This article is my response to scholars who contributed to

‘Around Abby Day’s Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World’:

Christopher R. Cotter, Grace Davie, James A. Beckford, Sahila Chattoo, Mia Lövheim, Manuel A. Vásquez.

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Response to Comments by Abby Day

It is a great privilege to be in conversation with scholars who are so closely connected to my main research interests and who excel in their own areas. Their comments pertain to my book that arose from empirically based AHRC-funded doctoral work at Lancaster University between 2002 and 2006 and an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship to allow theoretical elaboration between 2007 and 2009 at the University of Sussex.

In response, I will restrict myself to five main points: (1) Davie—what about the marked differences between generations and the shifting middle ground? (2) Beckford—what of the place for forms of propositional belief that are unconnected to ‘belonging’? (3) Chattoo—what is the potential impact of the theory for scholars working across religious traditions, cultures, and geographical contexts? (4) Lövheim—how can the theory and model take better account of increasing mediation through print, electronic, and not least digital media in contemporary society? (5) Vásquez—what forms of relationality make the embodied belief in and experience of transcendence possible in time and space?

Beginning with Davie’s question about generational changes, I agree with her observations that much may be changing and will continue to change. While I was unconvinced by much of the believing-without-belonging thesis that emerged in the 1990s in both the UK and the US (Davie 1994; Warner 1993), I noticed later that Davie also found it insufficient and con­sequently developed her concept of ‘vicarious religion’ (see Davie 2007; Day 2015). This, too, has generational implications: will the idea of a church as a place of symbolic community travel well among generations who have not been socialized into it? I echo Davie’s questions about this in greater detail elsewhere, initially through an ESRC-funded project that permit­ted me to return to the original field to revisit that sample of the population first explored during my initial fieldwork between 2003 and 2005. The significant finding from my longi­tudinal study was that beliefs were generally stable and that when change occurred, it was always mediated by changes in social relationships. Considering patterns that show how the number of people choosing to say they have no religion is increasing, most markedly among young people, and that the oldest, most loyal cohort of churchgoers is dying and not being replaced (Day, forthcoming), I agree with Davies that the middle ground is shifting through generational decline.1

Young people were the focus of a network I created with Gordon Lynch, funded by the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme. Titled “Belief as Cultural Performance,” its goal was to establish a new framework for studying the religious and secular life-worlds of young people. One of the network’s key debates was around the idea of propositional belief, which leads me now to Beckford’s point: what of the propositional form of belief that does not necessarily link to belonging? Writing in an edited special issue composed of a wide-ranging theoretical intro­duction and contributions from six members of the network, Guest et al. (2013) report on how university-based student societies ‘police’ the beliefs held by their members through focusing on propositional belief. They also argue that propositional belief statements are predominantly

used in quantitative research. Those surveys do not always focus on the implication of identity and belonging, but rather on creedal or doctrinal statements.

My longitudinal follow-up study (Day 2013) was fruitful in that it allowed some further elaboration of what was meant by ‘propositional’, especially as I found that two of my young informants had been able to delineate clearly the kind of belief that was linked most strongly to a doctrine or to a form of truth claim. For example, one young man grieving the loss of his grandparents had been comforted by the church’s teaching about life after death. One could conclude, arguably, not only that he belonged to the church tradition, but also that the point of his belief in that doctrine was precisely its claim to a propositional form of truth. The same man also believed in the love of his family, finding that such emotional, embodied belief was a form of belonging. That realization led me to develop a wider typology of belief, showing the inter­relationship among propositional, felt (emotional-embodied), and performative modes.

Chattoo’s observations and questions resonate deeply in three main areas: disciplinary, geo­graphical, and governance. In 2008, as part of my ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship, I organized a study day with Simon Coleman for the British Sociological Association’s Sociology of Religion Study Group, inviting international scholars to consider “Broadening the Boundaries of Belief.” People attended internationally from a range of disciplines, including Religious Studies, Soci­ology, Anthropology, and International Development, with several contributing to our edited special issue of *Culture and Religion*, which was published in 2010. These articles mostly illus­trated that a problem with ‘belief’ emerges when it is treated ahistorically as a psychological and sometimes emotive state with little reference to the time and conditions that shape it. For example, Elizabeth Graveling (2010) discussed how those in international development view ‘religion’. Whereas many people accept complexity and contradiction as part of their everyday lives, those from the outside often make the mistake of trying to see religion as a separate sphere or group of activities.

In 2011, as part of an AHRC/ESRC Public Sector Placement Fellowship, I studied how the British Council produced and performed a program called “Belief in Dialogue.” This led me to post-revolution Egypt to discuss issues of belief and belonging with young people, mostly Mus­lim, many of whom had been affected by and involved with the recent events. Although many scholars have argued that belief is not a transferable concept, I found that it was rather more dis­cernible when seen through a multi-dimensional framework, both on the ground in Egypt and a little later when I hosted a three-day conference at the University of Kent for young people based in Egypt, Tunisia, and the UK. That symposium incorporated scholarship from a broad range of disciplines and countries, all linked by the symposium’s theme: “What does it mean to believe?” It meant, I concluded, much the same to someone in Egypt as to someone in North Yorkshire. While the content may differ, what mattered was the legitimacy of the source in whom the belief was entrusted. Revolution, after all, occurs when the legitimacy of the ruling power fails.

Another geographical and disciplinary extension was a collaboration (Voas and Day 2007) to apply my ethnic-natal-aspirational typology to interrogate further the European Social Sur­vey and illuminate the large section of the UK population that is neither actively religious nor non-religious. David Voas (2009) was able to use my typology to analyze a similar pat­tern in the wider European population. The conclusion we reached for Britons (Voas and Day 2007: 10) was, almost exactly, the finding that Voas reached with the larger European data (Voas 2009: 164). Another extension to my work was Ingrid Storm’s PhD dissertation and related paper (2011) in which she applied my concept of ‘ethnic nominalism’ to explore levels of nationalistic identities, using large quantitative data sets. Lois Lee (2015) has adopted many of my questions to explore non-religion in London, finding that the ‘secular’ category is both substantial and significant. 18 n An Author Meets Her Critics

The findings also gained traction in the policy domain when I was appointed in 2008 to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Academic Advisory Board to advise on questions concern­ing Ethnicity, Identity, Language, and Religion on the 2011 census. As the only member present without a background in quantitative research, my questions probed issues relating to interpre­tation, change, nuance, and assumptions in relation to the questions and categories. Along with several others in the broader consultation, I proposed two changes that were adopted for the 2011 census. Findings from my research, discussed above, showed a clear association between the idea of ethnicity and religion among some ethnic Christian nominalists. As a result of our arguments, the question on religion was moved away from a question about ethnicity, allowing respondents to consider the questions separately. Another major finding from my study was that those who said they had no religion were often just as guided by beliefs and values, albeit non-religious, as those who self-identified as religious. It was therefore preferable, I argued, that one potential response to the question “What is your religion?” was changed from “none,” signi­fying absence, to “no religion,” which suggested more of a substantial category.

One of my other recommendations, related to Lövheim’s point above, was not followed through. This concerned the skewed—and often offensive—way that the popular press some­times communicates census results with scaremongering headlines about the apparent growth in numbers of immigrants and foreign-born people. I would like to see the ONS take a more vigorous stand in educating the wider public and responding to often misleading and damaging information. As Lövheim has stated, religion and belief are mediated, and the role of traditional and social media cannot be ignored. To that end, I have begun a new role as Research Director of the Religion Media Centre Research Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London.

My earlier work was, as Vásquez has noted, perhaps exclusive to a fault with its emphasis on human actors, even if in many cases those humans were the presences of deceased relatives. That weakness in my own work was partly filled vicariously through working with other people. For example, one such actant may be music. Daniel Nilsson DeHanas (2013), a member of the “Belief as Cultural Performance” network, researched how young British Jamaican men in London engage with hip hop and particularly with one of its sub-genres, gospel rap. Through interviewing young rappers, DeHanas discovered the rich language of God and religious belief in their lyrics and the processes by which the young men learned to believe in certain proposi­tions, applying their own ‘sensibilities’ of what was authentic.

Part of the challenge facing scholars who want to extend their empirical and theoretical rep­ertoire is methodological. It would be several years before I engaged in a deep ethnography (Day, forthcoming) where I became immersed in the daily religious lives of a group of people. This was not, as was my earlier work, related to self-identification but rather to the lived experi­ence of a certain generation of women. Here, the solid, unmoving, non-human presence of their church building was one of the most significant ‘actants’ in their lives.

In an effort to develop the complexities, rather than the binaries, of contemporary beliefs, I have worked with several colleagues to probe the complexity of the secular-sacred divide and the space in between (Day et al. 2013). I suggested then that belief may act as the hinge that allows people to move between sacred and secular. As N. J. Demerath (2013: 203) points out in the collection, such divisions are linked in constant “dialectical oscillation.”

Like Lindquist and Coleman (2008), I conclude that research within the sociology of religion needs to conceptualize belief in more diverse and complex ways. I thank the contributors and most particularly the editor of this review, Christopher Cotter, for bringing us together in con­versation in ways that will help us all move forward.

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n **NOTES**

1. For an up-to-date overview of the patterns of decline and the implications for the Anglican Church, see Collins-Mayo (2015).

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