

Young people and the cultural performance of belief – international network event, 19-22 July 2010

Background

This central workshop brought together 21 participants from Britain, Sweden, Finland, Poland, Russia, and the United States to explore the meanings of belief in relation to young people across different religious, secular and national contexts. The workshop involved both general, theoretical discussions, as well as more detailed analyses of cases ranging from the uses of belief for young British Sikhs, the significance of belief for religious sub-cultures ranging from Christian punk to new forms of Islamic popular culture, the loss of religious faith amongst young Catholics in Poland, and the childhood formation of meaningful relations with nature amongst environmental activists in America.

Through these discussions, we tried to keep in mind three broad questions:

- How is ‘belief’ constructed, negotiated and used as a category by young people themselves or in relation to their lives by other actors and institutions?
- In what ways might ‘belief’ be useful as an analytical concept for making sense of young people’s life-worlds? What are the values and limitations of this concept, and what concepts might we better use instead?
- What are the wider political, economic, social and cultural contexts that provide the conditions under which belief is constructed, performed and narrated by young people? What does this tell us about the wider conditions of contemporary religious life?

The July 2010 Oxford conference followed on from the London 2009 conference and the October 2009 to July 2010 Virtual Conference. Four papers had been posted on the Virtual Conference and first session in Oxford was devoted to summaries and critical reflections of those papers by Peter Marshall, Anna Strhan and Abby Day. The Oxford event was then structured around case presentations from the empirical work of network members, with response by Pete Ward, further reflections by members, and summary by Gordon Lynch.

Case presentations:

Ibrahim Abraham, University of Bristol: The Co-ordinates of praxis in Christian punk: Youth, belief & performance

Grzegorz Brzozowski, Warsaw University, Space and performance of religion in neodurkheimian terms: the case of collective mourning on Warsaw Pilsudski square after John Paul II death (April 2005 - 2010).

Sylvia Collins-Mayo, Kingston University: Everyday Belief Amongst Young People

Dan Nilsson DeHanas, University of Bristol: London Second Generation Youth Hip Hop as a Cultural Performance of Belief.

Anna Glukhanyuk, Ural State University: Young people and the cultural performance of belief in Russian context.

Mathew Guest, Durham University: Christianity and the University Experience in Contemporary England: Preliminary Findings

Maruta Herding, Cambridge University: The dimension of belief in the Islamic youth culture of Western Europe.

Mia Løvheim, University of Oslo and Uppsala University: Religion as a Resource?: A research project about the place and significance of religion in the lives of young people in contemporary Sweden.

Gordon Lynch, Birkbeck College, University of London: The meanings of belief and unbelief in the context of children's experience of industrial schools in twentieth-century Ireland

Sarah Pike, California State University, Chico, .Becoming Eco-Warriors: Youth and Belief in Nature as Sacred

Maria Rogaczewska, Warsaw University: "I don't reject the Catholic Church; the Catholic Church rejects me": How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Live and Lose their Religion in Today's Poland

Jasjit Singh, University of Leeds: Sikh-ing Belief: The uses and meanings of Belief for young British Sikhs.

Amy Wilkins, University of Colorado-Boulder: Gender, race, and class in the transition to adulthood: The Case of Unity Christians.

Key findings and issues

The discussion demonstrated that, whilst there is a widespread critique of the assumption that propositional belief is an essential feature of all young people's lives, alternative ways of conceptualising belief are still at an early stage of development. While the term 'propositional belief' was familiar to some of the participants, many had never heard it outside the context of our network. It was felt that another term, such as 'doctrinal' or 'truth-claim' might more accurately express the notion of a belief that was based on intuition-ally-created or philosophical statements, rather than something that was more felt or socially produced.

The workshop identified a number of points that would encourage more critical understandings of ‘belief’, and allow alternative models of belief to develop in response to specific historical, social and cultural shapings.

- We need to always recognise that there is no universal phenomenon called ‘belief’, shared across time and cultures. Questions (for example asking respondents to state their beliefs about God) imply that respondents share a common understanding of belief. Such research practices obscure the fact that there are different interpretations and degrees of salience about ‘believing’, and that people who may tick the same box in a survey response or answer an interview question may be expressing quite different modes of believing. It cannot be assumed that it is meaningful or useful to apply the notion of belief to all religious life-worlds.
- To abandon such a common notion of belief challenges not only certain research practices, but also practices across a wide range of social institutions such as constructing religions as organised around ‘beliefs’ in religious education in schools, or the assumption in legal contexts that assent to particular beliefs is a marker of an authentic religious identity.
- We may benefit more from thinking about the ways in which the category of belief is being constructed and deployed in different contexts, and analysing the particular kinds of social and cultural work that this concept performs. This also involves thinking critically and reflexively about the ways in which ‘belief’ is deployed in the study of religion, for example the ways in which particular assumptions about belief may be embedded in debates about religious ‘radicalization’. It was noted that none of the presentations during the workshop has focused on ‘radicalization’ or ‘extremism’ and while it was agreed this might reflect our sensitive research approaches, we also agreed that we should not avoid exploring how beliefs can be used in anti-social or ideological modes.
- ‘Belief’ also needs to be historicised, both in the sense of recognising the historically-contingent nature of concepts of belief, but also in the sense that ‘belief’ becomes significant in specific historical contexts in which it may previously have had little importance. In Poland, for example, the setting up of new forms of Religious Instruction in schools has led to the construction of Catholicism as a belief-system or ideology when, more historically, Catholicism was performed as a set of practices whose meanings or underlying beliefs were not subject to explicit discussion. Similarly, Sikhs have come to think of themselves as having ‘beliefs’ only through a particular historical process of formalising Sikhism as a ‘religion’ as defined within Western culture. The historical formation of ‘believing subjects’ can also have consequences unintended by those working to promote particular forms of belief; for example, the construction of Catholicism as a belief-system in the Polish school system may be intended to disseminate Catholic faith amongst young people, but it has the effect of making Catholicism one ideology amongst others which may be subject to greater critical scrutiny as students develop more critical approaches to learning.

- It may be possible to identify different modes of belief. ‘Beliefs’ may become important as a way of differentiating oneself against other groups, or as a way of making sense of the experience of not feeling part of a cultural mainstream (e.g. understanding why one is not allowed to take communion at a Christian faith school). The nature of the opposing groups, or imagined excluding mainstream, will vary depending on historical and cultural context. In that case belief is an identity marker of belonging (or ‘heritage/cultural/national religion’). By making ‘belief’ statements, young people make claims about their social and cultural affiliations which may have little or no relation to propositional beliefs. Instead, statements about belief in this mode articulate relationships and groups that are important for a young person. In Sweden, for example, survey research revealed belief in a Christian identity was grounded in birth and culture. There was also emerging from the case studies a sense of belief as a statement of conviction or faith. Some young people expressed ‘weak’ opinions which are as good as anyone else’s, but which do not have any particular influence on how a young person lives their day-to-day lives. For some young people, to challenge another’s beliefs may seem an affront to the autonomy of the individual, and the individual’s right to free expression. By contrast, for other young people, a particular set of beliefs and associated practices may form an espoused or actual organising centre for their lives - beliefs one would literally die for. Those young people may be more likely to be critical of others’ beliefs (including within their own religious traditions), but even then can be sufficiently conscious of the etiquette of pluralist, liberal societies to frame these criticisms in ways that do not sound too judgmental.
- Where young people inevitably fail to meet the demands of their organizing beliefs, this can be experienced as a source of guilt, but religious youth cultures also provide ways of negotiating this tension, for example, through practices of confession or repentance. Degrees of acceptance for different kinds of failure to live up to these beliefs may reflect more general underlying assumptions (e.g. the ways that assumptions about appropriate gender standards leads to different attitudes to breaches of sexual abstinence amongst young male compared to young female Evangelical Christians). Young people who are not organising their lives in relation to specific sets of religious belief may be more likely to describe their beliefs in terms of what it means to live a good life, and these statements may often take narrative form.
- Modes of belief are not mutually exclusive. Young people may demonstrate different modes of belief across different arenas of their lives, may demonstrate more than one mode of belief within a particular religious context, and may engage or dis-engage with particular modes of belief over time. These modes of belief are not universal. It cannot be assumed that all young people will always demonstrate at least one of these modes of believing. Beliefs as identity-markers will tend to be particularly significant for those who experience themselves as having some form of minority status. Whilst needing further empirical confirmation, survey evidence from Sweden presented at the workshop suggested that it is less common for young people to practise beliefs as organizing centres for their lives than to make belief statements as markers of belonging. This would help to explain why, as the National Youth and Religion study in America found, young people tend to be less articulate about the beliefs that form an organising centre for their lives. Young people who hold beliefs as organizing centres for their lives are more

likely to present these beliefs in propositional terms. When completing an open-ended survey question to British university students about what it meant for them to claim to be a Christian, respondents for whom beliefs represented an organising centre were more likely to respond using formulaic statements of creedal faith (e.g. that ‘by Jesus’ substitutionary atonement, my sins have been forgiven’).

- When young people do hold to a set of beliefs as an organizing centre for their lives, this can motivate them to create new (sub)cultural practices which replicate wider popular cultural forms but re-work these in ways that are experienced as consistent with those beliefs (e.g. making hip-hop ‘halal’). This can involve taking existing genre codes and sifting these as to whether they are legitimate in terms of the organising beliefs (e.g. retaining the punk genre of playing short songs, but not drinking or swearing on-stage). For young people who do not hold beliefs as an organizing centre for their lives, such religiously-refracted reworking of cultural practices is unnecessary.
- One of the most common, and striking, findings across the wide range of contexts studied was that young people typically found it important to conceive of their beliefs as authentic, personally meaningful and freely chosen. One of the statements receiving the highest levels of assent (93%) in a survey on religion, belief and young people in Sweden presented at the workshop, was that beliefs should be meaningful and one’s own choice. The meaning of authenticity varies across different contexts, however, and can range from authenticity to a particular religious tradition or authority, authenticity deriving from relationship with a particular sacred figure, authenticity in maintaining the ‘real’ heart of a particular sub-culture or lifestyle, or authenticity in the sense of being true to one’s experience and inner self. Despite these variations, a discourse of authenticity remained important and widely-used across religious and national contexts. There is also a paradox in that whilst it is very often important for young people to see their choices about religious belief and identity as freely chosen, they are in reality negotiated and shaped in the context of specific social structures and relationships which constrain the choices that are possible and unconsciously reproduce sedimented meanings of gender, class and ethnicity. This suggests that Beck’s ‘individualization’ thesis, which recognises the structural conditions under which it becomes important for people to *conceive* of themselves as individuals, is a better theoretical framework for understanding young people’s religious lives than simplistic notions of a spiritual marketplace characterised by high levels of actual choice and reflexivity.
- Beliefs may at times be framed in explicit, discursive forms. Sometimes this is an encouraged part of particular religious activities, for example as young people learn to narrate their testimonies through Bible study groups. Research interventions like surveys or interviews represent another kind of social interaction in which young people can be encouraged to offer explicit articulations of belief sometimes in ways that they have not done previously (‘I’ve not thought of this before, but...’), and the data from such interactions therefore needs to be understood as a kind of shared social performance than a pure insight into the interior beliefs of the respondent.
- Belief may be expressed as social action. Being a particular kind of believing subject leads young people to engage their social worlds in particular ways, and also informs the ways in which they are constructed by other young

people (e.g. being regarded with suspicion for being 'too religious' in one's views). Choosing not to believe can also be a distinctive form of social action; some survivors of the industrial school system in Ireland who reject Catholicism are at the same time rejecting the meaning-system and institutional structures that defined their selves in shaming and abusive ways.

- Beliefs are sometimes inseparable from practices. Practices do not simply 'express' underlying beliefs, but it is through particular practices (e.g. through discussions in the classroom, family interactions, playing in places of natural beauty, performing or listening to music) that beliefs are formed and reproduced and that people learn to become believing subjects. Beliefs as expressions of belonging or expressions of conviction may primarily be performed through different kinds of social and cultural action, and discursive articulations of these may be second-order phenomena.
- Beliefs are also integrally-embedded with space. Different kinds of space allow or constrain different kinds of interaction, or make various forms of aesthetic experience possible. Beliefs are formed and performed through particular spaces, both real/off-line and virtual. The uses of space are also influenced by operations of power which seek to encourage, limit or forbid various kinds of belief-practices, or to bring more diffuse practices into a more explicit and more defined structure of belief (e.g. bringing popular expressions of mourning on the death of Pope John Paul II in Poland increasingly in line with symbolic and liturgical forms of the Catholic Church). These operations of power involve not only religious institutions, but institutions of the State, for example in the prohibition of belief-practices associated with environmental activism. Significant spaces include both public spaces, but also private spaces in the home (e.g. young people's bedrooms) which become sites for personal reflection and belief-practices.
- Beliefs are also relationally-embedded. This is true not only for belief as statements of belonging (which may be narrated in terms of significant relationships or affiliations), but in the sense that all modes of belief are performed in the formative context of relations with family-members, peers, and other adult figures with whom young people have formal and informal relationships. It is important to expand the range of those with whom we understand young people to have significant inter-subjective relations beyond immediate family and peers to include sacred figures as well as natural spaces and animals – and even, as we heard, volunteer 'street pastors' hearing about young people's beliefs at 2 a.m. outside a club. Even expressions of belief which take narrowly propositional forms are grounded in relationship: one learns to put trust in a particular propositional statement of belief because one trusts the testimony of those who claim that statement.
- An important relational context for the formation of young people's belief is their relationship with parents. It should not be assumed that young people's beliefs are formed in opposition to those of their parents, and parental beliefs (or indeed indifference to religious belief) are more likely to shape those of their children. The degree of influence of parental belief may change through adolescence, as adolescents seek to define their beliefs in spaces away from family interactions or shared spaces in the home. Attention to the different social and historical contexts experienced by parents and their children is significant in understanding patterns of belief between generations.

- We need to develop clearer understandings of the significance of emotion for belief. Emotion can at times be constructed as a sign that one is believing in the right way (e.g. ‘I know that I am properly committed in my relationship with God because I am happy’), and certain emotions (anxiety, depression) may in certain religious contexts be interpreted as evidence as a lack of appropriate belief. Beyond legitimating particular forms of belief, though, emotion may also be the medium through which belief is formed – through particular relationships, spaces and practices. Through particular kinds of emotion we come to understand ourselves as belonging to individuals and groups in particular ways, come to find particular convictions convincing, or develop meaningful attachments to particular sacred figures and spaces. Emotion also provides a framework for memory and the narration of particular meaningful events in a young person’s life. Understanding the relationship between emotion and belief more adequately may involve further engagement with recent work in the sociology of emotion or emotional geographies. This will also need to take into account particular kinds of emotional development that children and adolescents experience.
- The relationship between the explicit beliefs that young people articulate also needs to be understood in relation to that which they cannot easily articulate or may not be in their conscious awareness. This could, for example, be understood in terms of the distinction between discursive consciousness (i.e. what young people are able to say explicitly about important meanings and motivations in their lives) and practical consciousness (i.e. ways of learning to live that they may have absorbed within a particular habitus but which are assumed rather than explicit). Similarly, this could be thought about in terms of the distinction between the exercise of reflexive forms of agency, and structures which either constrain that agency or which are unwittingly reproduced through the exercise of agency.
- Whilst young people may engage in different modes of believing there may also be moments of collective effervescence which draw young people together across different forms of belief. For example, public mourning after the death of Pope John Paul II brought young people into collective forms of ritual mourning despite the fact that they had very different ‘beliefs’ or were engaged in quite different forms of believing. Similarly music festivals may provide moments of significant collective identification for young people who otherwise demonstrate quite different forms of belief. We therefore need to understand better how particular public rituals or moments of sacred identification can bring young people together into temporary communities that are not premised on a single form of belief or set of beliefs.

Conclusion

As is clear from the above, the discussion demonstrated the need for further clarity about the ways in which we use the concept of belief in relation to the religious and secular lives of young people. The assumption that propositional belief is important for all young people – or a common feature of religious life more generally – has been subjected to sustained critique already within the disciplines of anthropology and history, and our network has sought to develop this critique further in the study of young people and contemporary religion. Recognising the need for further theoretical and methodological refinement, this discussion emphasises the need for

understandings of belief which are *properly historicized*, which *differentiate between various modes of believing*, which *recognize social and cultural structures that frame forms of contemporary belief* (e.g. *the importance of the idea of the autonomous, authentic self*), and which understand belief *in relation to practice, inter-subjectivity, space and emotion*. We also recognise that the concept of ‘belief’ remains meaningful to many young people, and is used by them to refer to their identities, affiliations, opinions and convictions. At this point, then, it seems premature to think about rejecting the concept of belief wholesale, and important to attend both to the ways in which it is deployed in relation to young people’s lives as well as to the ways in which more theoretically-refined understandings of belief could encourage more nuanced research of young people’s religious life-worlds.

Gordon Lynch
Abby Day
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