

# Introduction

*Abby Day*

As with other books in the series, this collection was inspired by an international gathering of scholars discussing an important theme within the sociology of religion. The focus of the conference of the Sociology of Religion Study Group of the British Sociological Association (BSA) held at the University of Manchester in 2006 was 'Religion and the Individual', a theme chosen to provoke dialogue between psychologists and sociologists of religion. Eleven of the papers in this volume were commissioned from scholars who presented at that conference; a further two were commissioned from presenters at the 2007 BSA conference who contributed to a specially designed stream, *Religious Identity in Contemporary Contexts*.

Contributors to this volume shaped their work to reflect a common theme: how do individuals engage with religion to create and express meaning? Although it is a commonplace within the sociology of religion that the individual's religious beliefs, practices and identities are influenced by social contexts, the question for individuals is often 'what does this mean to me'? The work published here discusses that question from a variety of disciplinary perspectives: sociology, psychology, anthropology, and theology. Much of the work is empirical, drawn from international contexts, but some is expressly theoretical. Methods vary according to the questions being explored: we have large-scale quantitative studies and micro qualitative work. What matters here is not epistemological preference, but rather how in fact people are religious and what their beliefs, practices and identities mean to them.

Accordingly, the collection has been organised into three parts. The first explores 'belief' in terms of what belief means to the individual. Douglas Davies begins by exploring why the individual became sidelined in sociology and, rather more importantly, why we lack an analytical category within which sociological and psychological factors can complement each other to allow the individual to reappear within sociological studies. Janet Eccles conducted doctoral research in north-west England, revealing what she described as the 'hiddenness' of relational forms of the sacred, and what those mean to two kinds of women: those who are active church-goers, and those who have left the church.

Exploring belief amongst those do not attend church is also taken up in the next chapter by Sylvia Collins-Mayo as she looks at the nature and meaning of prayer in young people's daily lives in the UK, particularly amongst those who have little or no contact with institutional religion. Xiaowen Lu, Richard O'Leary and Yaojun Li look in depth at the meaning of religious belief in China. Although China is the most populous state in the world, there has been limited inquiry into the relationship between socio-economic development in contemporary China and the individual value orientations of Chinese people.

Part II of the book explores different ways in which people are religious in practice, considering the different meanings that people attach to religion, and the social expressions of their personal understandings. From Singapore, researcher Jayeel Serrano Cornelio considers what may account for the success of what is termed ‘new-paradigm Christianity’. Another form of religious practice and its related meaning is explored by Kevin S. Reimer, Alvin C. Dueck, Joshua P. Morgan and Deborah E. Kessel. Here, we move explicitly from an exclusive Christian context as explored thus far in the volume and consider life experiences, attitudes and practices of exemplar Muslim and Christian peacemakers who effect positive change under difficult and often dangerous circumstances. The theme of autonomous practices within a wider religious context is picked up by Rob Warner in the UK with his study of Spring Harvest, the largest charismatic-evangelical conference in Britain. From practices of commitment, peace-making and individual choice-making, we conclude this section on a more prosaic note: what do religious people mean by ‘giving’ and how do they practise their religion through what they do with their material wealth? Ali Çarkoğlu used survey data to probe how Muslims in Turkey practised philanthropy.

Finally, what religion means to people often shapes and reflects how they see themselves. This does not happen in isolation, but necessarily in relation to others. In Part III of the book we explore identities and the tensions between external and internal meanings and constraints. David Bell dresses the stage theoretically by arguing that the meaning of religious identity has been clouded and ill-defined. He provides a theoretical foundation for measuring religious identity and proposes further research into types of religious institutions that promote different aspects of religious identity.

From his perspective as an anthropologist, Peter Collins seeks initially to interrogate two apparently opposite modes of being in religious contexts – individuality and sociality. He introduces what he describes as a complicating factor, the plane of ‘secular discourse’, to show how the terms ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ represent a second dichotomy which may contribute fundamentally to a misunderstanding of religious contexts. Russell Sandberg discusses how lawyers and sociologists have often wrestled with the question of defining religion, and yet there has been little sociological commentary on the various definitions and conceptions of religion found in law. He works to address this omission within a Durkheimian theoretical framework. A struggle to define a sense of identity is described by Michael Keenan as he looks at how Anglican male gay clergy manage the coexistence of gay, Christian and clerical identities. The way that the men connect life sectors, such as sexual and professional identities, provides a meaning framework for individuals. Concluding our volume, Andrew Dawson explores the new religion of Santo Daime in Brazil and discusses the fabrication of religious identity by urban middle-class *daimistas* through their appropriation of millenarian motifs traditionally associated with Brazil’s rural poor.

I am grateful to all the authors for their work and for the privilege and pleasure it has been working with them. We hope you find this volume engaging, provocative and useful in your learning, teaching and research.

**Acknowledgements**

On behalf of all of us, thanks go to Ashgate Publishing and in particular to its supportive, professional and seemingly tireless commissioning editor, Sarah Lloyd. We are also grateful to David Voas at the University of Manchester who organised the 2006 *Religion and the Individual* conference and selected the theme. Finally, special thanks to the Sociology of Religion Study Group: its support for the discipline through conferences, postgraduate events, study days, and publications has helped many of us to develop our work in the field.