Believing in belonging: an ethnography of young people's constructions of belief

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Introduction

For many young people today, religion is an insufficient source and mode of belief and belonging. The question for them is not so much 'does God exist?', but, 'why would it matter?' Within the sociology of religion, an understanding of what and how young people believe has been bedevilled by epistemological and methodological weaknesses where scholars tend to ask overtly religious questions, using religious vocabulary and leading questions, such as 'do you believe in God?'. I will turn to those studies in more detail later in this paper. First, I will discuss evidence from my three-year case study (Day 2006) probing notions of 'belief,' and analysing how belief is socially constructed, embedded, and reproduced. Examining, in particular, ethnographic data from interviews and participant observation amongst adolescents in northern England, I explore how articulations of beliefs reflect where young people define and locate legitimate sites of power, meaning and authority in what I will discuss as the everyday transcendent and social.

My interest in 'belief' was partly stirred by data that initially appeared to be anomalous: results of the 2001 UK decennial census revealed that 72 per cent of respondents self-identified as Christian, in a country where less than 7 per cent attend church regularly and participation in public Christian rituals, from church attendance to weddings, funerals, confirmations and christenings, also shows decline (Brierley 2000, 2006; Gill, Hadaway and Marler 1998).

The research aim was to probe beliefs through conducting semi-structured interviews, without asking overtly religious questions, and without selecting people on the basis of their interest in religion or spirituality. My approach would focus on discussions (what Yin 2003, 89-90 refers to as 'guided conversations') in ways that I hoped would allow informants to discuss their beliefs in terms of what was important to them and how they sourced and practised their beliefs. I prompted discussion with questions like 'what do you believe in?','
'what is most important to you?', ‘what do you think happens to you after your die?’ Those were, I assumed, more provocative than a closed and religiously loaded question such as ‘do you believe in God?’ The only direct question I asked about religion was my final question when I asked informants what they had said in answer to the 2001 national census question: ‘What is your religion?’ In the case of minors, whose ‘head of household’ would have filled out the census on their behalf, I asked them what they would have said had they responded to the question.

My 14 months of fieldwork involved discussions with more than 200 people. Census data were used 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 lived in the region throughout my study and had previously researched an aspect of religious life in its main town (Day 2005). The main data come from 68 semi-structured interviews with people aged between 14 and 83, roughly balanced by gender and social class. I was aware that social class designations are themselves contested, but in the absence of a perfect solution, I decided to use the Social Economic Group designation for adults, with the students I interviewed allocated the designation of their parents. As my study did not claim to be representative or statistically significant, I was not concerned with creating a representative ‘sample’, but did want to ‘dip into’ a broad cross range of people. Informants were accessed through a variety of means – direct approach, gatekeepers (and snowballing from them), schools, sheltered housing and a local football club, for example. I created target numbers to allow a breadth of people, and monitored the balance through recording informants’ details such as age, gender and social class.

My general conclusions, discussed further in this paper and in more detail elsewhere (Day 2006, 2007, 2008), were that people ‘believe in’ their human affective relationships in preference to Christian doctrinal beliefs, even when they claimed Christian identity on the census. I explained this tendency in terms of their ‘believing in belonging’ to certain self-perceived family or ‘ethnic’ social groups.
In the following, I will focus on my findings about young people. During my three-year study, I visited three schools on a regular basis – one large comprehensive, one girls’ state grammar and one boys’ state grammar. I was able to conduct some limited participant observation by facilitating classroom discussions. I also conducted 24 private, recorded and transcribed-verbatim interviews amongst students aged between 14 and 18: 13 girls; 11 boys; 11 from Social Economic Groups 1,2,3 and 13 from Social Economic Groups 4,5,6 (derived from parents’ occupation). I piloted the questions amongst a Year 8 and Year 12 class and used them in much the same order as I did amongst older participants, allowing for deviations and prompted by the informants’ threads of narrative.

Most of my findings about young people generally conform to findings from larger national and international studies about youth and religion, with important exceptions (Clydesdale 2007; Mason, Singleton and Webber 2007; Regnerus, C. Smith and B. Smith 2004; Savage et al. 2006; Smith and Denton 2005). Those studies, from the United States, UK and Australia, all found that young people derive meaning, happiness and moral frameworks from social relationships, but the authors added notes of doubt and concern about whether those beliefs are sufficiently grounded in larger narratives of meaning and morality. I will argue below that young people’s beliefs are grounded differently, rather than insufficiently, from what might be preferred by some followers of organised religion whose own beliefs and assumptions colour much of the research I will discuss.
I will begin by describing my interview encounter with a 14-year-old student I will call Jordan, who overturned much of what I knew about religious definitions and the nature of belief. The decisive moment occurred during an interview he had agreed to, following my participation a few weeks earlier in his Religious Education class at the comprehensive school. The classroom experience had been challenging mainly because only a few students had contributed to the discussion I was leading about contemporary religion. Most, including Jordan, had spent the period talking amongst their friends. Many had, at least, participated in the small-group exercise I had initiated, which involved writing examples of their beliefs on a piece of paper and then comparing their lists with others at their table. Jordan and his friend had merely written ‘nothing’ across their paper, before resuming their banter with boys at the next table. I was therefore surprised that he volunteered to be interviewed, even when he later explained it was because it entailed being excused from the main class. I was left with a lingering doubt, however: was it really better to be interviewed for 45 minutes by a middle-aged woman in a stuffy windowless school store-room, than laugh and chat with his friends? Or, perhaps, I am now inclined to conclude, Jordan had something he wanted to say.

I began by asking my usual opening question and he responded in Yorkshire vernacular for nothing (nowt) and something (owt).

Abby: What do you believe in?
Jordan: Nowt.
Abby: Sorry?
Jordan: I don’t believe in owt. I don’t believe in any religions.
Abby: You don’t believe in any religions.
Jordan: No. I’m Christian but I don’t believe in owt.
I was momentarily confused: I did not have the concept of ‘non-believing Christians’ in my interpretive frameworks. Ideas about ‘bricolage’ or religion as a form of social memory, or ‘pick ‘n mix religion’ or seekers in a ‘spiritual marketplace’ were of no help. Even people described as invisibly or privately religious (see, for example, Luckmann 1967; Davie 1994) still apparently retain some form of belief, however transformed. Davie’s (1994, 107) ‘believing without belonging’ thesis argues that ‘some sort of belief persists’. Indeed, she describes a dialectical process of transformation from public into private forms of belief: ‘as the institutional disciplines decline, belief not only persists, but becomes increasingly personal, detached and heterogeneous’ and shows a ‘reverse’ tendency (2002, 8).

Theories about the privatisation, invisibility, transformation or interiorisation of belief do not explain its apparent absence in conjunction with a named religion. Returning to the interview itself, I was left to merely repeat Jordan’s statements back to him while I played for time, thinking of what to ask him next. He told me he was a Christian but he did not do ‘owt Christian’ and did not go to church. I asked him what it meant for him to say Christian, and he said it did not mean much apart from being ‘someone who believes in God and Jesus and Bible and stuff’. I asked him if he believed in those things and he said he did not, but his grandparents did:

Jordan: No, I don’t, but my Grandma and Granddad do. They’re like Irish and really strong Christians.
Abby: And so they believe in - ?
Jordan: The whole bible thing.
Abby: And God, and Jesus?
Jordan: Yeah.

Now he seemed to be offering something that came close to what I understood to be a Christian belief, not far from a Durkheimian (1915, 62) definition of religion as ‘a unified system of beliefs’. Further, he embeds those beliefs in sociality, particularly ethnicity and
kinship, not theology or institutions: it is what his grandparents believe, not what the church teaches, that is important to him.

I continued to probe in what I now hear as a slightly inquisitional tone:

So, those people are Christians and they believe in all that stuff, and you’re a Christian - but you don’t believe in that stuff?

He replied, simply: ‘No’. This reminded me about what Berger had said characterised secular society: ‘where people regard their world without the benefit of religious interpretations’ (Berger 1967, 107-108). I supposed not believing in the bible and stuff would count as an absence of religious interpretations. I decided to ask him directly the, perhaps most obvious, question:

Abby: What makes you think or say, or describe yourself as Christian?
Jordan: Well, on my birth certificate it says I’m Christian, so.

He concluded his sentence with a common vernacular expression with ‘so’, for ‘there you have it’: it says on his birth certificate that he is Christian and so he must be. Except, I knew, it does not say that. It is not practice for a UK birth certificate, or passport, or indeed any other state-produced document to have a religion stated on it. Wilson (1966) here is correct: religion has lost at least some of its public, social, institutionalised influence. I did not challenge Jordan, tell him he was wrong, or ask him to meet me the following week and produce his birth certificate. I assumed he either had confused his birth certificate with his baptismal certificate or had otherwise received the impression that religion is something that comes from birth. Perhaps it meant something like ‘kinship’ or, possibly, it implied an official, bureaucratic and irreversible identity to which he could belong without having to take any personal action or responsibility.

Jordan was also reflecting how the term ‘belief’ has become associated with ‘Christian’ over the centuries. Smith (1967, 1977, 1978, 1979) discussed how the term ‘belief’ has its roots in Christianity, although its meanings may have changed over time. Needham
(1972) provides an exhaustive account of how the term belief is used and concurs it has a distinctly Christian lineage and orientation. Asad (1993) argued that the category of belief has been inextricably linked to specific historic creations of what it means to be Christian. That creation is produced by what Christian leaders authorise as legitimate practices and beliefs and what then becomes sedimented and reinforced, layer upon layer, in both public discourse and epistemological practices (Foucault 1972).

I was interested further in what Jordan believed in, if not ‘ownt’ Christian. During the course of our interview I asked him more questions, all designed not to be overtly religious but to probe areas of meaning and morality. I discovered that Jordan did believe in many things, such as doing well at school, helping out at home, and sharing time with family and friends.

During doctoral supervision later in that month my supervisors and I agreed that as Jordan was one of my first interviewees, it was too early to judge how to interpret fully what he had said. After all, those data which appear anomalous occur throughout fieldwork and may represent later opportunities for reflections. All of that made sense and I returned with more confidence to subsequent encounters, only to discover that Jordan was not anomalous: he and others I interviewed responded to my question about belief in ways which forced me to reconsider what was meant by the term and where it was located in the cosmology of informants.
Learning from belief narratives

As it transpired during our interview, Jordan had many beliefs, although not in God, Jesus, the Bible and ‘stuff’. He believed in doing well at school, helping at home, being with his friends. He had no difficulty in discussing rights from wrongs or what made him happy, sad or worried. Jordan, like most other people I interviewed, did not want to answer my questions in terms of propositions, facts or creeds. My informants tended to answer my questions by giving me examples, often long descriptions of a person or a situation that would illustrate what they were trying to say. For example, two other adolescents from the comprehensive school, Tom and Gavin, talked about fishing for so long during our interview that I nearly interrupted them and I asked them to get to the point, before realising that it was the point: their stories of fishing together were stories of friendship. Like so many of my informants, they needed to illustrate their examples with accounts of social contexts and social relationships. As I became more familiar with informants’ elongated responses, I allowed the questions to thread through our conversations, to sometimes ask them in a different order. Often, I did not have to ask one or more of the questions because the informant had already answered it, usually through a long and elaborate story. I was not listening to coherent, cognitively-based belief statements, but stories with real characters, plots and emotional content – what I came to call belief narratives. Like 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. The young people I interviewed did not typically articulate their beliefs in grammatically grand language or in flat, rehearsed creedral mono-tones; their belief narratives were polyvocal, enlivened with the stories and voices of other people, alive or dead, who meant something to them - in whom, I argue, they ‘believe’.

Drawing on feminist research methods (Reinharz 1992; Skeggs 1995) I decided to focus on my informants’ narratives and methods of constructing meaning. My inquiry was
about what people believed and how they discussed those beliefs, not only about how they behaved or self-identified as religious or not. I therefore decided to use interviews as my main source of data and deconstruct the narratives that emerged. Mitchell (2005) made a similar choice in interviewing 35 people about their Protestant or Catholic identities. Although she had other data available, such as participant observation, she chose to focus on her interviews because she was interested in how the participants used their own narratives in the process of identity construction.

In deconstructing the narratives, I learned that their stories were about themselves and other people, not about beliefs in terms of creedal statements. This may reflect a shift from a propositional form of belief to a form that expresses faith and trust (see also, for example, Robbins 2003, 2007; Ruel 1982). Further, their narratives did not correspond to ‘belief systems’ as described by, for example, Borhek and Curtis (1975) whose analysis focused on mainly cognitive and empirical measures of a belief system’s levels of commitment and validity. What I observed was less of a system than a dynamic and often emotionally-charged narrative. My finding about young people’s belief narratives resonate (although, as described below, my conclusion is radically different) with what Savage et al. (2006, 170) described as the ‘happy midi-narrative’, where young people do not reflect a ‘mini-narrative’ of individualism, or a ‘meta-narrative’ of grand theory, but a space ‘communal on a small scale’ populated by friends, family and close associates.

Through the process of our interviews, my informants’ articulations and insights led me to construct five dimensions which reflected how many people expressed their beliefs and what they believed the nature of them to be. They discussed what those beliefs were: content; where they got them from: resources; what they did or did not do with those beliefs: practice; the relative importance of some beliefs over others: salience and what those beliefs actually did for the believer: function. Although some of their belief content reflected an idea of God and they may have said that they believe ‘that’ God exists, such a belief had little salience and even less function for them if it was not located in the social context in which they feel they belong. Jordan, for example, rejected the doctrinal content of Christianity but
embraced the *function* it gave him of familial identity. Gemma, 14, answered my first question in much the same way as did her class-mate Jordan, saying she said she did not believe in ‘owt’ and did not attend church. When I asked her about the origins of life and the universe, she said that she thought God had created the universe, but ‘don’t, like, worship him or anything’. She said that sentence forcefully, almost spitting the words out, as if the idea of worshipping God was distasteful. The content of her God-belief related only to an explanatory function and had no other salience for her. Her desire to disassociate herself from the act of worship is, I suggest, both a rejection of a relationship with a god, and with those who maintain that relationship. ‘Worship’ is a word linked with public, communal expressions of belief: churches, synagogues and mosques are often called ‘places of worship’ where people gather for what is called a ‘service of worship’. While Gemma may believe ‘that’ God exists, she does not ‘believe in’ him and did not want to be seen as someone who does.

In looking at belief through these dimensions, informants most often situated their examples and contextualised their beliefs with explicit reference to other people, such that I concluded that their beliefs were both informed and reproduced through human interaction, particularly the emotions that such interaction produces. This recalls research about people in their early 20s, where Lynch (2002) found that people expressed desire for ‘authenticity’, where their beliefs would conform to their inner values and needs. My research reflects not only a desire for personal authenticity, but for embedment, belonging to and believing in adherent, reciprocal, emotional relationships.

I will examine below in more detail how young people’s belief narratives illustrate how and with whom they belong.
Boundaries of belonging

I found amongst most of my informants an acute awareness and desire to articulate their sense of ‘belonging’. While most adults spoke about their families being most important to them, the young people I interviewed were selective and self-referential about who, in their views, would count as ‘family’. This finding is important not only to illustrate the different types of relationships to which young people belong and in which they believe, but also to suggest that their acts of choosing may represent a shift from an externally imposed narrative to one that is self-defined and personally authentic. This shift provokes, I will argue, anxieties for older people in both secular and religious contexts. It is also a shift which may partly explain some of the changes we have seen in official religiosity. Indeed, when I identified the idea of ‘family’ and ‘family values’ as an important part of my doctoral investigation, my then supervisor Paul Heelas objected to that line of enquiry, saying that it had nothing to do with ‘belief’ or religion. On the contrary, as I argued then and will demonstrate here, the self-defined, personally authenticated ‘family’ is one of the most important sources for meaning, morality and even transcendence – all areas conventionally associated with religion. My finding here complicates the work of Heelas who focuses on an apparent turn to the self, subjectivity and individualisation as an explanation for new forms of spirituality, rather than relatedness, kinship and social embeddedness. (Heelas 1996; 2005) In her work, Lury (1995) argues that current modernity theorists (she cites Beck and Giddens) say that individuality is a key part of modern thinking, without showing how individuality is a gendered process, dependent on a sexual contract and gendered division of labour. Individuality and independence are not gender-neutral. What is discussed as ‘individual’ is usually ‘masculine’, but the female is subordinated to the point of invisibility. Recalling her work and considering its applications to mine, I was unwilling to dismiss the possibility that women and young people’s beliefs may reflect other, less individualistic, modes of being.
During that pivotal supervision meeting, we had been discussing one of my first interviews, with Hannah, a single, 35-year-old mother of four children, heavily pregnant with her fifth child. The interview presented me with immediate difficulty because it introduced concepts about belief which I had not anticipated. Hannah teaches mathematics part-time at a local college, and runs her own hairdressing business. The pressure of work and family commitments sometimes makes life difficult, she explained, but she would not choose to live differently. When I asked her my first question, ‘what do you believe in?’ she said the question made her immediately think about values and morals, particularly family values. For her, belief triggered thoughts about ultimate value or meaning, rather than doctrine or creeds. She said that by ‘family’ she meant herself and her children. She said that although she had very strong ideas about morality, this might appear as ‘a contradiction in terms’. She continued, saying, ‘Being a divorcée, I do have quite big family values’. I asked her why she thought that might be a contradiction and she replied, ‘Well, you kind of think, how can I have big family values when I’m a single parent?’ I note not only that she understands belief in terms of social and personal values, but also that she is conscious of how she is using the term and is able to comment reflexively on it.

The juxtaposition she was posing between family values and divorce reminded me of several theorists who argue that a change in family structure caused by divorce or by mothers working outside the home leads to moral decline in society.
For example, Wilson (2001, 44-45) referred to the modern family being ‘split apart’ with parents insufficiently present to take a role in the moral inculcation of their children. This, he says, is not only because family structures have changed but also because individuals are being encouraged today to: ‘discover their own identities,’ to ‘be themselves,’ to ‘do their own thing’. The, I suggest, hidden code here is that women are ‘doing their own things’. The tendency to blame women, in this case mothers, was a trend I found amongst older informants in my study, but strikingly absent and, indeed, problematised, by interviews with younger people.

Jeff, 17, was in his final year of A-levels at the comprehensive school when I interviewed him. When I asked him what he believed in he said:

> I believe, I believe that like, in your family, ‘cos I’m quite close to my Mum and to my brother as well, and I think that should be, I think you should be close to your family.

When I asked what had happened to his father, he said he was not sure:

> I’m not sure where he is at the moment. He was a biker and a heroin addict. And, I don’t really want to know him to be honest.

Jeff continued our discussion by saying that he believes it is important for him to ‘support’ his mother emotionally, as she has ‘been through a lot’. In a similar way, another young man told me about his family structure using examples and words to convey feelings of closeness and warmth in spite of a changed structure. Tom, 15, who attended the same school, lives with his two biologically-related siblings, and his mother and step-father. Every weekend his step-father’s biological children come to stay. I asked Tom how he felt about that and he said he liked it. There was enough room for everyone, he explained; everyone got along well together and he was close to his step-father’s son, whom he referred to as his brother. In describing his Christmas day meal, Tom said:
my sister’s boyfriend comes around with my sister, she’s got a little kid, so she comes
around, all of us, we’re just all of us sit down have a family meal together, a big Christmas meal.
Lovely.

Here, he extends his idea of family to include his step-siblings and his sister’s
boyfriend and his idea of Christmas to connote family, not religion. When I was clarifying my
understanding of his family structure, I repeated what he had told me - that he lived with his
stepfather and mother. He asked if I would just write down ‘my Mum and my Dad. Or, does
that matter?’ I explained it mattered a little, as I wanted to record the changing structures of
family. He then said: ‘If you prefer to put step-dad, for reasons for you, then put step-dad’.
He had not seen (and ‘I don’t want to see’) his biological father since he was about six years
old. I noted that although Tom had referred earlier in the interview to his ‘step-dad’, when it
came to positioning him for my interview records he initially wanted to be seen as living with
his ‘Dad’. It was a measure of the considerable rapport we had built in the interview that he
offered to allow ‘step-dad’ if it was important for me. It is also an indication of how the
terminology used to describe family members is not fixed and can change for different
purposes. Tom referred mostly in the interview to his step-dad as his Dad, his step-brother as
his brother and his biological father as his ‘real’ Dad. The way he sometimes privileged and
interchanged those terms indicates their context-dependency and his reflexive ability to alter
their meaning to reflect his criteria for authenticity.

Nadia, a 17-year-old student at the comprehensive school, said she believed in her
religion (Islam), prayer and her family. Her use of the term family includes herself, mother
and sibling, but no longer her father. Although she is glad her father, whom she described as
a ‘devil at home and angel outside’ has left, there had been a difficult period of adjustment:

I was really attached to my Dad. I really loved him, and he pretended that he loved me, and lied
and everything. I do believe fathers should be there to an extent, but I think it’s wrong to say –
we’re an example, as a family to everyone around us, that we can cope.
It was during that period of adjustment that she decided to wear the hijab and to pray regularly, she said, finding comfort in God and her religion.

Thus far, I have argued that young people ‘believe in’ family relationships insofar as they define their family in terms of the people they can trust and with whom they have emotional, adherent relationships. In this sense, they believe in a post-nuclear family, where the structures are flexible and the boundaries shift, defined and maintained by the members’ conceptions of who legitimately belongs, or not. The sense of belonging is so important to young people that it sometimes privileges people over divinity, as I will explore below.
Relocating the transcendent to the social

Lindsay, 14, a student at the comprehensive school, told me she was a Christian who attends church, believes in Jesus and ‘most’ of the bible. When we later discussed what influenced her in life, she said that Jesus influenced her ‘in a sort of way’, explaining that ‘he can’t be that much of an influence on my life now, if you know what I mean. It’s just through what he preached in the bible that’s an influence’. I was curious about how she was experiencing his influence, and asked her to give me an example. She thought for a moment and then said that sometimes she prays to him about problems, and although she thought he was telling her what he thinks is best, she might choose to disagree: ‘sometimes I think I’m right and he’s wrong. It depends.’

This is a striking statement for a Christian to make. I asked her what it depended upon, and she gave me an example of when she might have problems with friends, and she would be inclined to talk to them to resolve matters, but Jesus would tell her just to leave the problem alone and see if it resolved itself. That, she explained to me, was wrong advice: she understood her friends and how they behaved and it was definitely better to act quickly and seek to right situations as soon as possible. Jesus, she explained, did not have her first-hand knowledge of her friends and her relationship with them and therefore would not be in the best position to advise. When I asked her if it ever bothered her that she was not accepting Jesus’ advice, she said:

No, not really. Sometimes it does when I know what he says is right and I don’t do it, then that bothers me. But when I think I’m right, then, no, it doesn’t bother me at all.

I note the self-confidence with which she is navigating territories of authority. She understands the different between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’: her decision to trust her own judgement over that of Jesus was not a willful act of disobedience, but a carefully considered, situated decision made in the context of her social and intimate relationships. In those contexts, Lindsay privileges her social, temporal authority over Jesus’ divine,
transcendent and therefore less informed authority. For her, the overtly religious is seen as less social, and Jesus is reduced to a creed-like figure of historical significance.

Sarah, 15, a grammar school student, is another person who, while describing herself as a Church-attending Christian, often imposes her moral authority over her religion’s. She explained:

I used to be very judgmental, but now that I’m a teenager, I’ve learned not to be, so my morals have slightly changed - cuz, I am a Christian but the morals that go with being a Christian I don’t necessarily agree with now.

When I asked her for examples, she mentioned sex before marriage - the sort of activity people of her age are beginning to seriously consider, if not already engage in. Her social situations are providing her with opportunities for moral considerations and belief-making, some of which demand a shift in authority from Christianity’s teachings to her own decisions to be less judgmental. Her conscious act of claiming moral authority was similar to Lindsay’s, described above. Both Lindsay and Sarah are sufficiently morally astute to know when they are simply being disobedient to the will of God or Jesus, but they feel able to ignore that will when they sense their judgment is better.

Antony, 14, a grammar school student, spoke about socially-based, godless morality. He told me he thought that the Ten Commandments provided a good basis for morality, adding that he was speaking of those commandments ‘after four till 10’ - in short, those that defined a social code and not a relationship with God. Harriet, 14, a student at a grammar school, sourced her understanding of morality in a form of social code Christianity derived from the social, but not from the church. When I asked her what she believed in, she said she was open-minded, but she would believe in ‘Christian morality’, which she described as recognising that there is good and bad in people, and that people can be forgiven. She said she used to attend church when she was younger. When I asked her if that was where she had received her ideas about Christian morality, she said: ‘Not really. We just did colouring in.’
Although it may not be theologically correct in most readings of Christianity to assert one’s judgment over God’s or Jesus, what I observed amongst young people is that they were not individually deciding on moral authority, but resourcing those beliefs from their social relationships, primarily in concert with their friends or relatives, both alive and dead.

Believing through bereaving

The degree to which young people continued their relationships with deceased loved ones was striking, and prompted me to consider how they transformed bereavement from an experience of loss to an experience of belonging. Young people may sometimes experience transcendence on an everyday, human, social scale, relocating a transcendent ‘other’ to an everyday experience of the ever-after. Wood (2004) observed that spiritual experiences that sometimes may appear to be fluid and free-floating, such as certain forms of ‘new age’ spirituality, are in practice often deeply rooted in social and particularly kinship networks.

Vickie, 14, a student at the comprehensive school, continued her relationship with her deceased uncle, believing in him more than she believes in God. She told me that she had been emotionally close to her uncle, who, when he was alive, had visited her regularly and taken her to church with him, although her parents did not attend. After he died in an accident she stopped attending church until recently, when a friend persuaded her to accompany her to both a weekly youth group and the Sunday service. Her return to a more formal religious practice with her friends indicates the influence of peers on teenagers’ religious practice. Regnerus (2004, 31) found that ‘the strong age effect on declining attendance disappears with the addition of friends’. Yet, despite her return to church, it is Vickie’s relationship with her uncle, not God or Jesus, which remains the most important to her emotionally. She told me that she does not pray to God or Jesus, but discusses personal problems and worries with her deceased uncle, who offers advice and solace.
In a similar way, one of Vickie’s classmates, Charlotte, 14, told me that she believes that God exists but she does not expect him to intervene or otherwise influence her daily life. When she has problems, she turns, instead, to her deceased grandfather who ‘sorts out’ the people who bully her at school. I note here that Charlotte’s grandfather does not simply offer her advice, but in Charlotte’s view intervenes on her behalf. She was unclear about how he actually accomplished this, suggesting he might in some way visit the perpetrators and convince them to stop, but in any case the bullying did stop.

The young informants appear to be managing bereavement through relocating transcendence to the social and temporal. I discovered throughout my study, amongst people of all ages and social classes (although significantly more women than men, an issue I analyse elsewhere: Day 2008) that belief in supernatural phenomena was widespread. Significantly, I found that belief in the continuing presence of deceased relatives is unrelated to beliefs in religion or spirituality, or to religious affiliation. That finding challenges other studies of so-called religious experience. Many of my informants, including those who said they were atheists, reported feeling the presence of their deceased relatives or seeing ghosts. Andrew, for example, a martial arts instructor in his early 20s, said he was not religious and did not believe in God. And yet, he told me that ‘I always jog past my grandfather’s grave, and I always stop to talk to him’. People like Andrew would not call those experiences religious or spiritual, in contrast with many scholars in the field who apply the label ‘religious’ to such experiences and describe them variously as common, folk, invisible or implicit religion (Bailey 1990; Davie 1994; Hay 1982; Hardy 1979; Luckmann 1967; Sutcliffe 2004). Some scholars claim there is an enduring religiosiy or ‘common religion’ on the basis of surveys where people say that they believe in fate, the paranormal and so on, but what those surveys do not reveal is what such phenomena and concepts mean to people.

Hay (1982) and Hardy (1979) conducted research similar to mine, involving in-depth interviews. They were told similar stories about people’s experience of something outside their ‘everyday selves’. Hay (1982,152) said that other than the named experience of God,
experiences such as ‘premonitions, encounters with the dead and encounters with an evil presence were often ruled out of the category religious’. He (1982, 162-163) concludes by saying:

> On the basis of what people have said to us, then, I feel that ‘religious experience’ is not quite the right term for what we have been describing. I would be more correct to say that it is a type of experience which is commonly given a religious interpretation. For reasons of shorthand I intend to continue to use the word ‘religious’ while recognising that this is only one way of looking at it.

This ‘shorthand’, I argue, rather obscures the significance of the beliefs of people who reported such experiences and unfortunately has crept into the established canon within the field. I prefer the secular social supernatural to describe the sort of experiences young people describe in which they feel the sense of their deceased loved one: they often said that they knew that their loved one had gone somewhere else and yet was still present in their lives. This connection between belief in an afterlife and experience of bereavement was reinforced when I asked people what they feared most: young people most often said they feared losing their parents. Their belief in an afterlife appeared to allow them to continue their relationships.
**Conclusion**

As a product of a certain historical era – and one raised in a church-attending family - it was initially difficult for me to explain Jordan and the many other ‘anomalies’ I was to meet in my research: atheists who believe in ghosts, agnostics who despise religion and yet say they are Christian; apparently ‘rational’ humanists who believe in life after death and Christians who prefer talking to their dead relatives than God or Jesus in prayer. Much of that did not correspond to what I had understood ‘Christian’ or ‘religious’ to be. As I was later to learn, my unacknowledged orthodoxy was not confined to the sociology of religion. Cannell (2005, 339) wrote that:

> I have long found in my own research an uncomfortable gap between my fieldwork experiences of how people account for their own Christian practice and the theoretical models of Christianity which prevail in anthropological accounts.

In my research, particularly with adolescents, I found belief not absent but relocated to a social realm where it is polyvocal, interdependent, emotionally-charged and illustrative of experiences of belonging. The young people I interviewed appeared grounded in their family and friendship relationships and networks, illustrating a Durkheimian turn to the social. The people in whom many young people believe, and with whom they belong, are their intimates: friends and relatives, alive or dead.
The findings discussed here suggest an orientation to family, friends and other social relationships as legitimate sites for locating belief, authority and transcendence. Using an inductive approach that avoided imposing religious vocabulary, I found that young people’s beliefs tend to be co-produced, through participating with family and friends in creating and maintaining beliefs. This problematised ideas about private, individualised beliefs, or a ‘believing without belonging’ thesis, as my work suggests that belief and belonging are interdependent, with beliefs being explicitly located, produced and practised in the public and social realm. The lack of salient or functional God-belief amongst most of my young informants corresponds to findings of Smith and Denton (2005), the largest study ever conducted in youth and religion. My finding, however, that young people account for the source and maintenance of beliefs in their social relationships complicates some of Smith and Denton’s conclusions that describe youth being (143) ‘nearly without exception profoundly individualistic, instinctively presuming autonomous, individual self-direction to be a universal human norm and life goal’. The authors further suggest (156-158) that teenagers today live in a ‘morally insignificant universe’ where decisions are not guided by or grounded in larger, invisible, sources of either religion, philosophy or other supra-mundane moral forces. I depart from their conclusions, however, in that I found no reason to de-legitimise young people’s moral beliefs as insignificant simply because they are firmly grounded in the significance of the social and the emotional and not in a grander narrative. I also depart from Savage et al. who conclude (170) that young people’s midi-narratives are insufficient, because true happiness requires a meta-narrative which can only be found ‘in a Christlike way of life, for in him alone is true happiness to be found’. That may be their opinion, but it belongs to apologia or theology, not social science. Further research could fruitfully focus on emotion, friendships and other forms of belonging where we can locate people’s beliefs not in propositions ‘that’ they believe, but the people ‘in’ whom they believe.

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