Interview with Grace Davie

Keynote Speaker of the 2018 EASR Conference, Bern

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This text was automatically generated on November 16, 2023.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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Grace Davie is professor emeritus of sociology at Exeter University. She has done extensive research on religion in contemporary European societies. She continues to work closely with the Uppsala Religion and Society Research Centre, specifically with the Linnaeus Centre of Excellence: The Impact of Religion – Challenges for Society, Law and Democracy. Professor Davie's research focuses on religion in Europe; on interactions between religion and welfare, healthcare, and law; and on recognizing the implications of these new fields for sociological thinking about religion. Among her most influential ideas are the concepts of believing without belonging and vicarious religion, which she used to analyze the ongoing changes in religious attitudes in Western societies. In Bern, Professor Davie gave the keynote »Multiple Religious Identities: Realities and Reflections«. In a follow-up interview, we wanted to know more about possible developments in Professor Davie's theories, potential intersections between the concepts multiple religious identities and vicarious religion, and her personal realizations as a sociologist of religion.

1 *Professor Davie, thank you for accepting this interview. In your keynote speech, you talked about your work with colleagues from different fields of study and from various cultural and religious backgrounds. Why is this kind of collaboration so important?*

2   I can remember the moment when I decided that I wanted to work comparatively. I am not anywhere near as good with languages as you are, but I could already speak French as a junior scholar, which was unusual among British social scientists. This meant that I was exposed to important parts of the French tradition, and I learned early on that what the French call *formation* is quite different from the curriculum of a British scholar. What I want to say is that comparative work is essential and the most rewarding way to work, but it is also the most demanding because you have to bridge differences, and deal with misunderstandings. You are going to get frustrated with each other at times, so you have to work harder. And if there is a misunderstanding regarding concepts and assumptions, you have to think, »How do we work through this?«

The international research project on welfare and religion that I was part of is a good example. It was tricky because all the concepts about religion were different in the various countries, but so too were the concepts about local government and what people meant by welfare. We really had to work hard, but it was very interesting. For instance, we realized that in some places there was no word for what we were trying to say. The absence of a word is an important finding because it means something is *not* there. Now, why not? Through such questions, you begin to turn these debates on language and concepts into something bigger: they reveal that a country—or a part of the world or Europe—does not talk about a particular thing because they do not need to, whereas in another country, they cannot manage without such a word!

The most common example of this problem in relation to religious discussion is the French word *laïcité*, which is untranslatable into German or English because there is nothing in Germany or Britain which is *laïque* as the French understand it. »Secular« is used in translation, but it is not the same thing. This lack of vocabulary tells us something. I would always say to students, »Work comparatively if you can.« You will learn much more about your own society when you begin to work out what your society is not. So, do it but do not expect an easy ride. You will make many friends all over the world, and it is deeply rewarding, but you will have tricky questions to answer.

3   *Speaking about terminology, the conference organizers purposely left open the meaning of* multiple religious identities*, which gives the conference its title. What does this concept mean to you? What is, in your opinion, the main significance behind the idea of multiple religious identities?*

4   I have to be honest: multiple religious identities is not a concept I am familiar with. Maybe I am mistaken, but I think that it is more a concept in religious studies than in the sociology of religion. So when I read the preamble to the conference, I thought, »Well I have never thought in terms of an individual having multiple religious identities.« I am sure it happens, but I have not reflected very much on this question or, indeed, studied it. Conversely, I am very familiar with the notion of multiple religious identities within a society or within a community. Still, I can see various intersections between the idea of multiple religious identities and my concept of believing without belonging. *Believing without belonging* defines a situation in which people hold on to some beliefs without actively participating in the life of a religious community. As such, it designates an individualistic way of operating in which people are not so securely anchored to an institution and its teachings. So their own beliefs are likely to drift, and they can drift in all sorts of directions depending on the various influences in their lives: they can drift away from the religious to the spiritual, or they can borrow some

aspects from other faiths, or they can drift straight to the secular domain.

At its core, *believing without belonging* addresses the weakening of ties between institutions and individuals. (Personally, I think that *vicarious religion* [see below] is a better concept to describe this process, but *believing without belonging* found its way into the literature, and I guess I have to accept this.) The most important point is that rather than making the deliberate decision to step away from their religion and become secular or something else, people are more like an elastic band, so to speak, that can sometimes stretch to the point of breaking, but they keep a minimal relationship with the tradition in which they were born, although this does not necessarily have a strong influence on their lives.

The lack of a clear affiliation allows people to develop new ideas—possibly new religious belongings or identities. If people are tightly tied to a tradition, for them to adopt an alternative view would mean moving in a very different direction in life. This is not the case if they are already detached. This »elastic band« that is not yet broken gives them much more room to explore, particularly if they retain some sort of sensitivity for the spiritual. This kind of exploration is going to become more frequent if people live in more diverse societies. In previous epochs, it was rare to encounter other religions in European societies. Today, due to the impact of the media, people are aware that Christianity is not the only possibility even if they do not encounter other religions firsthand.

5 *Would you therefore consider multiple religious identities a phenomenon symptomatic of our time rather than something that scholars have just started to notice but that can be traced back to the past?*

6 In his keynote lecture about the premodern individual, Reinhard Schulze [see the interview with Schulze in this special issue] called attention to some flexibility in the construction of one's personality that has a certain historical depth. But I would like to insist on the role of context in these discussions: I might be wrong, but I do not think that in Saudi Arabia there is much of an idea of multiple religious identities even today. What I have noticed in my own work is that realities and perceptions change. To find out which comes first—reality or perception—and how the change takes place are subtle questions that need to be explored *empirically* in each place. Does change occur because of new people arriving? Does it result from more media exposure? Does it happen because of changing events in the modern world? I do not think there is a single answer. Instead, we need to look at different contexts and at different faith communities. I would be cautious about generalizations, but I also think you are absolutely right in asking whether we are dealing with a change in reality or with a change in the way we see reality. My answer is the following: it varies, and it depends on where you are. But I think it is a good way of looking at this issue.

7 *You have already mentioned your concept of vicarious religion, that is, of a religion that is performed by an active minority on behalf of a much larger nonpracticing majority. How did you develop this idea?*

8 There is a reason why I moved from *believing without belonging* to *vicarious religion*. I felt that there were a number of misunderstandings in the debate around believing without belonging, and yet those discussions were like toothpaste: once you squeeze the idea out, you cannot put it back into the tube; you cannot say to people, »That is not what I meant.« That said, I felt that the debate was overemphasizing belonging as the strong variable and believing as the weaker, wider one. But you can have strong and weak

forms of both believing and belonging. For instance, the Christian creed is a strong statement of belief: »I believe in ...« and then you say some very specific things. Believing can also simply mean »I believe in God« or »I believe that this world is in some way penultimate« or »I believe that there is some sort of higher power.« There is a huge spectrum there. Similarly, if you think of belonging, you can say »I am a Christian«, »I am a Catholic«, »I am an Anglican«, or »I am a regular churchgoer«, and again the spectrum becomes very broad: you go to church every week or more often, or you go very occasionally, or you can be very insistent that you are an Anglican and never go.

I feel that the concept of vicarious religion captures such variations better than believing without belonging. On the one hand, vicarious religion conveys the idea of a nucleus of people who practice on a regular basis and think harder about what they believe, and, on the other hand, it accounts for the existence of a wide range of other people who, either in terms of belief or in terms of practice, ownership, or self-identity, have ceased to be active in the institution.

To analyze this kind of phenomenon is very demanding in terms of empirical research because very often you are trying to do research on something you cannot see. Sometimes you can capture some aspects of it in a village: the church is closed, and there is no longer a priest because the church can no longer afford it, and the people are upset even if they never attended service because they nevertheless feel that it is »our« church. In this way, you perceive certain patterns of behavior. You can also see how people behave in times of disaster and shock, or indeed in celebration. Very often they return to the church on these occasions.

9   *This phenomenon of vicarious religion is well established with respect to the mainline Catholic and Protestant churches in Western Europe. How well can this concept work to analyze other religious realities?*

10   In my opinion, the idea of vicarious religion enables us to ask all sorts of questions and helps us understand the legacy of the historical churches in Europe. What I have learned is that if you travel across Europe explaining this idea, almost every audience will understand what you are talking about, provided you have a good interpreter. It is not always easy to translate »vicarious«, but as soon as the members of the audience get the idea, they start giving you all sorts of examples. By contrast, if you go to the United States, they cannot understand what you are talking about because vicarious religion, quite simply, is not a part of American self-understanding. Americans do not have a state church. Their church life is quite different: it does not have a territorial base, and it lacks the historical roots of European churches. This incapacity to understand what vicarious religion means just shows me how different the United States is from Europe. It does not mean that one is better and one is worse; it is just different.

In Europe, too, there are differences across countries and generations. The practice of vicarious religion speaks more to older generations than to younger ones. I can see this with my children, who are much more secular than I am, and to whom this idea does not make much sense. But this would be much less the case in Greece, Romania, Italy, or Portugal. It is always a good idea to look across European countries because in some places this attitude endures and in other places it does not—and then you have to figure out *why* it endures here and is disappearing there. Poland, for instance, is an interesting case because of the fusion of Polishness and Catholicism. The relationship between the Romanian identity and Orthodoxy is similar. So, sometimes vicarious

religion is bound up with a national identity, and this connection can have deep historical roots. But shifts can happen very quickly. The astonishingly fast shift in Ireland is a case in point. It suffices to consider the two referenda on abortion to see the ambivalent feelings in Irish society regarding the Catholic Church.

Whether this concept can be applied to some forms of Islam or Judaism might depend again on the context. When I first spoke of believing without belonging, it was necessary to turn the expression around to discuss the case of Judaism because for many Jewish people religious practice is more important than belief—some scholars therefore spoke of belonging without believing. There was a similar problem in Nordic countries. The majority of the population there is Lutheran and so has a different concept of church membership from Anglicans. Nordic ecclesiology fits the idea of vicarious religion very well, and thus you can observe relatively high membership numbers both there and in Germany. Church taxes in these countries are also a good indicator of vicarious religion. Although it is true that fewer people pay it than used to be the case, the number of those who do pay remains significant. Why would people pay for something they do not regularly use? It is not an insignificant amount of money, and it is very easy to opt out; there is no stigma to leaving. It seems, however, that people have very good reasons to continue to support the church.

Whether or not ideas like vicarious religion resonate tells you a lot about a society. To what extent the concept of vicarious religion can be transposed to a different dynamic of church life that lacks a historical link to a territory is an empirical question. I think that the scope of such transposition would be limited, but I would be very interested to know if it might apply to some aspects of Islam. Unfortunately, I do not know enough about Islam to answer that.

11 *In comparison to the situation of the mainstream Christian churches in Europe, what do we know about believing without belonging and vicarious religion among other religious groups in Europe?*

12 Personally, I do not think that the idea of vicarious religion can be applied to religious minorities in the European context. For me, it does not work because it is very much about legacy, history, and culture. Minorities never behave like majorities. Whereas a majority can afford to believe without belonging or to behave vicariously, knowing that the historical church is going to be there, a minority cannot do this. Minorities tend to be more proactive because if they are not so, they will disappear. But the fact that minorities are different from majorities is not new. If you look at the Catholic minority and the free churches in Britain, they have always had a more active core. Some of the older Protestant minorities, like the Methodists or the Presbyterians, are seriously eroded now, but the new minorities—Pentecostals, free churches, Afro-Caribbean churches—work hard.

Still, it can be the case that if the majority cease to be sufficiently active, their church too will no longer be able to sustain itself. This leads to some interesting questions about how many people it takes to sustain a religious denomination. Of course, it is not only a question of numbers: it all depends on who these people are, on whether they are influential people or not. And you could ask all sorts of questions, such as whether they are women or men. It is quite clear that women often sustain religions on behalf of wider societies. Religion is women's work in many ways. Not officially, but in practice: it is a gender question!

13   *In recent publications, you have stated that secularization has led to a decrease in religious knowledge and to the loss of religious vocabulary even though the public discussion of religious topics is rising. Could you elaborate on this issue?*

14   The dilemma in which we find ourselves is this: on the one hand, we are less and less knowledgeable about religion—partly because of secularization, although it is not always true that secular people have little knowledge of these matters—while, on the other hand, we are faced with important questions regarding fairness. What should we respect? Where do we draw the line? To complicate things, these discussions play out in a world in which the association between religion and violence is widespread even though the causal relationship is dubious. These are complex issues, and it would be foolish to think we can find easy answers. So we need to have a sophisticated and informed debate; unfortunately, we are not doing very well at the moment.

To improve the quality of the discussion, we need to involve people who are sensitive to these issues and care for the common good, whether individually, in their communities, in their countries, or in their workplaces. One result that came out of my work with the International Panel on Social Progress is the importance of what we call street-level ecumenism, which is simply the capacity of everyday people to get along with one another in their everyday lives.[1] Street-level ecumenism is at least as important as interfaith dialogue at the elite level if not more important: the everyday interactions of families, children, and young people are really the key. Nicola Madge published a very nice study entitled *Youth on Religion* about young people talking about religion in three different multicultural communities, two in London and one in Bradford in West Yorkshire.[2] I found this study extremely refreshing because these young people were really at ease with diversity. Some of them mentioned that they do not like it when, in the classroom, the teacher shows no understanding of the diversity *within* a faith community. Religious education was an interesting topic: pupils valued the subject, but they would always express dissatisfaction regarding how it was taught in their schools. Very likely it was taught by someone was not a specialist or fully trained. We need outstanding teachers of religious education, teachers who can be change makers.

15   *In light of what you have said, what do we need to change in the way we talk about and teach religion?*

16   You need guidelines to make sure that certain basic issues are covered, but you also need to build on the experience of the children in the class. I feel passionately about religious education; I think that children are entitled to it. It must be in the curriculum; it must be properly resourced; and it must be taught by properly trained teachers who want to contribute to a robust democracy. It is a subject that cannot be tucked away on a Friday afternoon in a stuffy classroom and canceled when something more important happens. It has to have a status that is acknowledged and underlined by everybody in the school; a charismatic teacher can do a lot but infinitely more if he or she has the backing of senior management. If we fail on that, we are setting ourselves up for a more difficult time ahead.

17   I also think that every scholar working within academia or every teacher more generally, indeed anybody who is engaged in public speaking—and that includes numerous people in religious organizations—should make huge efforts to be accurate. For example, when it comes to Islam and you ask someone how many Muslims live in

their country, the answer is often a ridiculous exaggeration. This is not only unhelpful, but dangerous.

18 *Besides getting our facts straight, we also need to find terms to frame our analysis. Yet names and terms are often related to normative ideas and concepts of a specific religion. How should we, as scholars of religion, deal with this issue?*

19 It is difficult, but you have to start somewhere. You have to be very conscious of the baggage you bring, of the indirect messages you might convey. Most people know that I am involved in the Church of England, which is my affair, but I know perfectly well that this involvement informs what I think and feel. This is why I get very irritated when my secular colleagues assume that they come with no baggage; in fact, they bring just as much baggage as I do, but it is different baggage. We need to acknowledge what we bring, and only when we do can a constructive debate begin, not by denying that a certain concept is related to a particular religion—of course it is—but by interrogating it. Where did it come from? Why might it be helpful or why not? But we have to begin somewhere; we cannot just stay in a state of indecision that does not even allow us to begin the debate. Let everybody who participates bring their contributions but knowing where they are coming from and where there might be a direct or indirect influence. And I am caught short all the time: I make an assumption and discover, »Oh goodness, not everybody thinks that!« And it will keep happening; it is not something that you learn when you are twenty-five, and then it is settled. Senior scholars must keep on repeating: »What am I bringing into this discussion? Have I made an assumption that other people do not share? Should I be more careful next time?«

20 *There is an important lesson to be learned here. Thank you for your time and for your stimulating inputs, Professor Davie.*

21 The pleasure was mine. Thank you.

NOTES

1. See Davie, Grace et al. 2018. Religions and Social Progress: Critical Assessments and Creative Partnerships. In: *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel on Social Progress*, vol. 3. 641–76. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2. Madge, Nicola, Peter Hemming, and Kevin Stenson et al. 2014. *Youth on Religion: The Development, Negotiation and Impact of Faith and Non-faith Identity.* Hove: Routledge.

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