, BWB may be a transitional phase as a thoroughly secular culture emerges, rather than an important characteristic of late modernity. If the point is merely that there is a lag between declining participation and the erosion of belief, this phenomenon may be analysed and explained more directly (Gill, 1999: ch. 3).

In what follows we offer evidence that the strong version of BNB is wrong. Religious belief has declined at the same rate as religious affiliation and attendance, and is not even necessarily higher than belonging. In so doing we are vulnerable to the charge that we misrepresent what the phrase – in its weak version – represents. It is worth quoting Davie's response to earlier criticism:

The terms 'believing' and 'belonging' are not to be considered too rigidly. The disjunction between the variables is intended to capture a mood, to suggest an area of enquiry, a way of looking at the problem, not to describe a detailed set of characteristics. Operationalizing either or both of the variables too severely is bound to distort the picture But the question very quickly becomes semantic, for it is clear that we need some way, if not this one, of describing the persistence of the sacred in contemporary society despite the undeniable decline in churchgoing. (Davie, 1994: 93–4)

Operationalizing the concepts differently might indeed make a difference, but we argue that our measures are appropriate and valid. The 'persistence of the sacred' in our culture is not self-evident (Brown, 2001; Bruce, 2002a). Despite the interest in the idea of BWB, we maintain that it is now more misleading than helpful as a way of describing the contemporary situation.

While the introduction of an idea that has generated as much discussion as BWB is by any standard a major contribution, one wonders whether the entire perspective rests on a mistake. We refer not to the alleged mismatch between trends in religious belief and participation but to the identification of this relationship as a problem. 'Why relatively high levels of belief and low levels of practice (rather than any other combination) should be considered normal is far from clear', Davie argues (1994: 5). Questioning what we take for granted can be valuable, but is there really a mystery here? At least outside the boundaries of religion, no one expects assent to any given view to be matched by active membership in a relevant organization. If we felt impelled to demonstrate every week at a public rally supporting each of our beliefs – from the rightness of funding antenatal care to the wrongness of building more prisons – there would be no time to eat or sleep. The question is not why passive assent should be more prevalent than regular practice, but why anyone finds this situation unusual.

The reason some observers expect more religious activity is simple: Christian churches tell us that it matters to God and ipso facto to us. Religion is a social pursuit; even the most unsacramental Protestant sect holds that joining together to affirm shared beliefs and to hear the word preached is vital both as a demonstration of faith and as a means of strengthening it. If people choose not to belong it is a clear sign that they do not believe religious doctrine. Whether or not they are confident that God exists, it is apparent at the very least that they doubt the Almighty much more than when they spend Sunday in church or in the shops. Nor is it simply a matter of believing in a god who does not take attendance: they evidently do not believe in a god who is sufficiently important to merit collective celebration on any regular basis. Put simply, increasing numbers of people believe that belonging doesn't matter.

The basic problem with evidence of residual religiosity is that it is easy to forget that such beliefs often have little personal, let alone social, significance. In a passage quoted earlier, Davie comments that people want to believe without putting those beliefs into practice. Just what sort of practice should one expect, though? Many people in Britain have beliefs about the rights and wrongs of fox hunting, but comparatively few are either participants or protestors. It is not enough to find that people accept one statement of belief or another; unless these beliefs make a substantial difference in their lives, religion may consist of little more than opinions to be gathered by pollsters.

There are three parts to the analysis that follows. First, we consider whether there really is 'an increasingly evident mismatch between statistics relating to religious practice and those which indicate levels of religious belief' (Davie, 1994: 4) and specifically whether 'believing is declining (has declined) at a slower rate than belonging' (Davie, 1990: 455). Second, we undertake the crucial – but heretofore seldom attempted – task of attributing religious change to period, cohort and age effects. What, in other words, is determining religiosity: forces that act regardless of age, shifts from one generation to the next, or characteristics of the lifecycle? Finally, having identified generational differences as by far the most significant component of religious change, we analyze the rates at which believing and belonging are transmitted from parents to children.

Religious Affiliation, Attendance and Belief

Our analysis begins with the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), a dataset that is both longitudinal and rich in family and household context. The study started in 1991 with 10,264 individuals in 5,538 households. These individuals have where possible been surveyed every year since, even if they leave the original household.

Three main questions on religion are periodically included, initially in wave 1 (1991–2) and most recently in wave 9 (1999–2000). The first, 'do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion? (If yes, which?)', can be used

to measure affiliation. The second, ‘how often, if at all, do you attend religious services or meetings?’, is a standard gauge of participation. The third, ‘how much difference would you say religious beliefs make to your life? Would you say they make a little difference, some difference, a great difference, no difference?’, reflects the strength and significance of belief.¹ It is helpful for present purposes to represent each conceptual category with a dichotomous variable: the respondent either does or does not identify a denomination (for affiliation), report going to services at least once a month (for attendance), and state that religion makes some difference or a great difference to life (for belief).

As a first step we examine a ‘constant panel’ of those individuals who participated in both waves 1 and 9 of the survey; we will subsequently compare these results with cross-sectional output representative of the British population as a whole. It is useful to consider three kinds of change in the BHPS panel:

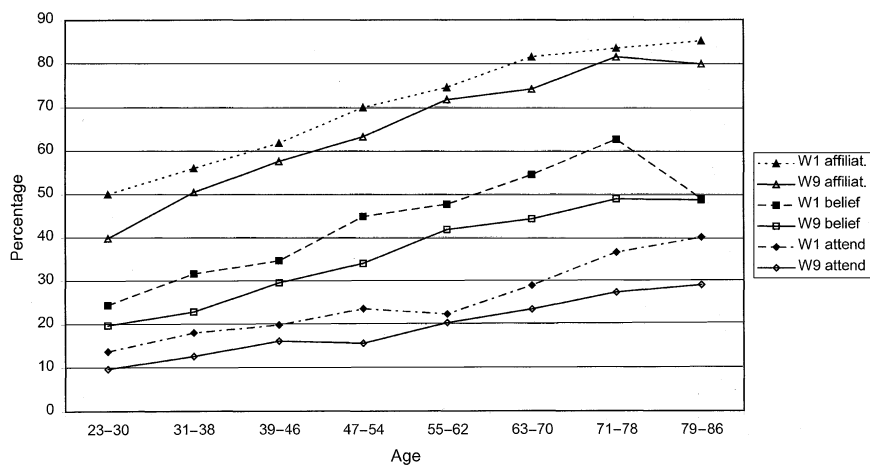
- between different age groups at the same period;
- between the same age groups (but different individuals) at different periods; and
- between different periods for the same individuals.

Figure 1 allows us to visualize these comparisons. There are three pairs of lines representing affiliation, belief, and attendance. The age groups have been constructed in such a way that every individual moves up one category between waves 1 and 9. Note that

- the lines slope upwards, i.e. older people are more religious than younger ones;
- the lines for wave 9 are below those for wave 1, i.e. people in 1999–2000 were less religious than those at the same age in 1991–2;
- with some exceptions the points for wave 1 are similar to the points for wave 9 in the next age group, i.e. respondents did not change substantially during the decade.

The natural interpretation is thus that religious decline is principally the result of differences between generations: each age cohort is less religious than the last. If religiosity increases with age it is not obvious, either because such effects are very small or alternatively because they are balanced by temporal (period) effects acting on everyone to depress religiosity across the board.

What is also apparent is the absence of any real mismatch between the figures on believing and belonging. Indeed, the question that uses the term ‘belong’ (albeit to elicit a rather passive kind of religious self-identification) produces much higher values than the one that taps the personal significance of religious belief. The very active form of belonging (regular churchgoing) is lower still, but there is no great gulf separating it from belief. Even more importantly, the slope of the belief lines (showing the pace of generational change) is just as great as for affiliation and substantially higher than for attendance.



Source: BHPS waves 1 and 9; N = 6,371.

Figure 1 Religious affiliation, belief and attendance by age.

Moreover, to the extent that individuals changed between waves 1 to 9, the net effect on belief tended to be negative. Far from being relatively strong and robust, religious belief is by this measure lower than passive belonging and is declining more rapidly (in absolute terms) than active belonging.

Table 1 shows the overall decline in religiosity for the constant panel and also a cross-sectional comparison of *all* BHPS respondents in 1991 and 1999, weighted to be representative of the British population at both years. The constant panel comparison underestimates decline across the population as a whole since, as a result of ageing, the panel contains no one younger than 23 by the later date. Not only are the rates of decline higher in the weighted cross-

Table 1 Change in religiosity, 1991–99

		Wave 1	Wave 9	Absolute decline
Constant panel	Affiliation	62.1	62.2	-0.2
	Belief	36.9	34.0	2.9
	Attendance	20.6	17.8	2.9
Cross section	Affiliation	62.0	59.1	2.9
	Belief	37.8	32.5	5.3
	Attendance	20.3	16.8	3.5

Source: BHPS waves 1 and 9

Notes: Both waves in the cross-sectional analysis have been weighted using the appropriate '#xrwght' variable to make the BHPS sample representative of the British population at the time of wave #.

section, but importantly, believing has declined by more than either measure of belonging.

One anomaly in Figure 1 deserves to be mentioned. As mentioned above, values for age group x at wave 1 generally correspond fairly closely to those for group $x+1$ at wave 9, as one would expect (in the absence of period and age effects) if individual responses are stable and reliable. The exception is in the very old: people who moved from ages 71–78 to 79–86. Here there is a drop in attendance (possibly to be expected if frailty inhibits churchgoing), in affiliation (though by a modest amount and perhaps associated with the fall in participation), and more surprisingly, in belief. Exactly the same gap is found on a cross-sectional basis in wave 1 (i.e. looking at people of different ages from the same period). It is difficult to account for this loss of a sense that religious belief makes a difference in life among the very old. The value for those aged 71–78 was quite elevated at wave 1; perhaps we are merely seeing a correction from an unusually high figure.

Period, Cohort and Age Effects

It is universally accepted that churchgoing has been declining for at least the last four decades (Brown, 2001; Bruce, 1995, 2002a), and longer time series show a slow but relentless fall since the 1851 census of religious worship. In the mid-19th century more than half the adult population of England and Wales would have attended services on any given Sunday (Crockett, 1998);² by the end of the 20th century the fraction attending in a typical week was less than one-twelfth (Brierley, 2000). The situation with belief is more controversial – hence the BWB thesis – but careful examination of opinion polls going back several decades makes it plain that faith has also eroded (Gill et al., 1998). The problem for sociologists is to clarify what is happening and why.

It is hard to explain secularization (using the term descriptively) without first having a good idea of how it operates. In particular, we need to understand what combination of period, cohort and age effects are at work. Is society becoming less religious because of forces that have an impact on everyone? Or do those forces have their effect by undermining religious upbringing, so that some generations come to be less religious than their predecessors? And if (as we tend to suppose) people become more religious with age – perhaps on reaching life stages such as childbearing or widowhood – how far does this factor compensate for the other influences?

No analysis can provide unambiguous answers. Each of these variables can be expressed as a combination of the other two (for example, age is simply the difference between the date at any period and an individual's year of birth), and with sufficient ingenuity all purported effects of one kind could be explained in terms of the other two. Plausibility and parsimony will generally lead us to favour certain interpretations, however (Harding and Jencks, 2003).

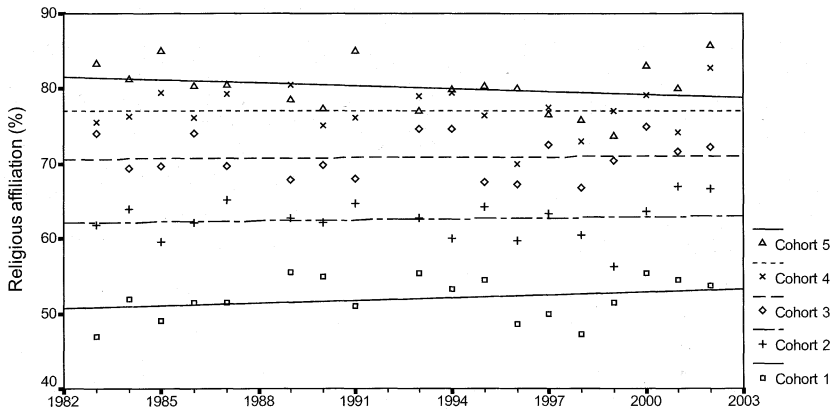
Longitudinal datasets are particularly useful in attempting to identify the different effects, and as we have seen the BHPS allows us to offer the important hypothesis that age itself is relatively unimportant. There remains the possibility, though, that age and period are both significant but that their net effect is nearly nil (if the tendency is to become more religious with age and concurrently less religious over time). We need another survey that has covered a longer period; especially if age (or year of birth) is recorded, repeated cross-sectional samples provide valuable data for these purposes. We can thus use the British Social Attitudes (BSA) surveys, carried out annually (except in 1988 and 1992) since 1983. Questions on religious affiliation and attendance have been included routinely, with special modules on religion (associated with the International Social Survey Programme) providing much more detail in 1991 and 1998.

Religious affiliation and reported attendance (but not belief) have been recorded in every BSA survey since 1983. We use the extent of self-reported religious affiliation in trying to decompose the pattern of change over the past two decades (and arguably earlier, by extrapolation). Declared affiliation is a poor measure of religiosity in absolute terms – many British people identify themselves as ‘Christian’ or ‘Anglican’ or ‘Catholic’ despite having no real connection with any church – but it is a useful indicator when examining change over time.

The level of adult religious affiliation fell from 69 percent in 1983 to a low of 54 percent in 1998, followed by a slight rebound subsequently. Has this shift come about because everyone became less inclined to claim a religious identity, because more religious generations are being replaced by more secular ones, or through some combination of the two (in conjunction with age effects)?

Figure 2 provides some clues. Trends in affiliation are shown for five cohorts: people who were in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s in 1983. These groups will have aged by a year in each successive survey, so that in 2002 the age groups for the same cohorts are 39–48, 49–58, 59–68, 69–78 and 79–88. The time series is not as long as one might ideally like, but we are able to follow young adults into middle age, middle-aged people to the onset of old age, and the old to an advanced age. The following features are particularly noteworthy:

1. The general level of affiliation falls for each successive generation; moreover, the gap between cohorts has been increasing.
2. The OLS trend line for each cohort over time is essentially flat, suggesting the absence of any period effects over and above the generational differences.³ (The lines fitted to cohorts 1 and 5 have very slight gradients, but being in opposite directions they are not evidence of a period effect.)
3. Age effects would reveal themselves through differences in the shapes of each curve. Although there is a good deal of apparently random variation (attributable to sampling error),⁴ there are no systematic deviations from horizontal linearity. Trend lines for all age cohorts in the BHPS are also flat,



Source: BSA 1983–2002

Note: Cohorts 1 through 5 consist of individuals who in 1983 were aged in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s respectively.

Figure 2 Religious affiliation for successive cohorts by survey year

corroborating the view that the brief upturns and downturns observed here are the product of chance.

To judge from two decades of BSA affiliation data, the main feature of religious decline is its generational character. An analysis of attendance leads to the same conclusion.⁵ Given that belief has declined in much the same way as affiliation and attendance, it seems reasonable to suppose that here too cohort effects are dominant. The detailed evidence from two generations of BHPS respondents examined below will substantiate this conjecture.

Although the idea of a ‘cohort effect’ provides the most economical description of the phenomenon, an alternative and essentially equivalent perspective is available. Two factors may be said to be at work, one operating over time and the other relating to age. The force of secularization has acted on everyone for at least the past few decades. Not everyone feels the effects in the same way, however; in particular, children are far more likely to be affected than adults. How children are brought up has an enormous impact on their subsequent propensity to identify with a religion; by the time people reach adulthood their religious affiliation is no longer likely to be influenced by these social forces.

Consistent with previous findings (Bruce and Glendinning, 2003; Voas, 2003), these results do not support the hypothesis that secularization is largely a product of the 1960s (Brown, 2001). The intergenerational decline in religiosity can be observed as far back as there are data available: here, at least to the Second World War (assuming that the gap between people who were aged in their 50s and 60s in 1983 reflects differences in their upbringing). It is fair to

note, however, that the decline apparently accelerated over the course of the post-war period, with the youngest cohort (consisting of people who were children in the 1960s and 70s) showing a particularly large difference from their predecessors.

A possible objection is that the results could have been produced by a pure period effect in the 1960s and 1970s, i.e. by a secularizing force that did not operate previously or since. If everyone (of whatever age) became less religious during that time, but has since maintained a steady level of attachment, the graphs could be as shown in Figure 2. The best rebuttal is to note that religious affiliation among young adults has continued to fall since 1983, reaching a low in the late 1990s of one-third of those aged 18–24.

Intergenerational Transmission

However one interprets the forces underlying the cohort effect, the evidence from two decades of attitudes surveys is that generational change is the key component of religious decline in modern Britain. We have been considering two different views of religious change. The first, represented by the notion of BWB, is that personal religiosity is separable from (and indeed has been separated from) public performance. The second is that belief and belonging are essentially connected, so that deterioration in one is associated with a decline in the other. A corollary of the BWB perspective is that the fall in churchgoing is merely one particular instance of a more widespread move away from associational activities (Davie, 1994, 2001; Putnam, 2000; for criticism and a reply, see Bruce, 2002b; Davie, 2002; Gill, 2002). By contrast, our view is that failure in religious socialization has resulted in whole generations being less active *and* less believing than the ones that came before. Because upbringing crucially determines the magnitude of the cohort effects that are the most important element of religious decline, we suggest that:

- the proximal cause of secularization is to be found in the relationship between the religiosity of parents and children, and
- the propensity to inherit faith or a spiritual disposition will be no higher than the probability of following in the parental footsteps (literally, in the case of churchgoing) in active involvement or passive identification with a denomination.

Our analysis has so far looked at aggregations of individual survey respondents. The richness of the BHPS data also makes it possible to compare parents and children, from which we may hope to achieve two things. We can test the conjecture that how (and by whom) people are raised is crucial to the perpetuation of religion; if the relationship between the religiosity of mothers/fathers and daughters/sons is haphazard or unsystematic then perhaps – despite the evidence presented above – cohort effects are less important than period effects

after all. We can also test whether belief is in fact distinctive, following rules or rates of intergenerational transmission that might make faith more enduring than affiliation and attendance.

Our investigation focuses on various specific questions. What is the impact of parental practice, affiliation and belief on the religiosity of their children? How much does it matter whether the parents are religiously the same or different? Does it make a difference which parent (mother or father) is religious? Once we have tried to answer the basic questions, we move on to ask whether other characteristics like age, sex or ethnicity interact with affiliation in influencing the degree of religious socialization.

Starting from the full BHPS, we have selected the 1,500 young adults aged 16–29 for whom we have data on both natural parents.⁶ All were resident in Great Britain (i.e. England, Scotland or Wales, but not Northern Ireland). We compare religious characteristics of parents and children at BHPS wave 9 (where values are taken from the first previous wave with suitable data if wave 9 religious data are missing).

Somewhat more than half of the parents had the same religious identity, either with a denomination (39%) or with none (17%). Mixed marriages commonly feature one person – generally the woman – who specifies a religion while the spouse does not (34%), though sometimes both partners were affiliated but to different denominations (10%). It is worth making clear that even the religiously mixed marriages are overwhelmingly between Christians of different denominations, and only rarely between members of different world religions.

Key Findings

Regular attendance (i.e. active belonging) is relatively easy to analyse. If neither parent attends at least once a month, the chances of the child doing so are negligible: less than 3 percent. If both parents attend at least monthly, there is a 46 percent chance that the child will do so. Where just one parent attends, the likelihood is halved to 23 percent. What these results suggest is that in Britain institutional religion now has a half-life of one generation, to borrow the terminology of radioactive decay. The generation now in middle age has produced children who are half as likely to attend church, and the trend does not depend on marriage patterns: the net effect was the same whether people married in or out.

Could it be that identification with a religious group (i.e. passive belonging) has persisted, even if observance is no longer frequent? The answer, as Figure 3 shows, is 'no'. If neither parent is religiously affiliated, 91 percent of the children likewise describe themselves as having no religion. At the opposite extreme, where both parents belong to the same denomination, the proportion of children maintaining that allegiance and the proportion listing themselves as 'none' are equal at 46 percent each. Interestingly, there is no disadvantage for religion if the two parents choose different denominations: 48 percent of

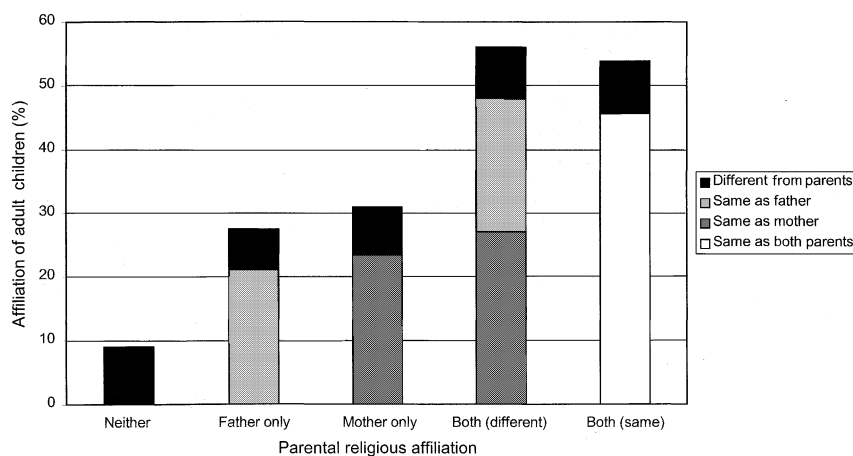


Figure 3 Transmission of religious affiliation

children follow either their mother or (a little less often) their father.⁷ As with attendance, so with affiliation: if only one parent is religious, the probability of the child following suit is around 22 percent.

There is a fairly constant 7 to 9 percent risk that the child will become religiously different, whatever the parental configuration. No religion, different religions, the same religion, mixed religious/non-religious, it makes no difference: roughly one child in 12 will choose a denomination not mentioned by either parent.

For both active participation and (potentially passive) affiliation, then, the story is the same: young British adults are half as religious as their parents. What about belief, though? If it is true that Britain is characterized by believing even in the absence of belonging, we might expect to find that children are not so different from their parents in this respect. In fact the conclusion for belief seems to be much the same as for attendance and affiliation. Two non-religious parents successfully transmit their lack of religion. Two religious parents have roughly a 50/50 chance of passing on the faith. One religious parent does only half as well as two together.

The details depend on exactly what test one uses (Figure 4). The standard pattern described above emerges most clearly in considering respondents who say that religious beliefs make some difference or a great difference to their lives. If we also include those for whom religious beliefs make a little difference (on the grounds that such people presumably do at least have such beliefs) the results are not so clear cut. Only 82 percent of children are in complete agreement with two nay-saying parents (though most of the remainder record that belief makes only a little difference). By contrast, the position of believing relative to belonging is less favourable if one uses the highest level of seriousness –

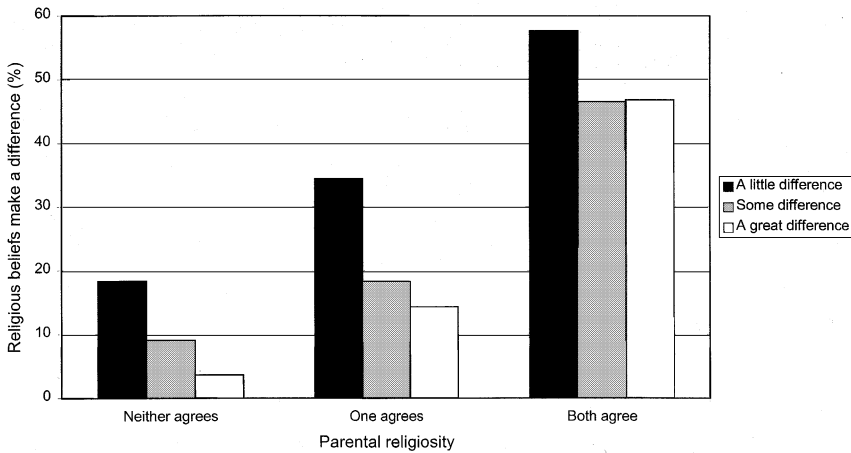


Figure 4 Adult child's belief by parental religiosity

beliefs make a great difference to your life – as the criterion. Having only one parent in this category reduces transmission to 14 percent.

In brief, the weakness of religious transmission is just as evident for belief as for churchgoing or denominational self-identification. One might argue that the term 'religious beliefs' still smacks of institutional religion, and hence does not reflect contemporary spirituality, but the onus will be on Davie and others to show that God or higher powers make a difference to people even if orthodox religious beliefs do not.

Supplementary Findings

Any number of additional characteristics of the parents or children may affect patterns of intergenerational transmission, e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, religion, familial co-residence (whether the grown-up children are still living with their parents) and parental separation (including divorce, remarriage and widowhood). A very few findings deserve a mention here.⁸

The gender gap in religiosity among young adults is relatively modest: 63 percent of young men and 58 percent of young women in this sample say that religious belief makes no difference to their lives, closely corresponding to the proportions saying that they do not belong to a religion (66 and 56%). Although the difference is small, women are consistently more likely than men to become religious in a different denomination from their parents, whatever the parental combination: a consequence of marriage, or of spiritual experimentation? In addition, women in their 20s seem considerably more likely than men to attend church, particularly when only one of their parents did the same. Gender may interact with cohort (and perhaps period or age) effects rather than

simply being an independent influence on religiosity. To the extent that daughters are generally influenced by their mothers – and there are signs in the data that maternal influence on religiosity is stronger for female than for male teenagers – the gender gap may be partly self-perpetuating.

Ethnic minority groups form too small a sub-sample to analyse. In any event, the figures simply corroborate what is well known: there is a high degree of homogeneity and of transmission of belief and practice to the next generation. Although half of these young adults say that their religious beliefs make a great difference, a third say that they make only a little difference or none at all.

Conclusion

It has long been supposed that levels of religion in society may be affected by increased involvement associated with family formation or ageing, or decreased involvement among people influenced by a more secular culture. Although many individual adults become more or less religiously committed, our investigation suggests that in the aggregate such age and period effects have little impact. At least in Britain in recent decades, change has occurred because each generation has entered adulthood less religious than its predecessors.

Everyone agrees that religion has lost ground; the key dispute concerns why, how much, in what way and with what prospects. We suggest that the only form of BWB that is as pervasive as Davie suggests is a vague willingness to suppose that ‘there’s something out there’, accompanied by an unsurprising disinclination to spend any time and effort worshipping whatever that might be. As soon as one focuses on belief in the teachings of the church, one finds belonging to go with it. Few people fully believe and yet stay away in defiance of doctrine; such a disjunction would indeed be noteworthy.⁹ Between the extremes of full faith and noncommittal assent there is naturally a middle ground of more or less Christianized belief, but the passivity of so-called ‘believers’ is itself a sign of religious decline. While no doubt ‘some form of religiosity persists despite the obvious drop in practice’ (Davie, 1994: 43), citing use of the term ‘mission statement’ in business and similar examples of the supposed penetration of the sacred in secular society merely underlines how far we have moved.

BWB underpins the proposition that ‘the British are far from being – or becoming – a secular society in any strict sense of the term, “particularly if by that omnibus adjective we mean an increasing approximation of average thinking to the norms of natural and social science”’ (Davie, 1994: 84 quoting Martin, 1969). It is quite true that lay thought does not closely approximate scientific norms, but one may comfortably argue that the popular worldview has been moving away from supernatural attachments in a critically rational direction.

If ‘persistence’ means more than merely ‘continued existence’ – and surely the subtext in claims about ‘the persistence of the sacred’ is that some kind of non-rational spirituality remains as strong as ever – then three things would seem to be necessary for religious (or quasi-religious) belief:

1. it is as widespread as before;
2. it is as personally significant as before; or
3. it is as socially significant as before.

None of these propositions holds in Europe for Christianity; proponents of BWB must therefore fall back on unorthodox belief (e.g. privatized, pick-and-mix doctrine), unconventional religiosity (e.g. new religious movements), alternative spirituality (e.g. New Age/holistic views), unscientific belief (e.g. alternative medicine), and so on. Although some specific forms of non-standard belief are obviously growing, we maintain that they have merely displaced other forms of religiosity or non-rationalism that were at least as common in the past. There is nothing new about personal interpretations of Christianity, sects and cults, spiritual experimentation, or folk belief in a vast assortment of taboos and remedies. Indeed, we suggest that all of these varieties of religion (broadly defined) were more prevalent in the past than in the present, were more important to the people who engaged in them, and had a greater impact on the societies of the time.

While we reject the strong form of the BWB thesis and find its weak version (that undisciplined and possibly transitory supernaturalism outlasts active churchgoing) too unsurprising for the idea to give shape to the field, the issue of whether people in the West might increasingly be 'spiritual but not religious' is important (Fuller, 2001). The evidence (to be discussed in a subsequent article) makes us sceptical about the likelihood of a 'spiritual revolution' (Heelas and Woodhead, 2004), the signs of which might just as easily be discerned in earlier enthusiasms for divination, Freemasonry, Swedenborgianism, mesmerism, spiritualism, New Thought, Theosophy, and so on. Such moves away from Christian convention may mediate rather than deflect the transition from faith to secularity, and in any event the gains in alternative belief are not sufficient to replace the orthodox losses.

Let us be clear. Religion is still much in evidence and highly worthwhile as a subject of study. Few forms of thought and action are as common, have the same life-shaping potential, or (at least at some times and places) are as important socially. Explaining why faith survives and sometimes thrives in an age of science deserves attention. Our point is simply that the crucial fact about religion in modern Europe is decline; the rest is commentary. 'Believing without belonging' was an interesting idea, but it is time for the slogan to enter honourable retirement.

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Data Archive supplied data from both the British Household Panel Survey (managed by the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex) and the British Social Attitudes Survey (conducted by the National Centre for Social Research).

Notes

- 1 While the question concerns the strength or significance of religious belief rather than its mere existence, we would argue that these characteristics are precisely what one wants to elicit. If there is to be any relevance in 'the persistence of the sacred', it must have some impact on people.
- 2 The churchgoing rate (excluding Sunday scholars) in England and Wales revealed by the Census of Religious Worship on 30th March 1851 is estimated by Crockett (1998) as between 56.9% and 60.1% of the population aged 15 and over. In obtaining these estimates, Crockett uses a large sample of original returns and controls for both multiple attendance and inflation of reported attendance totals from the rounding up of congregation sizes.
- 3 In principle, positive effects of age could balance negative effects of time, but the effects would have to be perfectly uniform and exactly offsetting to produce these results.
- 4 The BSA survey design has a relatively large effect on the standard errors of these variables; for example, the 95% confidence interval in 1998 for the percentage of the population with a religious affiliation is 52.6 to 57.2. (Accurate estimation of standard errors involves making allowances for clustering and stratification effects on weighted data, a process better performed using STATA than SPSS.) The range will be even greater for individual cohorts, which explains why the points in Figure 2 are somewhat dispersed. The important point is that the scatter is random: there are no significant within-cohort trends over time.
- 5 Because of a change in the BSA sampling frame from the Electoral Register to the Postcode Address File in 1993, the analysis of attendance is somewhat more complex. Non-whites were sampled far more effectively from 1993 onwards, with some impact on reported levels of attendance at religious services. The effect on affiliation was much less because non-whites form a substantial proportion of regular worshippers but only a small proportion of religious affiliates. After making appropriate allowances for the change in ethnic minority representation the results concerning attendance match those described in the text for affiliation (i.e. no trend within cohorts). See also Tilley (2003), whose conclusions about attendance are based on data from the British Election Studies from 1964 to 1997.
- 6 A few dozen were 15 at the time of interview. The exact number of valid responses varied slightly from question to question.
- 7 It is likely that many individuals who marry someone from a different religious group subsequently change or lose their religious affiliation (Voas, 2003), so spouses who retain separate denominational identities are probably more religiously serious than average.
- 8 Further results are available on request.

- 9 The force of Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* rests on just such a choice (to perform an action in the shattering belief that it will result in perdition).

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