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EXTRAORDINARY RELATIONALITY:
ANCESTOR VENERATION IN LATE EURO-
AMERICAN SOCIETY

Abstract

Following a ten-year intergenerational study, my research is currently focused on one cohort I have termed ‘Generation A’: female, Christian and born in the 1920s and 30s, everywhere regarded as the back-bone of mainstream Christianity and everywhere dying and not being replaced in the church. I identify here a belief in ancestor veneration, similar to ancestor worship, that functions to preserve social norms and is particularly experienced and transmitted by Generation A through mainstream and ethnic, natal and aspirational Christian nominalism.

Keywords: belief, ancestor, women, Christian, nominalism

Introduction

In this article I will explore, primarily with one longitudinal case study and cross-cultural comparisons, why non-religious people may believe in life after death, how others are socialized into such beliefs and why they may prevail and even increase in late modern, apparently secular, societies. Large-scale surveys support the view that belief in life after death is a common phenomenon: Haraldsson’s 2006 paper based on analysis of the European Values Survey, for example, showed that a majority of those surveyed from Nordic counties believe in life after death and 43 per cent in reincarnation. David Voas has discussed at recent conferences evidence that shows such beliefs are increasing while beliefs in God are decreasing. Greeley observed in 1987 that people in the USA and Britain often reported that they felt the presence of their deceased loved ones. Beyond belief, there are ritual practices that indicate belief in life after death. In Norway, the practice of lighting candles on graves increased from 40 per cent in 1991 to 51 per cent in 1998 and 59 per cent in 2008 (Aagedal forthcoming).

Such surveys are useful but only ask broad questions such as believing in the afterlife or reincarnation, and may not reveal the nature of what those beliefs are, but it would not surprise me to find that most concerned the experience of sensing deceased loved ones. I will propose that belief in life after death arises from the experience of
extraordinary relationality and can be understood as a late modern Euro-American form of ancestor veneration that serves to preserve social relations and, particularly, patriarchal gender norms.

The article is structured along two points: first, after-life beliefs are not necessarily religious. Their existence or even proliferation does not indicate a persistence of residual religious belief or re-enchantment, nor are they best understood as supernatural, paranormal or other cognate terms. They belong in a different category: I suggest ‘extraordinary relationality’; second the belief and practice of afterlife beliefs is a form of ancestor veneration that sustains and reproduces social relations and in particular gendered social norms and structures.

Method
First, a note on method. During longitudinal research\(^1\) carried out in rural and semi-urban communities in northern England over the past ten years I have discussed people’s beliefs with them without asking overtly religious questions (Day 2009), such as «do you believe in God?» or «do you go to church?» My purpose has been to explore beliefs and identities by opening up new, discursive spaces in which people could discuss their beliefs without being prompted by restrictive vocabulary imposed by a theoretical religion-belief-supernatural connection. Most of my informants discussed beliefs in terms of their everyday social experiences, leading me to describe their accounts as belief narratives rooted in specific social contexts and relationships. In this article, I theorize and discuss the implications of my observations and findings, particularly concerning the breaking of the religion—belief—supernatural connection and the subsequent relocation of the transcendent from a spatial supra-mundane to the social and temporal, where the every-day and ever-after co-exist.

It was there, in the field, confronted by what I first perceived to be irreconcilable contradictions that I began to learn about belief. Only in practice, through unraveling the complexity of what informants told me relative to what I had been taught about belief did I realize that what I perceived as contradiction was no more than a mismatch between emic and etic perspectives. Contradictions that are self-evident to researchers are not often remarked upon by their informants. Researchers may make the mistake of assuming informants simply have not yet perceived the obvious glaring mismatch between, for example what they say and what they do, or between what is assumed they must believe and what they say they believe. Perhaps, indeed, the anthropological analytical task begins when researchers perceive contradiction. What may be seen as contradictory is perhaps only a clash between what the researcher expected to find and what was found.

Although I deliberately did not ask people about uncanny or supernatural experiences, such experiences were very common. Informants described these as arising in everyday, mostly domestic, contexts: a third of informants reported something of this sort, irrespective of age and social class. Significantly, amongst my 68 interviewees, more women than men reported supernatural experiences (39 per cent vs. 25 per cent)
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and discussed those experiences differently. I will return to this point shortly. First, I will attend to some issues that tend to obscure analysis.

Non-religious belief in life after death

Belief in life after death is not necessarily religious, although the connection between the two was reinforced sociologically in the 19th century by E.B. Tylor (1958 [1871]). He developed theories of animism - the belief that everything, material and non-material, has a soul – and concluded that all such beliefs were incorrect, child-like, and something out of which people would grow as societies develop. Writing as he did more than a century ago, Tylor might now be surprised to find the continuing presence of animist beliefs within contemporary societies, sometimes grouped under larger rubrics of New Age, Pagan, and Neo-Pagan. Indeed, the growth of those movements during the last 20 years might further surprise him. Nevertheless, Tylor’s classic definition of religion as «a belief in spirits» remains dominant within the sociology of religion. As Lambek (2002) noted: «Tylor’s theories ‘remain congenial to many contemporary thinkers and [are] indeed almost a part of western “common sense” on the subject» (2002: 21).

The tendency to link belief in life after death with religion has, indeed, become part of a common sense within certain sections of the sociology of religion. For example, Clark decided (1982) in his study of a Yorkshire fishing village to «include in the category of religion, at least for purposes of argument, numerous examples of popular belief, local custom, superstition and ritual» (1982: viii). By casting his net so widely he missed an opportunity to explore what may be more explicitly acts of sociality than ‘folk religion’. Many other scholars in the field also apply the label ‘religious’ to such experiences and describe them variously as common, folk, invisible, or implicit religion (Davie 1994; Hardy 1979; Hay 1982; Luckmann 1967; Sutcliffe 2004). Some scholars claim there is an enduring religiosity or ‘common religion’ on the basis of surveys where people say that they believe in fate, the paranormal, and so on, but what those surveys do not reveal is what such phenomena and concepts mean to people. Even those studies that claim people are seeking spirituality rather than religion (Roof 1993) may be missing the point that such terms are often a cover, or proxy, for sociality. Rice (2003) notes that religious scholars generally ask questions about supernatural beliefs that are already embedded in religious language. This was a problem I particularly tried to avoid by not asking questions loaded with religious vocabulary (Day 2008).

The epistemological problem in habitually linking religion to beliefs in life after death is significant for it creates an illusion of knowledge about phenomena that requires a different framework. For example, the UK-based Alistair Hardy Trust collects (Hardy 1979; Hay 1982) stories about people’s experiences in response to the question: ‘Have you ever been aware of a presence or a power which is different from your everyday self?’ The researchers have analyzed how people explained those experiences and found that most people did not describe such experiences as ‘religious’ or
`spiritual’ other than the occasions that explicitly concerned the named experience of God. Most other experiences: «premonitions, encounters with the dead and encounters with an evil presence were often ruled out of the category religious» (Hay 1982: 152). And yet, Hay concludes (1982): ‘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’ (1982: 162–163). This ‘shorthand’ obscures the meaning of those beliefs to people who reported such experiences and misrepresents vernacular belief. I will now turn to some examples of non-religious belief in life after death that arose in my work.

Patrick², a 49-year-old professional, said he was an atheist:

I do not believe that there is any all-powerful force that is organizing human destiny. I think that is utterly ridiculous.

While I was initially confident in describing people like Patrick as non-religious and secular, he and others confounded those tightly-bounded categories by their beliefs in spirits. Patrick told me at length how he had been emotionally close to his mother and distant from his father. Patrick had never married and although he had many friends, he felt emotionally devastated and alone when his mother died. As her funeral approached he began to feel so distressed that he was convinced he would not be able to attend. Then, a few hours before the funeral, he was alone at home when what he described as a profound sense of peace and comfort enveloped him. This, he explained to me, was the spirit of his deceased mother. He was convinced that her spirit had come to strengthen him at her funeral, and he was able to attend the ceremony in relative ease. Patrick did not find it contradictory that he was an atheist who had come to believe in what he described as «the human spirit.» That spirit, he said, explains why people sense their deceased relatives, or have experiences of telepathy.

Another of my informants, Becca, was a 28-year-old education consultant who was adamantly anti-religious and anti-God, saying she had been «weaned off» God some years earlier. She described extraordinary experiences involving both her deceased brother and her deceased grandmother. Her grandmother had believed strongly in an afterlife and had promised her daughter and granddaughter that she would return after she had died and they would know this through experiencing the smell of her favorite flower, violets. Sometime after her grandmother’s death, and following the death of her brother, Becca smelled violets and felt comforted that her grandmother was present and that her prediction about the afterlife had come true. She and her mother discussed this at length and supported that interpretation. Becca also experienced the presence of her brother through a sense of him watching over her and through messages she believed he was transmitting during thunderstorms. Once again, she told me, her mother agreed with her and supported her interpretation.

Briony, 19, a student, also told me she did not believe in God and was not religious, yet she sensed the presence of her grandmother when she awoke in hospital after a suicide attempt. She continued to have the sense that her grandmother was caring for her. Andrew, a martial arts instructor in his early 20s, said he was not religious and did
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not believe in God. He told me, «I always jog past my grandfather’s grave, and I always stop to talk to him».

These beliefs are neither religious nor reflect abstract ideas about heaven, hell or the nature of mind, spirit or matter. They tend to be deeply rooted in lived, experienced — although extraordinary - relationality. For most of my informants, after-life beliefs come from the experience of sensing the presence of their deceased relatives, supported by social relationships particularly with mothers and grandmothers, to believe this is so.

Monotheistic religions do not encourage belief in after life communication: what happens when we are dead is the business of God, not mortals. But, in any case, the Church’s view would not matter to my informants. What is really important to the people who sense the presence of their departed beloved is the here and now – the smell of their favourite flower, the murmur in the breeze of something that sounds like their voice, and the incomparable sense of their peaceful, loving presence. In other words, it is the continued, eternal relationship of belonging that is being sought and retained. There is no room for God when grandma comes home to visit.

People who experience extraordinary relationality do not use terms like secular, post secular, modernity, post modernity, religion, paranormal, spiritual, or supernatural. For the most part, they call those experiences Grandma, Grandpa, Mum or Dad. Further, those experiences are not immaterial, airy fairy, distant, or remote. Loved ones’ presences, in contrast, were materially present, located and embodied for adherents through sight, smell, and sound and sometimes mediated through non-human physical phenomena. There is recent work on the materiality of religion and belief (see, for example, Morgan 2010) which demonstrates how people experience religion through their felt, embodied senses, yet little attention is paid to how non-religious people experience extraordinary phenomena related to life after death.

The sensuous social supernatural

The non-religious experience of the after-life was experienced by my informants through their senses. I briefly review some examples below:

Touch: Viv, 54, works as a technician in a hospital. After her mother died when Viv was 13 she would often visit her mother’s room where she had died. She said: «I used to go and, well, just sit on the bed where she died. Lay there, exactly where it was and everything» and it was there, she said, she felt close to her. Her closeness was not a conceptual idea or a lingering memory: she felt it by physically pressing her body against the space where her mother had slept and where she had died.

Smell: Viv, mentioned above, told me she smelled hyacinths, her mother’s favorite flower, just before her aunt died. This was her deceased mother trying to tell her of the impending event, she said. Becca, mentioned earlier, referred to the grandmother’s promise to return with the smell of violets.

Sight: Kevin, 32, a manual worker who lives with his parents in a small town in the region, sensed the presence and saw a shape he identified as his dead grandmother. Gary, 52, a lorry driver, told me about an experience he described as «a near-death
experience». It occurred when he was about 12 years old and had fallen off his bike and suffered a concussion. He awoke in somebody’s farmhouse and found himself lying on a sofa looking out of a window at his deceased grandparents, and their dogs who were «looking through the window at me».

*Symbolic sightings:* Other people described phenomena that they assumed to be a sign or symbol of their deceased relatives. Marge, 75, described an event at the funeral for her grandson who had died at the age of 23. At the funeral, Marge recounted: «We stood outside and it was the most glorious sunset that I have ever seen. And never, never, seen that anymore». She said that she and her daughter had agreed that had said it was her grandson communicating his presence. She then said she was also sure that when she sees the North Star, that it is her grandson.

Having, I hope, made sufficiently now the point that beliefs in spirits are not automatically religious, I will move onto the next section of my article. It is, I will argue, important to disconnect beliefs in spirits from religion in order to better understand their social function.

**After-life beliefs sustain and reproduce social norms and structures**

The main point to disconnecting belief in spirits from religion is to understand that what is being experienced and socialized is not spirituality or religion or belief in the supernatural but relationality. It is the relationship that continues, not the individual.

Long-standing anthropological studies reveal the wide-spread experience of worship and venerating deceased relatives. Most of the literature concerns non Euro-American places: Africa, Korea, China, and Japan, for example. Those studies reveal that the practice of conducting specific ancestor worship rituals and maintaining kin relationships have several social functions. Primarily, they maintain social cohesion through reinforcing social norms of respect and obedience; they secure and reinforce lineage and ethnic belonging; they reproduce claims to group identity and territory.

Of course, they are specifically culturally located, just as are perceptions of relationships with living kin. Cultural variations notwithstanding, I intend to explore how ancestor care, veneration, and relationality are also common in Euro-American countries in late modernity. Fortes’ (1987) summary of ancestor worship describes an ancestor in specific terms as «a named, dead forbear who has living descendants of a designated genealogical class representing his continued structural relevance (1987: 68).» Death alone does not confer status, but being a person important to the descendants does. Fortes says that African ancestor worship beliefs and practices have «a remarkably uniform structural framework» (1987: 66). That framework principally relates to a movement from death to a temporary place and then ultimately to a relocation of a post-death home. Part of the purpose of the ancestor journey is establishing the new (male) heir and head of the family or group unit. Ancestor worship is therefore, at first glance, an act of corporate lineage, but individual lineage is not, Fortes concludes, the main purpose because not all ancestors are equally venerated. It is those
ancestors who help create boundaries and expressions of belonging who are most important because «they are those who are exclusive to the worshipping group and therefore distinguish that group unequivocally from collateral and co-ordinate groups of a like sort» (Fortes 1987:67). The function of ancestor worship is therefore more than an act of sacralizing an individual’s memory; it is a reinforcement of social boundaries. Firth (1955) made a similar point in his study of ancestor worship where he describes it as a reflection of social hierarchy and norms on earth that serve to do more than merely reflect, but to act as a restatement of symbolic structures, such as morality. Its purpose is to reassure that the social structure, not the individual, continues.

The unchanging continuity of both the character and relationship is a deeply culturally located idea. In his study of the Eveny in Siberia, Vitebsky (2006) describes how deceased relatives are often experienced as dangerous spirits who return to harm or even kill their relatives. It was also noticeable in his account that the experience of sensing the deceased relative was always collective. As one woman recounted: ‘This man had been appearing in the dreams of all our relatives,’ she said, ‘they were all having the same dream (2006: 295).’ In my study, the phenomena of communicating with deceased relatives were also experienced and reported in accordance with the structure of existing relationships and discussed at length with others.

**What is the ‘belief’ of after-life belief?**

One of the problems of understanding after-life beliefs here is the difficult question of what we are assuming people believe in. Belief is the word often appended to experiences scholars describe as, variously, paranormal, supernatural, super-natural, uncanny, or metaphysical. Some experiences are described as ‘unbelievable’. People often remark that they ‘couldn’t believe it’. Others say they believe in ghosts, or God, or fairies at the bottom of the garden, or a host of other phenomena.

Only by expanding what scholars understand about belief does it become clear that much of belief is related not to intellectualist statements but to emotional, embodied relational experience. I have given belief sufficient treatment elsewhere (Day 2011) where I show that belief is not only about creedal, propositional, truth-based claims but about inter-subjective religious or non-religious faith and trust in values and people. The construction of a ‘propositional’ style of belief often ignores that relational emotional, social element and has therefore often been criticized for being an individualistic, universalizing way of looking at belief. Ruel (1982) suggests that «A distinction made frequently today is between “belief in” (trust in) and “belief that” (propositional belief)» (1982: 103). The sensuous, social, beliefs I have uncovered require a new conceptual framework beyond Ruel’s proposal. I suggest we move from studying only the content of belief to its source, salience and function and where and when it was experienced or practiced. I have therefore argued for a multi-dimensional interpretive framework that is both holistic and organic, taking account of content, source, practice, salience, function, time, and place.
Understood multi-dimensionally, beliefs are more about sociality than facts or truth. The importance of social relations and the way that paranormal beliefs upheld those relations was the subject of Evans-Pritchard’s (1976 [1937]) study of Azande witchcraft belief. He argued that while an ‘intellectualist’ outsider may perceive some of the Azande witchcraft beliefs as contradictory, when understood in terms of the function that belief performed there was no contradiction. What mattered to them was the preservation of social and kin relations.

Hallowell’s (1960) fieldwork on the Ojibwa, an indigenous North American people, concluded that their lives and understanding centered on relationships with persons, both human and other-than-human. Binary categories of natural/supernatural or normal/paranormal were not part of their worldview. More recently, Harvey (2005) provides an excellent overview of those and related theories and continues the theme of continuing relationships with humans and those other-than-human.

For my informants there was no such struggle or concern about slippage of terms and no obvious distinction between the everyday and the ever after. Transcendence was shifted to an everyday, human, social scale, relocating a transcendent ‘other’ to an everyday experience of the ever-after.

Further, these experience and duties are not gender neutral. The experience of sensing deceased relatives and the experience of the relatives being sensed tended to center on women. We should not allow us to be distracted by that fact or fall into the usual problem of thinking women are more religious than men. Religion certainly tends to attract more women than men in Euro-American countries, and older women more than younger (Walter and Davie 1998). But, I argue that women’s experiences cannot be understood simply through a lens of religiosity but of belonging (Day 2008). Further, it is a kind of relational belonging the conforms with the roles generally accorded to them in Euro-American society: belief in continuing relationships is a form of care for kin and care for kin is, as we know, predominantly women’s work.

As described earlier, during my research I found that one third of my informants reported feeling, or occasionally seeing, a presence of something outside themselves. Most people who reported those experiences were also those who self-identified as non-religious or spiritual and several were confirmed atheists. This disrupted again the apparent connection between religion and belief in spirits. These presences were usually not disembodied or impersonal ghosts or spirits, but deceased loved ones, particularly grandmothers. While the experience was extraordinary, it was in other ways oddly not paranormal, but often ‘normal’ and ‘every day’ and usually, informants reported, shared with others who had either experienced the same direct experience with them or at least helped interpret the event as it was retold or performed, the sociability of these experiences was reinforced for me. They appeared to perform two main personal functions: confirmatory and comforting:

**Confirmatory**

When I first interviewed Gemma, she was 14 and not religious. When I interviewed her again, at 20, she was still not religious, but she did think there was something that hap-
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pened to people after they died. She said: «I don’t really believe in heaven, like you
know that whole...stupid little story that everyone talks about like living in the clouds
and everyone’s around having fun and stuff (laughs). I think that’s totally like silly. But
I do believe like there is a bit of an afterlife and that your soul will live on forever.»

When I asked her why she thought so, she described an event where she had seen a
ghost in the house next to her grandmother. I think the timing of that experience is
important for her and should be put into context. Gemma’s father had left home and
she was distressed that she did not see him very often. She felt abandoned, and uncared
for. Her grandmother, in contrast, was a caring person and demonstrated part of that
care through helping to look after a neighbor. When the neighbor died, the grandmother
continued to care for her by helping move out her contents and cleaning her house.
Gemma went over to help her grandmother clean the house for the new people moving
in. She went upstairs to clean the bathroom and suddenly, in her words, saw the dead
woman as a ghost, leaning over, cleaning her bath, just as she did when she was alive
Gemma added: «Like it was her castle and it was always spick and span.» She was so
shocked she said «I had loads of towels in my hand and I threw them on the floor cos
I was so scared and ran down and get my nana». She didn’t know how to explain what
she had seen. When she told her friends they refused to believe her. However, she told
me, «my nana believed me» and she never doubted it since. Her grandmother’s confir-
mation of the experience affirmed her sense of herself with the self, as always being
enfolded in the self of her grandmother and perhaps even the neighbor.

Above, I spoke briefly about Becca and Briony who also experienced the sense of
their deceased grandmother. In those examples, grandmothers reinforced the impor-
tance of continuing, social, caring relationships by confirming their granddaughters’
experiences, and perhaps desire, for continuities. This also fulfilled a personal function
of comforting the bereaved.

Comforting

Many people report that the experience of their deceased relatives is comforting, not
frightening or disturbing. Becca, just discussed, believed her personal romantic rela-
tionships are unreliable, marked by difficulties and out of her control but are being
managed by something else, probably her dead grandmother. Perhaps, she said, it is the
spirit of her deceased grandmother who is helping her, describing this as «something,
like a guardian angel, that guides people to meet».

Another of my young informants, Briony, 19, said she thought that she is destined
to meet certain people, and feels protected by her deceased grandmother, «sort of there,
and sort of looking». She first sensed the presence of her grandmother when she awoke
in hospital after a suicide attempt. Her motive to kill herself was prompted by her
mother’s remarriage to an unsympathetic partner and her feeling of being neglected
and abandoned. She says she likes to think her grandmother is watching over her, not
so much controlling what happens to her but «regulating in a sense» to ensure that not
too much harm or disappointment comes her way.
When people say they believe in the afterlife, I therefore conclude that they believe in continuing important relationships. Their reports are rarely about impersonal, distant phenomena, but about people, particularly mothers and grandmothers, who care for them. It certainly does not matter whether they are religious or not: The caring work here is to preserve kinship and close contact relations. This is a form of spiritual labor.

Part of that labor is the job of keeping the ancestors alive, and present. That the narratives informants share with me had a rehearsed quality was informative: these are stories they tell and re-tell, passing on to others and to future generations the memories and active presence of their loved ones. I have discussed in more detail elsewhere my experiences in interview situations (Day 2011) that first led me to believe that the way informants interposed and then led the discussion were akin to a ritual where they were going, and taking me, on a narrative journey. These I described as ‘performative belief rituals’ to capture the transformative sense of movement from one state of an informal, researcher-led social experience to one where the informant took over the interview to tell the detailed story of their ancestor experience.

Gendered labor

The work of sustaining relationships with the deceased is a form of care, of gendered labor that exists outside formal hierarchies of religious power. Religious power and authority has been and generally remains a male domain so this should not surprise us. My own study of older women in the UK’s national church, the Church of England, is revealing that women’s roles in that institution conform to their roles in wider social institutions.

In the same way, belief in the after-life reflects societal and gender norms. Belief in the continuing ancestor relationship demands something from the believers as they work to sustain the relationships with the deceased. In a study of hobby-genealogists in eastern England, Cannell (2011) studied people who engaged in charting their life histories and concluded that tracing one’s past through ancestors was not the self-oriented act it is often portrayed as, but a means of caring for the dead.

In caring for deceased relatives people may care for their graves, light a candle in their memory (a gendered practice) or talk about their experiences of sensing their presence. It is nonetheless continuing the relationship and this tends to be women’s work. Particularly as a form of ancestor care, it is emotional work and, like most emotional work, it is usually assigned to women. Aagedal (forthcoming) also found in his study that the practice of lighting candles by graves was performed mostly by women. Taking, as I do, that faith often involves emotional work I would argue, following, for example, West and Zimmerman (1987), that processes of social differentiation have assigned faith and other emotional labors to women. That women are responsible for society’s moral health or downfall is a familiar idea argued Brown (2011). This relates to a gendered, Christian discourse that located piety in femininity from about 1800 to 1960. He argued that the age of ‘discursive Christianity’ collapsed during the 1960s when women stopped subscribing to that discourse and ‘the nature of femininity
changed fundamentally’ (Brown 2001:159). While I think Brown has a powerful argument about the nature of discursive Christianity, I am not convinced that the nature of femininity has changed fundamentally for all women. Women do still look after their husbands and children, even while working outside the home. They also, as I am showing, look after them even when they have died.

Hochschild and Machung’s (1989) second shift argument illustrates that women in dual-income households still perform the majority of domestic labor, as well as care duties for their immediate and extended families. This apparently ‘natural’ scheme of gender relations can be supported through what Walby (1990) describes as ‘discursive patriarchy’, being a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. Her analysis focuses on how patriarchy can be understood best through exploring structures of production, paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality, and cultural institutions, to which I add, religion and the family. This is a case of how religion may function to support wider social norms. Ancestor connections can also reassure that family ties continue even when they have been disrupted elsewhere. As Aagedal found in his study about candle-lighting:

It is possible to interpret candle lighting on graves as a rite of social integration; maintaining a grave and lighting candles on it may be a matter of satisfying a moral expectation of complying with local customs and preserving the honour of family and friends (Aagedal forthcoming).

As women mainly perform the kind of labor that upholds relationality and sociality, it may be argued that in times of late modernity and all the anxieties that it produces it is more important than ever to continue long term relationships. Those relationships may offset other forms of disintegrating relationships in later modernity as, to name a few, families scatter, work becomes more virtual and globalized and nation states become more diffuse.

Conclusion

As a tentative proposition, tentative because we lack cross-cultural, nuanced data, I will suggest that maintaining ancestor connections may in late modern Euro-American societies perform similar functions as we see elsewhere. They may reinforce territorial and genealogical rights to help sort out the question of who belongs, reflecting anxieties about who counts as ‘us’ and ‘them’. I have discussed in depth elsewhere (Day 2011) that otherwise non-religious people may sometimes self-identify as Christian. This ‘Christian nominalism’, or marginal affiliation, expresses Christian ‘ethnic’, ‘natal’, and ‘aspirational’ identities. Most otherwise non-religious people who self-identify as religious do so to perform those nominalist identities and often justify them with reference to their birthplaces and the religiosity of their grandparents. Using European Social Survey data David Voas and I argued that the form of nominalist Christianity I had identified characterized the British landscape (Voas and Day 2007) and Voas (2009) later argued that my same analysis of nominalist adherence fit the wider European picture. That analysis may help explain why apparently non-religious people
perform apparently religious acts. Aagedal (forthcoming), for example, found that the practice of lighting candles was greatest amongst those I would describe as ‘nominalist’ Christians.

Further research is necessary to explore aspects of the purpose and function of ancestor veneration in late modern Euro-American contexts. Further research is also necessary to test the feasibility of the term ‘extraordinary relationality’, which seems to capture the everyday experiences people reported much better than supernatural or paranormal. The terminology in this article was refined following generous feedback received after presenting a draft of this article to the Nordic Conference for Sociology of Religion, Umeå University, Sweden, August 15–17, 2012.

Notes
1 I gratefully acknowledge the AHRC and the ESRC for funding.
2 All real names have been changed.

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