

# Recognizing Secular Christians: Toward an Unexcluded Middle in the Study of Religion

**David Voas and Abby Day**

*David Voas, University of Manchester*

*Abby Day, University of Sussex and Birkbeck, University of London*



PROVIDING FREE ACCESS SINCE 1998

QUALITY DATA ON RELIGION

[www.theARDA.com](http://www.theARDA.com)

## ***Introduction***

When belief in divine action was taken for granted, a religious worldview was not necessarily accompanied by a specific religious identity. The disintegration of the sacred canopy and rising ethnic diversity has led to the opposite tendency, whereby people with secular outlooks lay claim to religious identities. In particular, secular Christianity is becoming more prevalent for reasons discussed below.

We are often tempted to treat attributes as dichotomous implying, for example, that people either are or are not religious. This view is unhelpful. Religiously committed Christians identify with a church or denomination, believes in God, and attends services with some frequency; the non-religious does none of these things. Clearly there is a broad middle ground occupied by people who are neither especially religious nor overtly secular.

Despite dramatic shifts in the prevalence of conventional Christian belief, practice and self-identification in most Western countries, residual involvement is considerable. Many people remain interested in church weddings and funerals, Christmas services and local festivals. They believe in something out there, pay at least lip service to so-called Christian values (mostly concerning duties to others rather than duties to God), and may be willing to identify with a denomination.

By the law of the excluded middle, everyone would be either Christian or not Christian. The logic is reasonable, but this division does not really work. It is more useful to view the religious and not religious as extremes, between which one finds many kinds of fuzzy religiosity (to adopt the terminology of fuzzy set theory, which allows degrees of membership rather than requiring everything to be either R or not R). The fuzziness refers to the inclusion or otherwise of people in our categories; it is not meant to imply that their thinking is muddled (though it may be).

The intermediate group is large and important. Roughly half of people in most European countries are neither regular churchgoers nor self-consciously nonreligious (Voas 2009). Many Americans likewise qualify, depending on exactly how this intermediate category is defined. In what follows we seek to be systematic (and ideally comprehensive) in considering the scope of the unexcluded middle. Our focus is on Christianity in the West, but the analysis may apply to some other regions and religious traditions.

We suggest that the phrase "secular Christians" can be applied to the most important component of the broad intermediate group. These are people who call themselves Christian, but who for all practical purposes are secular. They live in a world centered on their social relationships, in which God has no everyday role. They do not expect God's help, fear God's judgment, or believe that things will happen *God willing*. They are indifferent to religion for the good reason that it gives them nothing of practical importance.

### ***Background***

A large proportion of people in Western countries identify themselves as Christian — and more specifically as Catholics, Lutherans, and so on — without attending church or being more than minimally observant. Nominalism (that is to say, belonging in name only) is arguably the largest form of Christianity today and the least understood (Brierley 1999). As described more fully below, Day (2006, 2009a) divides the nominal group into ethnic, natal and aspirational varieties. Ethnic nominalism is similar what Demerath (2000:127) calls cultural Christianity: "Arguably one of the world's most common forms of religious involvement, it is also one of the most neglected by scholars." Hervieu-Léger (2000: 157), too, discusses ethnic religion, where religious identity functions as a sign of belonging to a people and culture. Lim et al. find that a substantial number of respondents in panel surveys move back and forth between stating some religious preference and none, despite showing no change in their religious beliefs or behavior. They use the label "liminal nones" for people who "stand halfway in and halfway out of a certain religious identity." Although in a few respects they most closely resemble one pole or the other — demographically, for example, they seem much like consistent nones — their characteristics, like their identities, are typically midway between the extremes.

The phrase "believing without belonging" has been popularised by Davie (1990, 1994) to refer to the idea that faith may change shape but does not fade away. The strong version of the thesis is that much of the population is simply unchurched. The claim is that belief in the supernatural is high and reasonably robust while religious practice is substantially lower and has declined more quickly. People take the existence of churches for granted and look to them in times of personal or public need. In weaker versions of the thesis, the beliefs of those who are not religiously active are allowed to be non-Christian, vague, and even non-religious.

These formulations depict the phenomenon as potentially transitory. (A more detailed discussion of the points above can be found in Voas and Crockett 2005.)

Voas (2009) examines the large group of people who are neither regular churchgoers (now only a small minority of the population in most European countries) nor self-consciously nonreligious. Because they retain some loyalty to tradition, though in a rather uncommitted way, the term ‘fuzzy fidelity’ seems apt. Their attitude towards religion is usually not one of rejection or hostility. What seems apparent, though, is that religion plays a very minor role (if any) in the lives of fuzzy Christians. Only in the most religious countries do more than a quarter think that religion is personally somewhat important rather than unimportant. Elsewhere, the very large majority of these respondents see religion as not very important, and for a quarter or more it is very unimportant.

Storm (2009) analyses this fuzzy group and subdivides it into four parts. The moderately religious are characterized by a strong sense of belonging to the religious community as well as by relatively high rates of practice and belief (compared to others among the fuzzy faithful). The passively religious describe themselves as spiritual and somewhat religious and believe in God, but have particularly low rates of both individual and collective religious practice. Those in the belonging without believing cluster are nominal Christians; they feel close to the church and think church services are important at life events like birth, marriage and death, but score relatively low on every other dimension of religiosity. Finally, people who have a privatized form of religiosity can be described as ‘believing without belonging’.

Ammerman examines a category of churchgoers she labels “Golden Rule Christians.” They are “very this-worldly and do not think either that the Bible should be taken literally or that Christianity has a corner on the truth. They also attend church much less than others” (Ammerman 1997: 196). While these people have been labelled ‘lay liberals’ (Hoge et al. 1994) or ‘free riders’ (Iannaccone 1994), the implication being that they are simply less committed (and therefore less religious) than proper churchgoers, Ammerman argues that “they are a pervasive religious type that deserves to be understood on its own terms.” She maintains that Golden Rule Christians are different from others in kind rather than degree, while conceding that this sort of religiosity can be difficult to transmit to a new generation. Because these people belong to congregations and have a sense of the sacred, they may or may not belong to the intermediate group we are considering here.

Smith (2005) coined the term "moralistic therapeutic deism" to describe the religious outlook of many American young people. They characteristically believe that God created the world and wants everyone to be nice to each other, but he has little day-to-day involvement in life. Occasionally his help may be needed as a therapist or handyman, but for the most part God is on call rather than on active duty.

In his follow-up book, Smith (2009) offers a typology of religion and spirituality among emerging adults. Only about 15 percent of them are definitely religious (committed traditionalists), but likewise only 15 percent are unreligious (religiously disconnected or irreligious). In between one finds selective adherents who pick and choose what to believe and practice, spiritually open people who are curious about these matters without being very involved and, finally, the religiously indifferent, whose concerns lie elsewhere.

Spirituality typically refers to personal experiences of something regarded as sacred. Alternative spirituality describes those varieties that are spiritual but not (conventionally) religious. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) argue that the inner self is displacing transcendent beings or religious institutions as the source of significance and authority. While much has been made of the rise of New Age beliefs and practices, "the commonly invoked idea that spirituality is without the baggage associated with religion is another way of saying that it is not very religious" (Voas and Bruce 2007: 59). A distinction should be made between serious seekers (Roof 1993) who do not belong in the intermediate category we describe and the more casually spiritual who do.

### ***Dimensions of religiosity as fuzzy sets***

#### ***Measures of Christian commitment***

In recent years it has become conventional to focus on three dimensions of religiosity: belief, practice and affiliation. The first two dimensions seem fundamental, representing the distinction between the intrinsic, psychological or cognitive (belief in creeds, affective connection, knowledge and acceptance of doctrine) and the extrinsic or behavioral (communal activity, participation in services, private devotion). Belief (in God, an afterlife, a transcendent moral order, specific articles of faith, or less directly in the importance of religion) is a basic sign of Christian commitment, and profession of faith or agreement with some specific statements of belief may be a good index of personal religiosity. Actual religious behavior, such as frequent prayer or attendance at services, may be an even stronger sign of religious commitment. While it is not unreasonable to

assume that Christian practice in the modern world implies belief, the connection between the two deserves empirical investigation.

Although affiliation is simply what Americans label religious preference rather than a measure of commitment, the growth in the number of those who say that they have no religion has ironically turned the simple willingness to accept a denominational label into an indicator of religiosity. Objective measures of religious affiliation (e.g. baptism) now tend to be less important than self-identification. Identity has become a major topic in contemporary sociology, and religion is still capable of being an aspect of personal identity that does not depend on active participation, official membership, or even agreement with basic doctrine.

For reasons of practicality it makes sense to work with three standard measures of religiosity: self-identification with a religion, frequency of attendance at religious services, and belief in God. We start by looking at each of these variables separately. It seems apparent that they are not binary qualities; there can be degrees of each. At this stage we are simply noting the existence of intermediate, ‘fuzzy’ states and how they are manifested. In a later section we try to explain what they mean and why they arise.

#### *The fuzziness of Christian identity*

Different people will see religion in different ways: as a voluntary association (in which membership will lapse unless regularly renewed), as something more like a nationality (which you can have even if you go elsewhere), or simply as an aspect of cultural heritage. Individuals may vary over time in how they see their own religious identity. A comparison of waves 1 and 9 (1991 and 1999) of the British Household Panel Survey shows that the frequency distribution of religious affiliation is utterly static, from which it is tempting to conclude that religious identity is a stable attribute. Closer examination at the individual rather than the aggregate level reveals that a remarkable 27 percent of respondents interviewed in both surveys supplied different religious labels for themselves at the two dates. No doubt some of those panel members really did change allegiance (between denominations or between affiliation and no religion), but it is likely that many are simply uncertain or ambivalent. The line between ‘C of E’ (Church of England) and ‘none’ can be rather fuzzy. The same phenomenon has been observed in the United States (see Lim et al. on ‘liminal’ religion).

In most Western countries, the proportion of the population identifying with Christianity has declined over recent decades. At the same time, the percentage of people who identify as Christian rather than claiming

a specific denominational affiliation has risen. The British Social Attitudes survey shows an increase in this category from three percent in 1983 to 10 percent in 2001, making it second only to the Church of England in size. In the United States, the Christian (no denomination specified) group grew from less than five percent in 1990 to 14 percent in 2008, according to the American Religious Identification Survey. Similarly, the size of this category more than doubled in Canada between the 1991 and 2001 censuses (albeit from a small base).

In Britain, one might speculate that people who in the past might have given their identity as Anglican are now inclined to describe themselves simply as Christian, thereby distinguishing themselves from Muslims and Hindus rather than from Catholics and Methodists. Ethnic nominalism, where religion is linked to ethno-national identity, may be gaining ground at the same time as religious practice is declining (Day 2006, 2009a). Not all of these respondents are merely nominal Christians, however. Some will be active members of independent nondenominational churches, and indeed 25 percent of them attend services at least monthly. In the United States it seems apparent that the 'Christian' label is adopted by some of the most as well as some of the least religious. Part of the growth in the category — at least in the United States — can be attributed to the independent evangelical sector. Nevertheless, there is clearly a tendency on the part of many to associate themselves with Christianity as a cultural symbol rather than as a practiced religion.

Responses on religious affiliation are heavily influenced by the exact wording and context of the question. At one extreme, for example, the 2001 Census of Population in the UK shows 72 percent of people in England and Wales, and 65 percent of those in Scotland, categorized as Christian. Religion follows the questions on country of birth and ethnicity on the census form for England and Wales, so that it appears (reflecting the intentions expressed in the government White Paper) to be a supplementary question on the same topic. The positive phraseology ('What is your religion?') combined with tick-box options that simply list world religions (e.g. Christian/Muslim/Hindu) invite the respondent to specify a communal background rather than a current affiliation. The religion question used on the census form in Scotland preceded (rather than followed) those on ethnicity, was worded in a less leading way, and also offered answer categories for specific Christian denominations; perhaps as a result, people were nearly twice as likely as in England to give their affiliation as "none."

In contrast to the census, the question posed in the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey occurs in the context of a wide-ranging enquiry into opinion and practice, and it is worded in a way that might seem more

likely to discourage than to encourage a positive response ("Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?"). The respondent must interpret for him or herself what 'belonging' might mean, but for most it probably implies some current as opposed to past affiliation. Thus although half the English population could legitimately be counted as Anglican, having been baptized by the Church of England, fewer than a third identify themselves as such. For all religions combined the BSA 2001 survey gives a total of 58 percent among adults in England and Wales, a very different result than the 79 percent (aged 18+) obtained from the census in the same year.

Research in France has also revealed the substantial impact of exactly how a question is phrased. Use of a filter question ("Do you have a religion?" followed by "which?" in the event of an affirmative response) led more people to declare no affiliation than a single question in which 'none' was merely one option (Lambert 2002: 571).

#### *The fuzziness of belief*

It is important to note that while 'belief' may be an important part of Christian religiosity, it is not especially useful in the comparative study of religion. A detailed analysis of how sociologists and anthropologists have treated the term 'belief' is found in Day (2010, 2011 forthcoming); a summary follows.

As William Cantwell Smith observed, "The peculiarity of the place given to belief in Christian history is a monumental matter, whose importance and relative uniqueness must be appreciated" (1978:180). Needham (1972) provides an exhaustive review of 'belief', concluding that anthropologists consistently fail to interrogate the term sufficiently; there is a Christian tendency to appropriate belief as religious. Smith (1967, 1977, 1978, 1979) discussed how the term "belief" has its roots in Christianity, although its meanings may have changed over time. Asad (1993) wrote that the category of belief has been inextricably linked to a specific historic creation of what it means to be Christian, which was centered on church leaders authorizing specific practices and beliefs.

A further complication is that belief may be a matter of faith or emotion; it can be misleading to adopt a purely cognitive, intellectualist understanding of belief. Robbins (2007:14) offers a distinction between "believing in" and "believing that," where "believing in" is a value statement implying certainty and trust. By contrast, "believing that" involves a propositional statement that may or may not be true. Robbins argues that

most anthropological (and presumably sociological) research about religion places too much stress on the propositional or cognitive and not enough on values that are part of what one believes in. Ruel (1982) concluded that belief is best understood as faith. The faith-based belief form may also reflect a return to a relational sense of belief, recapturing a former use of the term belief as beloved (Smith 1967, Lopez 1998). That faith-based, emotional kind of belief is best understood through qualitative research where it is told through stories, or belief narratives (Day 2009a, Good 1994) rather than constructed as a belief system (Borhek and Curtis 1975).

If we take the rather strict view that religious people must accept specific articles of faith and know basic church doctrine, then only a fraction of the population will qualify as Christians. If we suppose that accepting the existence of a higher power or an ultimate moral order counts as religious belief, the proportion may be much greater.

In any event one can no longer infer from the widespread expressions of belief in a broadly defined God that people are basically Christian. Opinion polls over recent decades suggest (even given the previous caveats about interpreting survey evidence) that the characteristically Christian beliefs — particularly in Jesus as the Son of God — have been in decline, and are now held by a minority (Gill et al. 1998; see also *The Tablet*, 18 December 1999: 1729). Many people would like to be known as ‘spiritual’ (the alternatives seem unattractive; who wants to be labeled a materialist?) and will therefore acknowledge a belief in something, but that something is less and less likely to be recognizable as religious doctrine.

The International Social Survey Program module on religion includes the following question: Please indicate which statement below comes closest to expressing what you believe about God.

- I don't believe in God.
- I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out.
- I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind.
- I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others.
- While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.
- I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it.

It seems reasonable to treat the first two options as non-religious responses (representing atheistic and agnostic views respectively), while the last two may be regarded as properly religious. The intermediate answers represent a middle position, either unorthodox or doubtful and inconsistent. In describing such views as fuzzy our intention is to underline their significance as an intermediate position, not to dismiss these beliefs

as inept or blurred. We are also aware of the need to take account of the way different groups may themselves define terms such as "religion," "Christian," or "spiritual" (Zinnbauer et. al. 1997).

Among those fuzzy Christians who have religious or spiritual beliefs, we can distinguish two cognitive styles. Many entertain beliefs about their fate, the afterlife, a higher power and the like that are quasi-religious but inconsistent with the teachings of the major Christian denominations. What one might call "popular heterodoxy" combines elements of astrology, reincarnation, divination, magic, folk religion and conventional Christianity. These beliefs tend to be volatile and not particularly salient.

By contrast there are spiritual seekers for whom these beliefs can matter a good deal. Those who are most engaged with the process may reject Christianity, but others will see their spirituality as consistent with Christian identification. The number of self-conscious seekers is small. Heelas and Woodhead's pioneering attempt to identify people in a small English town who were in any way involved in what they termed the 'holistic milieu' claimed less than 2 per cent and over half of them denied that their involvement in reiki, yoga, aromatherapy and the like was spiritual (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Voas and Bruce 2007). Quests for psychological and physical 'well-being' were more common than spiritual seeking.

#### *The fuzziness of religious practice*

If we regard monthly attendance at services the minimum expected of actively religious Christians, while the non-religious attend no more than annually (weddings and funerals excepted), the intermediate zone is broad. Occasional churchgoing may be more or less consistent; someone may regularly attend every few months, or attend sporadically with varying frequency. In a culture of personal choice and secular opportunity, near-weekly attendance is no longer regarded as obligatory by institutions, let alone individuals.

#### *Varieties of non-religious Christianity*

Fuzziness (or differences in degree) can apply to these three key facets of religiosity separately, but the main varieties of the unexcluded middle come from different combinations of self-identification, belief and practice. Many people qualify as religious on one or two of the criteria but not all three. If we treat each dimension as dichotomous, there are eight possible combinations, as shown in the table below.

Type	Identify	Believe	Attend
Religious Christians	✓	✓	✓
Moderately religious Christians (attend occasionally) or passively religious Christians (attend rarely or never)	✓	✓	x
Social or instrumental Christians	✓	x	✓
Nominal Christians	✓	x	x
Active but unaffiliated Christians	x	✓	✓
Privately religious, or ‘spiritual but not religious,’ Christians	x	✓	x
Non-religious attenders	x	x	✓
Not religious	x	x	x

Moderately religious Christians are presumably people who are not very committed: they believe and call themselves Christian (both low cost, at least in the West), but they are not involved in more onerous activities such as frequent churchgoing. This group is largest in the most religious countries: it is simply the penumbra that surrounds the actively religious.

We discuss passively religious, social/instrumental and nominal Christians in more detail in the next section.

People who have religious beliefs and attend services frequently are very likely to identify themselves as Christian, and to that extent one imagines that there are few churchgoing believers who do not also call themselves ‘Christian’. If ‘affiliation’ refers to a specific denomination, then rather more may be active but unaffiliated.

While many people claim to be spiritual but not religious, most of them have unconventional rather than Christian beliefs. Those who do have recognizably Christian beliefs are likely to identify themselves accordingly, and so again one suspects that the size of the privately religious but non-identifying category is small.

Finally, the non-religious attendees apparently have practical reasons for going to church that do not require self-identification as Christian. This category also seems likely to be small.

In short, we suggest that fuzzy Christians fall into one of three broad types:

- Moderately religious Christians (who identify themselves as such, believe in God, and attend occasionally)
- Those with unusual or idiosyncratic combinations of characteristics (unaffiliated, attending believers, the privately religious, and non-religious attendees)
- Secular Christians (including the passively religious, social or instrumental Christians, and nominal Christians).

We turn now to a closer examination of this last group.

### *Secular Christians*

#### *Social or instrumental Christians*

While it may seem surprising to find unreligious people in church, religious practice can occur even among the secular. People accompany religious parents or spouses, go for the music, or hope to qualify their children for church-affiliated schools. Some might even hope to make business contacts or to affirm their own respectability. Like those who describe themselves as social drinkers or social smokers, social Christians partake in religion only when surrounded by those who do, often to establish their in-group membership.

Religious ceremonies for rites of passage remain popular, though much less so than previously, and some occasional services with a strong social dimension (e.g. church weddings and funerals or harvest festivals and the like) may draw large congregations. Christmas attracts two and a half times as many people to the Church of England as appear on a normal Sunday. It seems very likely that tradition and nostalgia rather than sporadic religious enthusiasm are largely responsible for high turnout at such times. Attendance at Easter (the religiously more important festival) is substantially lower, suggesting that secular Christians are largely responsible for the high turnout at Christmas.

Even private prayer is frequently practiced by people who do not identify with a religion, attend services, or believe in a personal God (Bänziger 2006); whether and to what extent such people are thereby shown to be 'spiritual' rather than 'secular' is debatable.

#### *Nominal Christians*

Most people in Western countries are still able to specify their religious background, just as they can name their birthplace, father's occupation, and secondary school, but whether these things make any difference to how they see themselves or the way they are perceived by others is not at all certain. As discussed above, many people who to all appearances are unreligious do choose an affiliation if asked, depending on the wording and context of the question. These nominal Christians comprise more than half the population in most European countries.

Long after active religious participation has ceased, people may still want services for special occasions; after even that degree of interest has waned, they may still accept association with their religion of origin. The result is similar to a self-description as working class by the owner of a large business, or claims to Irishness by Americans who have a grandparent from Galway. Such personal identities may be personally

meaningful, but the chances of passing them successfully to the next generation are slim. Moreover, a characteristic tends to disappear from our self-description as it loses its social significance. Being a Muslim currently seems sufficiently salient that very few European Muslims would not describe themselves as such; for relatively few Christians is the same true.

Nominal Christians are unsure whether God exists, but in any case he does not play a part in their lives. They do not engage in religious practice and do not give the matter much thought. They do not refer to God or religion in answer to questions about what they believe in, what is important to them, what guides them morally, what makes them happy or sad, their purpose in life or what happens after they die. Day (2006, 2009a, 2011 forthcoming) divides the nominal group into ethnic, natal and aspirational varieties.

Natal nominalists admit that they rarely, if ever, think about their religious identity. They assume that religious identity is something one acquires through birth or early upbringing, and ascribe their Christianity to familial heritage. Typically they were baptized and attended church when they were young. By contrast, ethnic nominalists describe themselves as Christian as a way of identifying with a people or culture, and to position themselves as different from others. Currently Muslims form the major 'other' for Europeans.

Aspirational nominalists describe themselves as Christian, and perhaps more specifically as part of an established church, because they want to belong to this group. It represents something to which they aspire. The emphasis on membership of a group is shared with ethnic nominalists, but the identity carries for them an additional notion of middle class respectability and confidence. In their view the label is attached not simply to people like themselves but to people they want to be like.

#### *Passively religious Christians*

Passively religious Christians are distinguished from purely nominal Christians by their belief in God and acceptance of basic church doctrine. It is not necessarily evident, however, that their beliefs are in fact Christian or even religious.

Opinion polls in Europe show high levels of belief in quasi-religious ideas such as reincarnation, but also in folk superstition: horoscopes, clairvoyance, ghosts, and so on. It is far from clear that these beliefs make any difference to the people claiming them. Studies on polling show that people are prepared to express opinions about almost anything, whether or not they have any knowledge of or interest in the topic. Such beliefs

may be uninformed, superficially held, seldom acted upon, and relatively volatile. Feeling required to hold and even to express opinions is one thing; finding those issues important is another.

That said, many people report having sensed the presence of someone who has died. Day (2006, 2009b) describes the phenomenon as the ‘social secular supernatural’, something that is experienced by atheists as well as by secular or nominal Christians. Likewise they may affirm a belief in the afterlife or even reincarnation without according it spiritual or religious value. People told similar stories to Hay (1982) and Hardy (1979) about experiences of things outside their everyday selves. Hay comments that experiences such as “premonitions, encounters with the dead and encounters with an evil presence were often ruled out of the category religious” (1982: 152). He 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 recognizing that this is only one way of looking at it (Hay 1982: 162-3).

This shorthand, Day (2009b) argues, is misguided. Some of the experiences commonly described as ‘religious’ are properly understood as secular or social.

While 25 percent of respondents in some European countries may say that they believe in reincarnation, one is not inclined to feel that they thereby express any basic truths about their own identities. The corollary, though, is that it is difficult to be too impressed by the apparent number of conventional believers. The argument here is not that the large subpopulation that acknowledges the God of our fathers — the memorably-styled “ordinary God” (Abercrombie et al. 1970, Davie 1990) — is shallow or insincere. The point is simply that we cannot conclude from the fact that people tell pollsters they believe in God that they give the matter any thought, find it significant, will feel the same next year, or plan to do anything about it. While economists claim that there is no such thing as a free lunch, survey responses come very close.

The salience of unorthodox beliefs, which generally receive little or no institutional support, is typically rather low. For spiritual seekers things may be different, though the evidence is thin.

## The worldview of secular Christians

### *Anthropocentric versus theocentric*

Some people believe in a God with whom they have an important personal relationship. Their moral views are affected by what God is believed to want. God is central to the worldview of this theocentric minority: he supplies protection and meaning in life, and his adherents look forward to being united with him in heaven. By contrast, Day (2006, 2011 forthcoming) found that most of her respondents were anthropocentric, a distinction she analyzed by looking at five dimensions of belief and practice: *content*, *resources*, *practice*, *function* and *salience*.

Secular Christians may believe that there is a God, but he has at best a peripheral role in their worldview. (There are parallels here with Smith's concept of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.) To put it another way, secular Christians may believe that God exists, but this belief has little *salience* and even less *function* for them: God is not located in the social world they inhabit. For example, Gemma, 14, said that she thought God had created the universe, but "I don't, like, worship him or anything." Her tone implied that the idea of worshipping God was distasteful (Day 2009b: 269). God had no other salience for her other than as an explanatory tool. While Gemma may believe 'that' God exists, she does not 'believe in' him and did not want to be seen as someone who does. Secular Christians typically contextualize their beliefs with reference to other people. Their secularity is simply an aspect of that anthropocentrism.

### *Content*

In terms of content, the beliefs of anthropocentric, secular Christians are most often a way of expressing a relationship to something or someone else. Few mention God or other divine beings, even when pondering questions like: What makes you happy? What happens after you die? What is most important to you? The people who do discuss these big questions are theocentric, and being interested in those issues is one of their key characteristics. The imponderability of some of those questions shows, in their view, that only God provides answers.

Secular Christians generally think the universe was created by a big bang that science will eventually explain, they believe that when they die they do not go to another place such as heaven, and if they are asked a forced question about religion and answer Christian they do so because of family or ethnic reasons. Many of

these same people believe that their dead relatives watch over them, talk to them, guide them and sometimes protect them. Some believe that such influence covers them with a protective canopy under which all is well, pre-ordained and meant to be. For the most part, they are reluctant to call that influence God: some who believe in the eternal influence of their relatives are atheists. Their anthropocentric orientation means that they see the world as revolving around human beings, not god(s).

### *Resources*

As for resources, most people trace their beliefs to their family roots, followed by life experience, by which they usually mean the consequences of events. By contrast, the theocentric minority see God as the source of their moral beliefs, as revealed in scripture. Some anthropocentrists refer to the Ten Commandments as a source of morality, but in so doing they only refer to those commandments that cover the social code, not the first four defining one's relationship to God.

### *Practice*

Secular Christians do not typically see their (quasi-)religious belief as something that needs to be put into practice, either in the sense of churchgoing or in everyday life. They are concerned about "treating people right," but they do not necessarily link their morality and values to religion. Theocentrists, by contrast, have a clear idea how their belief in God relates to behavior. They claim to be practicing Christians in their work, which they sometimes see as a vocation, and through behaving in ways they see as kind, helpful and loving.

### *Function*

The lack of a clear link between self-identification as Christian and behavior does not mean that belief and identity have no function for people of an anthropocentric worldview, however. For example, belief in an afterlife allows a bereaved person to continue a relationship that would otherwise have to end. Some people say that they have to believe in an afterlife because they cannot tolerate the idea that they will never see a loved one again. Belief in the afterlife is often a reflection of a secular, non-religious desire to be reunited with someone who has died.

As mentioned above, Christian nominalism derives from a sense of affiliation to a family group, an ethnic group, or a kind of respectability to which one aspires. As such it has a function. In Day's view the most important function of an anthropocentric belief system is to nurture a sense of belonging. People want to be with people they love, and so not only seek to prolong their relationships from this life into the hereafter, but also draw boundaries that help to demarcate those who are (and are not) loved.

### *Salience*

It is salience that most clearly separates secular Christians from the rest. Religious beliefs matter little to them. Some beliefs seem to be of only passing importance, as if taught but only half-remembered, or residual notions acknowledged but not recently reviewed. The search for meaning, purpose, theodicy and so on has no strong hold; what matters are relationships with other people, the social, secular, daily joys and distresses of ordinary life.

### *Conclusions*

This paper has explored a growing phenomenon that we call secular Christianity. As religion becomes less influential in society, it is increasingly possible to have a religious identity without sharing a religious worldview. This phenomenon is first evident among minority groups; secular Jews have long been recognized as a distinct category, being culturally Jewish but not religious. Christianity has been sufficiently dominant in Western societies that an equivalent label seemed unnecessary until recently. Religious diversity in combination with widespread irreligion has now made self-identification as Christian meaningful. What it means may have little or nothing to do with religion, however.

Secular Christianity is in some respects a less civil form of civil religion (Bellah 1967). It emphasizes social identity rather than shared belief. Whereas civil religion attempts to minimize difference, secular Christianity might grow in response to the presence of non-Western ethno-religious groups. Both may be used in support of national identity, but different kinds of religious views are compatible with civic nationalism on the one hand and ethnic or cultural nationalism on the other.

However one chooses to characterize it, there are large temperate regions between the poles of observant orthodoxy and overt irreligion. Who inhabits this territory, where they come from, and what will

become of their offspring are all questions deserving further research. We need to attend to fuzzy fidelity as well as firm faith.

## References

- Abercrombie, N., Baker, J., Brett, S., Foster, J. (1970) 'Superstition and Religion: the God of the Gaps.' Pp. 93-129 in D. Martin and M. Hill (eds.), *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*. London: SCM.
- Ammerman, Nancy (1997) 'Golden rule Christianity: Lived religion in the American mainstream.' Pp. 196-216 in David Hall (ed.), *Lived Religion in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Asad, T. (1993) *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bänziger, S. (2006) Praying in Dutch Society: The Socialization versus Individualism Hypotheses, paper presented at the annual conference of the BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group, Manchester, 4 April 2006.
- Bellah, Robert N. (1967) 'Civil Religion in America.' *Daedalus*. 96(1): 1-21.
- Borhek, J.T. and Curtis, R.F. (1975) *A Sociology of Belief*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Brierley, P. (1999) 'Numbering the Nominals.' Pp. 69-88 in H. Wraight (ed.), *They call themselves Christian*. London: Christian Research.
- Davie, G. (1990) 'Believing without belonging: Is this the future of religion in Britain?' *Social Compass* 37(4): 455-69.
- Davie, G. (1994) *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Day, A. (2006) 'Believing in Belonging: a Case Study from Yorkshire', PhD thesis, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK.
- Day, A. (2009a) 'Researching belief without asking religious questions', *Fieldwork in Religion*. 4(1): 89-106
- Day, A. (2009b) 'Believing in belonging: an ethnography of young people's constructions of belief', *Culture and Religion*, 10 (3): 263-278
- Day, A. (2010) Propositions and performativity: relocating belief to the social. *Culture and Religion* 11(1): 9-30
- Day, A. (2011 forthcoming) *Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World: Believing in Belonging*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Demerath, iii N. J. (2000) 'The rise of "cultural religion" in European Christianity: Learning from Poland, Northern Ireland, and Sweden.' *Social Compass* 47(1): 127-139.
- Gill, R., Hadaway, C.K. and Marler, P.L. (1998) Is religious belief declining in Britain?' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37(3): 507-16.
- Good, B. J. (1994) *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Hardy, A.C. (1979) *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Religious Experience*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hay, D. (1982) *Exploring Inner Space: Scientists and Experience*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Iannaccone, Laurence R. (1994) 'Why strict churches are strong.' *American Journal of Sociology* 99(5): 1180-1211.
- Heelas, P. and Woodhead, L., with Seel, B., Szerszynski, B. and Tusting, K. (2005) *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hervieu-Légér, Danielle (2000) *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Lambert, Y. (2002). La religion en France des années soixante à nos jours. Pp. 565-579 in *Données sociales—La société française*. Paris: INSEE.
- Lim, C. MacGregor, C.A. & Putnam, R.D. (submitted) 'Secular and liminal: Decomposing religious nones.'
- Lopez, D. (1998) 'Belief.' Pp. 21-23 in M.C. Taylor (ed.) *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Needham, R. (1972) *Belief, Language and Experience*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Robbins, J. (2007) 'Continuity thinking and the problem of Christian culture.' *Current Anthropology* 48(1): 5-17.
- Roof, Wade Clarke (1993) *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Ruel, M. (1982) 'Christians as believers.' Pp. 9-32 in John Davis (ed.) *Religious Organization and Religious Experience*, ASA Monograph 21. London: New York.

- Smith, Christian with Denton, M.L. (2005) *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Christian with Snell, Patricia (2009) *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, William Cantwell (1967) *Problems of Religious Truth*. New York: Scribner's.
- Smith, William Cantwell (1977) *Belief and History*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Smith, William Cantwell (1978) *The Meaning and End of Religion*. London: SPCK.
- Smith, William Cantwell (1979) *Faith and Belief*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Storm, Ingrid (2009) 'Halfway to heaven: Four types of fuzzy fidelity in Europe.' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48(4): 702-18.
- Voas D (2009) 'The rise and fall of fuzzy fidelity in Europe.' *European Sociological Review* 25(2): 155-68.
- Voas, D. and Bruce, S. (2007). 'The Spiritual Revolution: Another False Dawn for the Sacred.' Pp. 43-62 in K. Flanagan and P. Jupp (eds), *A Sociology of Spirituality*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Voas, D. and Crockett, A. (2005) 'Religion in Britain: Neither believing nor belonging.' *Sociology* 39(1): 11-28.
- Zinnbauer, B.J., Pargament, K.I., Cole, B., Rye, M.S., Butter, E.M., Belavich, T.G., Hipp, K.M., Scott, A.B., and Kadar, J.L. (1997) 'Religion and spirituality: Unfuzzifying the fuzzy.' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36(4): 549-64.