Desert Island Discourse - Abby Day

Abby Day is Professor of Race, Faith and Culture in the Sociology Department at Goldsmiths. Her books and articles include *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World* (OUP, 2013) and *The Religious Lives of Older Laywomen: the Last Active Anglican Generation* (OUP, 2017). She is a former Chair of the BSA Sociology of Religion study group.

Your first choice is *The Making of a Moonie. Choice or Brainwashing?*, by Eileen Barker – why did you choose that?

I always wonder why people assume that a scholar studying religion must be religious. I also study and teach about criminology, but I don't think people would assume I'm a criminal. (Spoiler alert! I'm neither). The main problem here is the academy's assumption that religion left the building sometime around the Enlightenment and yet, as most people in the world are religious and religion is an important social force (consider why Evangelical Christians elected Donald Trump or why the Shah of Iran was deposed by a theocracy, or why the BSA has had a sociology of religion study group since the 1970s) the sociology of religion should be a standard offer in any self-respecting sociology department. The books I choose here reflect that sociological imagination.

A dominant narrative about people who convert to new and often closed religious movements was that they were brainwashed and vulnerable. Worried parents would sometimes hire professional 'cult-busters' to kidnap their young, adult children and bring them back home for 'de-programming'. No one seemed to ask whether those young people had wilfully chosen their new groups or whether their new spiritual homes were in many ways similar to traditional religious organisations – apart from LSE sociologist Eileen Barker, who changed that narrative in 1984 and, with her charity Inform, continues to do so.

Eileen Barker moved the popular, yet derogatory, term of 'cults' to one reflecting nuance and difference, 'New religious movements', through her study of the Unification church founded by South Korean Sun Myung Moon. Through detailed observations, interviews, questionnaires and wider data analysis, she found that characteristics like age, class or gender didn't help explain why people joined the movement. Rather, the 'Moonies' shared complex experiences, attitudes and desires, came mainly from conventionally religious families, held the same values as their religious upbringing, and often simply wanted to return to and recreate a sense of a warm family. Moonies, it transpired, were pretty much like anyone else.

What made you choose your next selection – *Crossing the Gods: World Religions and Worldly Politics*, by Jay Demerath?

University of Massachusetts (Amherst) sociologist Jay Demerath is one of the foremost sociologists of religion whose arguments and theories have persuaded scholars to take religion seriously as a contemporary social force. Demerath criss-crossed the world over a decade, visiting 14 countries to explore religions in their national and international contexts. His questions focused on the ways in which religious actors experience their religions and often collaborate and compete with secular interests.

He notes that such interaction had been largely ignored by scholars in the 1970s, who thought religions, and those who studied them, were anachronistic and irrelevant. But then, in the 1970s and 80s, came the rise of the hard-right religious conservatisms, the visits and blessings of a Pope to Latin America and Poland, with their strong, anti-government political agendas, and crises in the Middle East fuelled by religious sentiments and identities.

Demerath shows how the interests of politicians and religious leaders often merge, distinguishing between religious actors becoming involved in politics, and such actors becoming involved in the state. The first, particularly for religions committed to changing people's behaviour, may be inevitable, while the second, usually related to power, is contentious, both for religious and secular publics.

He was also adamant about the need for complex methods for a complex subject, arguing that (2001, 221): "Mark Twain once observed that 'faith is believing what you know ain't so'. The very phrase 'religious belief' is subject to misinterpretation because it is so often confused with cognitive certainty as opposed to cultural identity. What we actually believe – and with what level of intensity – is fraught with ambiguity and inconsistency, depending upon the social circumstances. It is hardly surprising that questionnaire responses are manipulatable."

His case studies are sharp and layered with the sort of insights and observations that will keep my imagination alive and running.

Why did you select for your third book, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead?

A cliché perhaps, but there was one sociological book that changed my life: *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. The change occurred for two reasons. The first was personal and professional: as a Lancaster University PhD student I was generously allowed to participate in small ways during its research stage. This was my first taste of empirical research and it was thrilling to find my way through church archives, county records offices and libraries of census data, like a detective following clues, only to realise that much of what is presented as 'clean' data is, in fact, often messy and full of human errors.

Second, the theories the authors developed were sound and field-changing. Using a single site as a base (Kendal, in the Lake District) the research team during two years conducted surveys, interviews, observations and archival research to find and map 'contemporary patterns of the sacred' – the often hidden, nuanced stories within and amongst religious and spiritual lives. The researchers categorised the population they studied into two broad areas they described as the 'congregational domain' composed of churches, chapels and other Christian institutions in the predominantly white town, and the 'holistic milieu', a diverse and often hard-to-find population whose activities had, in their own terms, a spiritual dimension – such as groups meeting in private homes, circle dancers, yoga and Tai Chi groups, and complementary therapy practitioners.

They found that the two types were distinct, with little or no overlap. Those in the congregational domain believed in a higher, external power, such as God, while those in the holistic milieu focused on their own bodies and emotions, or 'subjective lives'. The book's title was arresting and misinterpreted by some. It was not the authors' thesis that religion would die out and be replaced by spirituality, but rather that some kinds of religion are losing their appeal and credibility as some forms of spirituality gain the same. They found that 7.9% of the Kendal population belonged to the congregational domain, while 1.6% were in the holistic milieu. They argued that if the current rate of respective decline and growth continued in Kendal, within 40 years the holistic milieu would outgrow the congregational domain. The text stands as a fine example of the generalisability of a single case study with theories and methods that continue to inform contemporary research.

Linda Woodhead went on to lead the

largest research programme ever conducted into contemporary religion, the AHRC-ESRC Religion and Society programme, which has revitalised and transformed the study of religion in the UK and internationally.

Your fourth choice is *Religion in Britain since 1945*, by Grace Davie – why this book?

Another path-breaking work that formed my career was Exeter University sociologist Grace Davie's 'believing without belonging' thesis, first written as a journal paper and then as a book (1994). My first book, based on my doctoral research, was somewhat unoriginally titled to present a variation on her theme, *Believing in Belonging* (Day 2011) as I wrote in conversation with, and sometimes against, her theories. For the nearly three decades following the publication of her book, I and others working in the field knew it was her thesis for which we would need to account, whether we agreed (and most did) with it or not.

Davie drew mainly on surveys to create her compelling argument that the majority of British people believe in God, hell, sin and heaven but just do not attend church regularly. Her book was written to try to explain that and to reveal more about a taken-for-granted phenomena which is rarely studied or otherwise explored – the large, and apparently unremarkable, middle ground in British religious affiliation.

She wrote that there were several good but small studies of religion in Britain, but "the picture in the middle remains alarmingly blurred", with very little known about "the beliefs of ordinary British people in everyday life" (Davie 1994, 6). Her work anticipated and influenced future research in the sociology of religion by people such as Nancy Ammerman who developed the concept of 'everyday religion' by researching the "nonexperts, the people who do not make a living being religious or thinking and writing about religious ideas" (Ammerman 2007, 5) and Meredith McGuire's (2008) exploration of 'lived religion'.

While Grace Davie made more than a dozen strong and deftly argued claims, several became central to my future study and thinking: the majority of British people persist in believing in God but "see no need to participate with even minimal regularity in their religious institutions" (ibid., 2). It is more accurate to describe them as 'unchurched' rather than secular (ibid.,12,13); the churches attract an audience which is disproportionately elderly, female and conservative (ibid.,2).

Fortunately for me, she left the term 'belief' relatively unexplained, something I was to pick up and, often with the collaboration of anthropologist Simon Coleman and sociologist Gordon Lynch, research its meaning and practice over the next decade.

Your last book is *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, by Saba Mahmood – what led you to this?

Opinions about conservative religious women often rest on ideas that they are oppressed, mistaken or suffer from a false consciousness. The late Saba Mahmood's study of Egyptian women's involvement in a conservative, strict form of Islam known as the 'mosque' or 'piety' movement challenged such narrow assumptions.

A Pakistani-born American woman who introduces herself as someone strongly influenced by Critical Marxism and feminist theory, she suggests that many feminists believe that "women Islamist supporters are pawns in a grand patriarchal plan" (Mahmood 2005, 1). She asks why women across the Muslim world actively support a movement that seems inimical to their "own interests and agendas", especially at a historical moment when these women appear to have more emancipatory possibilities available to them (Mahmood 2005, 2). The concept of 'duty' describes one of the goals of the mosque movement according to principles of 'da'wa', meaning a call or summons. Mahmood's analysis of the movement moves beyond the role of women and contested versions of feminism to concerns about the construction of personhood, negotiations between politics and piety, and the permeable borders between public and private.

One reason I would want this book with me is for the fine detailed descriptions and voices that create a vivid, moving text, folded into a deeply engaging, thoughtful, theoretical work.

Another is that re-reading it would take me back to stories and places I remember from my own research and others', where the messy work of good research into religion is carried out, revealing surprising phenomena – atheists who pray, religious people who don't believe in God, non-religious people who do, feminists who adopt conservative practices, Sunday Christians, Evangelicals for Trump, Friday Muslims, Jedi Knights and Cultural Jews, to name a few. Some may describe such findings as puzzling or contradictory; I prefer to think they are patterns and processes we have not yet discerned. Further research is necessary.

And for your luxury?

I'd say a photo album of my family, because they're what I'd miss most.

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