

## Believing in Grace Davie: what does she bring to an understanding of mission in Europe?



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*“Religion in Europe is like an iceberg: most of what is interesting is under the water and out of view.”*

Grace Davie (2003b)

Grace Davie is a British sociologist of religion who has explored the relationship between religion and modernity. I begin this essay by introducing Dr Davie’s work and outlining her contribution to the field over the last twenty years, including her well-known phrase ‘believing without belonging’ as well as more recent developments. In Section II, I focus on Dr Davie’s concept of ‘vicarious religion,’ and explain why it can be considered her most significant contribution towards understanding the place of religion in contemporary Europe. In Section III, I engage with this concept, considering its relative strengths and weaknesses as a methodological tool. Section IV demonstrates the usefulness of vicarious religion by considering it in relation to Christian mission in Europe. Section V then identifies some problems and weaknesses in its application to this context.

### Section I – Introducing the Work and Key Concepts of Dr Grace Davie

Dr Davie is a highly respected professor of sociology, responsible for either introducing or popularizing a number of key developments in the sociology of religion in Europe. Davie has a doctorate from the London School of Economics and is a Lay Canon of the Diocese of Europe. She has lectured and researched in Britain, western Europe and the United States, and has published books and articles covering each of these areas. As the scope of her research has broadened from Liverpool, to Britain, to western Europe, to global religion, her methodological toolbox has expanded accordingly.

#### (1) *Believing without Belonging*

In 1994, Davie published *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, substantially developing ideas that she had introduced in a short article four years earlier (Davie 1990). As the book’s subtitle suggests, Davie found what she argued was a profound mismatch between religious values that people professed (‘believing’), and actual churchgoing and religious practice (‘belonging’). Whilst others had remarked on this disconnection, Davie researched, articulated and explained it most clearly and coined the memorable phrase ‘believing without belonging’ to describe it. It is perhaps for this concept that Davie is best known.<sup>1</sup> The book became a significant landmark for those trying to understand the contemporary role and status of religion in Britain.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Whilst initially popular as a term and as a concept, ‘believing without belonging’ has recently attracted a good deal of criticism for its lack of clarity or sharpness as an analytical tool. An example of its falling popularity comes from Voas and Crockett (2005, 24-25): “We suggest that the only form of believing without belonging that is as pervasive as Davie suggests is a vague willingness to suppose that ‘there’s something out there,’ accompanied by an unsurprising disinclination to spend any time and effort worshipping whatever that might be... ‘believing without belonging’ was an interesting idea, but it is time for the slogan to enter honourable retirement.” For her part, Davie (2006b, 33) “largely agree[s]” but “doubt[s] that it will be allowed to do so.”

<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, Davie reported the opposite phenomenon in various Scandinavian countries, where ‘belonging without believing’ is the norm (2006b, 25).

## **(2) Vicarious Religion**

Whilst Davie found believing without belonging “offered fruitful ways in which to understand the religious life of both Britain and other parts of Europe” (2006b, 22) it also had considerable limitations. In particular, it seemed more descriptive than explanatory, and it relied partly on statistical measurement of what is in many ways a more nebulous phenomenon. Acutely aware of these limitations herself, Davie’s work turned towards more qualitative and more subtle tools of analysis. Conscious that the contemporary religious scene in western Europe has undergone profound changes, Davie developed the concept of ‘vicarious religion’ to describe the new state of affairs. In her opinion, this concept “provides the key to understanding the present state of religiousness in Europe” (2007, 137).

In *Religion in Modern Europe – A Memory Mutates* (2000), Davie starts from her “convenient shorthand, [that] Europe believes but it does not belong” (2000a, 33) and finds it significant that “churches remain, however, significant players” within society (2000a, 38), performing a moral, spiritual and social role on behalf of the population, i.e. *vicariously*.<sup>3</sup> This specifically European phenomenon means that those who see secularization taking place throughout Europe may be misunderstanding and misinterpreting the signs of the times.<sup>4</sup> For Davie, ‘vicarious religion’ is “an innovative [and]... empirically useful approach to the notion of secularization” (2001, 111), and we will engage with this concept in much greater detail below.

## **(3) Other Developments**

Davie’s work is important for introducing these connected concepts of ‘believing without belonging’ and ‘vicarious religion,’ yet is also significant for two arguments she has helped establish together with other sociologists, most notably Peter Berger. She has (quite successfully) challenged the secularization thesis that sees dechristianization as an inevitable consequence of modernity; and has likewise challenged the thinking that saw European religion as somehow normative and other instances as ‘exceptions’ from the European norm. If anything, she argues, *Europe* is the exception in a global trend of sustained or increased religiosity.<sup>5</sup>

Davie’s work to date can be summarised thus: she has added very helpful terms to our sociological vocabulary; challenged the monolithic theory that is the secularization thesis; argued persuasively that there are multiple sociologies of religion (and indeed multiple modernities); and opened up new methodologies in what she once described as “an impossibly difficult field to research... [which] is not amenable to anything but the most subtle of methodologies” (2001, 108). Her work has gone some way towards bolstering what many have regarded a methodologically weak and under-researched field, the sociology of

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<sup>3</sup> A dictionary definition of vicarious is: “(loosely) not experienced personally but imagined through the experience of others; exercised, performed or suffered by one person or thing instead of another; filling the place of another” (Chambers Dictionary, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Steve Bruce is one of a number of sociologists continuing to argue that modernity necessarily leads to the demise of traditional religions such as Christianity, the central tenet of classical secularization theory. For Bruce, any attachment the public has to institutional religion is merely “a nostalgic fondness” (1996, 35). Peter Berger is one sociologist who prescribed to this theory until becoming convinced that evidence pointed to the contrary (see, for example, Berger 1999 for his restatement of his position). The secularization thesis has declined in popularity due to its perceived inability to explain the religious vitality of the United States and other parts of the modern world. One academic has gone so far as to claim that “the enormous amount of work in the study of religion in the last 30 years has simply destroyed that [secularization] thesis” (Professor Leslie Francis, quoted in Taylor 1999, 13), but the debate continues.

<sup>5</sup> For Davie’s work on ‘European exceptionalism,’ see her *Europe – The Exceptional Case* (London: DLT, 2002) and her summary of this material in “Is Europe an Exceptional Case?”, *International Review of Mission* 95, July/October 2006, pp.247-258.

religion.<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that Pellivert (2008, 25) notes that Davie's work is "widely acknowledged as a thorough and acute explanation of current changes [in European religion]."

## Section II – Vicarious Religion Explored

In this section, we focus on Davie's concept of 'vicarious religion,' explaining why it can be considered her most important contribution towards understanding the role of religion in contemporary Europe.

Davie (2000a, 59) herself defines vicarious religion as "the willingness of the population to delegate the religious sphere to the professional ministries of the state churches" and, moreover, Europeans are grateful that "churches perform, vicariously, a number of tasks on behalf of the population as a whole." At specific times, churches – or church leaders or church members – are "asked to articulate the sacred" on behalf of individuals, families or society as a whole. Whilst ordinary European citizens may not practise religion on a daily basis, they recognise its worth, and are "more than half aware that they might need to draw on [it] at crucial times in their individual or collective lives" (2002, 19).<sup>7</sup>

To support and clarify this concept, Davie gives a number of examples, such as the mourning and articulation of grief after Princess Diana died in 1996; after the terrorist attacks of September 2001; after the sinking of the Baltic ferry *Estonia* in 1994; and on a more regular basis the persistence of religious ceremonies such as funerals, weddings and, to a lesser extent, baptisms. At such times, people instinctively turn to the church, its officials, buildings, symbols and liturgy to help them understand and articulate the sacredness of what has happened.

Important aspects of this concept of vicarious religion are: that it is drawn upon by others on rare but special occasions; that in some sense the church has an obligation to perform its expected role as mediator of the sacred; and that the church 'ought' to persist so that it is able to provide such vicarious religion as is required. In some European countries, this (typically implicit) understanding of the societal role of the church means that the state may financially support or privilege the church to help it continue in the future: effectively, religion should be kept 'on hand' for when people want or need it. This understanding of religion in Europe has been echoed by other commentators such as Philip Jenkins, who quotes Grace Davie's ideas approvingly and who himself concludes that "institutional weakness is not necessarily the same as total religious apathy" (2007, 54) and that "in surprising ways, Christianity continues as a ghostly presence" (2007, 69) within European society.

Davie (1999, 79-80) acknowledges her debt to the work of French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger, who regards religion as a form of collective memory, passed on from one group or member of the community to another via a series of chains. Davie's insight was that churches can hold part of that collective memory vicariously (described as 'vicarious memory') for the community as a whole. Davie (2006a, 249ff) identified four particular ways in which this is done:

- (1) churches and church leaders *perform ritual* on behalf of others;

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<sup>6</sup> Another example can be found in a little-known paper that Davie wrote on the use of text as data in the sociology of religion. Here, Davie analysed letters of correspondence from some of the 350,000 visitors to the National Gallery exhibition "Seeing Salvation: The Image of Christ" in 2000. Her textual analysis of the 461 letters was innovative and increased her confidence in the validity of the concept of vicarious religion (Davie 2003a, 28-44).

<sup>7</sup> The concept was developed by Davie in order to "attempt to grasp both the nature of European religion as it emerges from a complex past and the forms that this memory or memories are likely to take as the twentieth century gives way to the twenty-first... [to understand a] world characterized by unusually low levels of active religiousness, but with relatively high levels of nominal belief" (2000a, 33).

- (2) church leaders and active Christians *believe* on behalf of others;
- (3) church leaders and active Christians *embody moral codes* on behalf of others;
- (4) churches offer space for the vicarious *debate of unresolved social issues* (e.g. homosexuality).

Thus it can be seen that there are different *agents* of vicarious memory – churches as institutions; ministers and other church leaders; church members and other churchgoers; and, perhaps more controversially, the church as a form of public arena. These form a nexus through which religious memory is held, celebrated, and reformulated (i.e. it is not necessarily static, despite the connotations of the word ‘memory’). This formulation of religion is generally grasped and recognised by Europeans but much less so in America, says Davie (2000, 49 and 2006a, 251), where churches are less of a public utility and faith is a more privatised, individual phenomenon, the result of a different cultural history.

Reflecting on vicarious religion as a sociological concept, Davie herself concludes that “vicariousness still resonates in Europe in the early years of the twenty-first century and will do for the foreseeable future. As a concept, it is both more penetrating and more accurate than believing without belonging. It not only goes beyond a simple dichotomy but also points to the complex cultural and political histories that are likely to shape vicariousness in any given society” (2006b, 26). In the next section we briefly evaluate the extent to which vicarious religion can be regarded as a reliable methodology.

### **Section III – Vicarious Religion Evaluated**

At this point, we must stop and take stock of where the concept of vicarious religion has led us. We have moved considerably beyond bald statistics such as what percentage of a given population attends church each week, and have shifted towards something altogether less tangible. The significance of churches and religion persisting, argues Davie, lies less in the number of people they attract and more in the societal role they can and do perform, as retainers of collective memory.

As a progression beyond the stale dichotomy of believing versus belonging, the concept of vicarious religion is surely to be welcomed. In this section we shall raise some questions about vicarious religion as a sociological concept, in an attempt to make us think more rigorously about how and when to use it. It is only fair to point out that some of these queries have been anticipated by Davie herself.

Firstly, there is a sense in which vicarious religion may be, in part, a return to earlier attempts at understanding modern religion from a three-fold perspective, namely believing, belonging and *behaving*. Earlier sociologists who recognised the limitations both of attendance statistics and creedal or belief statistics also tried to incorporate data relating to behaviour and public action. Vicarious religion seems in some way related to this approach since the agents of vicarious religion are behaving in certain ways, such as performing ritual, embodying moral codes, debating social issues and so on. Those who ‘opt in’ to this vicarious religion at various points in their lives are also behaving in certain ways. So whilst vicarious religion moves us beyond the believing/belonging mindset, in some ways it also returns us to questions about religious behaviour, and this is not entirely new territory. What is new is the extent to which such religious behaviour is somehow enacted on behalf of others.

Secondly, and following on directly from this first point, is the unavoidable issue of to what extent religion (and it must be acknowledged that this debate relates principally to Protestant and sometimes to Catholic forms of Christianity in western and central Europe) *can* be conducted or performed vicariously. Whilst to some extent this is a theological and philosophical question, it also has sociological significance. Christianity celebrates the

biblical example of Jesus Christ vicariously bearing the sins of mankind, of suffering and dying on a cross in place of fallen humanity; the 'suffering servant'; the Lamb of God. Thus the concept of vicariousness is at the very heart of the Christian faith. However, the irony is that – certainly within mainstream Protestant theology – profession of faith in Jesus Christ must be an individual's own decision, and therefore Christianity ultimately cannot be a vicarious religion for those choosing to believe. Historically, priests had (and for many, continue to have) a significant role performing ritual (presiding over communion, receiving confession etc.) on behalf of their congregations, but the one thing they cannot do is *believe* for somebody else. Thus a sociological concept based on a group of people *believing* for others is inherently controversial.

Likewise, if people only seek to engage with this vicarious religion momentarily and/or in times of considerable stress (as with many of Davie's examples), again what does this tell us about the nature of their religious experience? If religion is accessed by non-practitioners on this transient basis, how meaningfully can we say that religion affects them? One of the difficulties with the concept of vicarious religion is that it gives us no way of answering this question. Have we moved from a sterile situation of overreliance on statistics, to a new situation where we are basing our analysis on too many nebulous and immeasurable concepts? It is difficult enough measuring a group's religiosity at any given point in time but measuring one group's religiosity on behalf of another's over a period of time is more complicated yet.

Next, what are we to make of the future of vicarious religion? Where could this concept lead us? That is to say, a religion that is predominantly vicarious will sooner or later have difficulty sustaining let alone growing its number of adherents. Davie herself is clear on this point: "[m]y sense is that vicarious religion will endure at least until the mid-century, but not for much longer" (2006c, 293). Is it possible to distinguish between religion lingering as a memory, and religion actively being passed on with each generation? This is an important question for Europe, because the latent expressions of Christianity could be understood either as the presence of lapsed Christians and surrendered social influence, or as new forms of Christianity that will continue to meet a public need. It is not altogether clear which of these alternatives best describes religion in modern Europe; neither is it clear that, as a concept, vicarious religion sufficiently distinguishes between people who have handed over to the church to hold vicariously that which they once practised for themselves; and those who have never fully engaged with Christianity but instinctively turn there when necessary. In short, the concept of vicarious religion fails to illuminate the difference between those remembering religious significance through the church, and those discovering it for the first time.

Despite these criticisms, however, vicarious religion is undoubtedly a helpful addition to the sociology of religion. There may be some concern that the concept could be used by Christians seeking to justify the social and political influence of the church at a time when its membership is declining, but it is a helpful way of considering the 'sacred canopy' or general influence of that which is religious. It redefines the debate away from the, say, 10% of the population who practise Christianity regularly, towards the greater majority who may have different and inevitably weaker ties with the church, and who may not even be aware that such a relationship exists. Whilst some sociologists claim that Europe is secular, and will be even more so in the future, the notion of vicarious religion challenges the assumption that a population will necessarily be religious *or* secular, but rather may occasionally turn to the church for spiritual succour or emotional support, requiring the church to be available and ready for when that time comes.

This section has critiqued the concept of vicarious religion in the abstract. In the following two sections we evaluate it positively and negatively by considering examples of its application (section IV) and then some of its practical limitations (section V).

## Section IV – Vicarious Religion and Christian Mission in Europe: Some Applications

In this section we look at six issues arising from the application of the concept of vicarious religion to the European context for Christian mission in the twenty-first century.

### (1) *Secularization Revisited*

Perhaps most significantly, if we accept vicarious religion as a meaningful tool for sociological analysis, we must revisit the issue of secularization. For almost the entire history of sociology as a discipline, it has been widely held that modernity necessarily leads to secularization. Yet the concept of vicarious religion seems to offer a different interpretation of observable social phenomena, an interpretation that brings greater hope to Christians. If religion is, to some extent, being continued vicariously, it is less dependent on individual, personal participation and regular attendance. Even if secularization theory could be deemed correct at predicting less active and less regular participation in religion, this is not necessarily where we should be seeking evidence for the vitality of religion, Davie would argue. Secularization is a theory positing a long-term decline in churchgoers, decline in public influence and decline in religious belief. But even if these things came about, a society could in some meaningful way still be considered religious if its collective religious memory were carried on by a large or influential enough minority, to be accessed at key times. In Davie's words, "[w]hile many Europeans have ceased to participate in religious institutions, they have not yet abandoned any of their deep-seated religious inclinations" (1999, 68).<sup>8</sup>

### (2) *Transmission of Collective Memory*

If vicarious religion is understood and taken seriously by European Christians, there ought to be a shift towards deliberate cultivation and transmission of the collective religious memory.<sup>9</sup> Quite simply, for vicarious religion to continue it must be passed on from one generation to the next, though not necessarily in the same form. Davie explains that cultural memory "is socially constructed and requires not only knowledge but training in order to continue as an effective resource or memory" (2000a, 173).<sup>10</sup> This construction and sharing of collective religious memory (as a principal form of cultural memory) is not just for future generations but also for the present. If the continuation of the Christian faith in Europe depends partly on the passing on of religious memory, then Christians will need to take even more seriously the fight for a public role for religion, especially in the media, in politics and in education (the main routes through which religious memory can be publicly communicated). On an even broader level, Davie (2000a, 52ff) argues cogently that former state churches should play an important role in the "formation of civil society."<sup>11</sup>

### (3) *Moral Guidance*

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<sup>8</sup> For this and other reasons, Davie prefers to use the word "unchurched" rather than "secular" to describe contemporary western Europe (1999, 68 and 2002, 5).

<sup>9</sup> Gill is right to question the extent to which a disengaged population could ever connect with the church: "...few adults in the future, even when faced with a crisis of identity, will be able to 'return' to church. They will never have acquired the language, symbols or rituals of church culture and are likely to find it strange rather than reassuring. Searching for meaning beyond the ambiguities of life, they will find difficulty in decoding the meanings offered within institutional worship" (2003, 218). This demonstrates the importance of transmitting and sharing the religious memory.

<sup>10</sup> The Catholic church has already identified this specific role for the church in Europe: "One of the main tasks of the Church must be, then, to act as the repository of the continent's tradition... recalling Europe to its roots in God" (Murphy-O'Connor 2005, 83).

<sup>11</sup> It should be acknowledged that throughout Davie's writings is the underlying belief that the church *ought* to continue, as a matter of public interest, e.g. "It is to everyone's advantage to find appropriate forms of religious life for the new millennium... The 'soul of Europe' cannot be left to chance" (2000a, 194). Davie is writing both as a sociologist and as a Christian.

One of Davie's four 'pillars' of vicarious religion is that church leaders and churchgoers embody behavioural and moral codes for the population as a whole: "religious professionals (both local and national) are expected to uphold certain standards of behaviour... and incur criticism when they fail, from outside churches as well as within" (Davie 2006a, 250). Therefore, those wanting to strengthen and promote religion in Europe would do well to redouble their efforts at living lives of integrity and purity. If European mission is to be done amongst those expecting moral lives to be lived *on their behalf*, it should be done so not just as a testimony of personal transformation but also as a means of communicating the transcendent 'other' that vicarious religion represents. This will be understood by people in terms of moral examples and guidelines for living, rather than abstract theology (Davie 2002, 46).

The church is not only *permitted* to explore a moral and ethical response to social issues; it is *expected* to do so on everyone's behalf. For Davie, this explains the media's apparent fascination with the church's struggle to articulate a contemporary response to homosexuality (2006c, 280 and 2006b, 24-25). If Davie is right, then new doors of opportunity open for Christian mission in Europe if the church can find ways of including non-members in its debates and moral wrestling. There remains a sense that sections of society across Europe, whether consciously or not, still look to the church for a moral line on social and ethical issues.

#### **(4) Adaptive Rituals**

Another of Davie's four 'pillars' of vicarious religion is ritual, whereby the church and its leaders perform ceremonies, employ symbols, define and celebrate rites of passage, and generally demarcate spiritual or religious occasions and impart their meaning. The key to understanding what impact this may have on Christian mission throughout Europe is to recognise that these rituals are actually both flexible and adaptive. Davie (2006b, 24) gives two examples of new rituals being developed: ceremonies recognizing (and thereby legitimizing) divorce, and gay marriage. Whilst these are only partially accepted within the wider religious community, they highlight the possibility of churches responding to social changes meaningfully and innovatively. For Christianity to remain or become relevant to more Europeans, it may need to creatively explore the possibility of other such rituals. Traditionalists may take some comfort from the fact that some of these rituals could be rediscovered or reinterpreted rituals from the church's rich history.

#### **(5) Churches as Public Utilities**

At the heart of the concept of vicarious religion, and the main difference from Christianity in the United States, is the idea that European churches are a form of public utility, that is to say they provide a form of service to the public in general, and have an obligation to provide that service satisfactorily. When comparing European Christianity with North American, Latin American, African and Asian alternatives, Davie argues that "Europeans, by and large, regard their churches as public utilities rather than competing firms; this is the real legacy of a state church history and inextricably related to the concept of vicariousness" (2002, 43-44). In reality, of course, religion in Europe is characterised by both state churches *and* 'competing' free churches.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, it would be helpful to church leaders if they understood that people often feel entitled, or affiliated, or connected in some way to their local church, even if they are not regular attendees. Of course, good priests and vicars will already be aware of this attachment but it would be beneficial to think more clearly about the

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<sup>12</sup> This point touches upon Rational Choice Theory, a popular way of understanding religion in North America, which posits that competition in the religious 'marketplace' leads to high levels of religious participation as individuals choose which denomination/faith is most attractive to them; conversely, monopolistic state churches offer less choice and will lead to lower levels of religious participation. Commenting on RCT in relation to European forms of religion, Davie (2006c, 281) observes that "choice is entirely compatible with vicariousness" since churches continue the religious memory so people can go to them when they choose.

nature of this relationship and, from a missional perspective, how it may be used as a springboard for engaging with non-church members. To return to earlier terminology, how many people feel they 'belong' to a church without that church even realizing? How can a church make the religious memory more accessible to such people, and on more occasions?

### **(6) Alternative and Emerging Memories**

Finally, it is imperative that we account for alternative and emerging religious memories when attempting to apply the concept of vicarious religion to Europe as a mission field. Significantly, the subtitle of Davie's 2000 book *Religion in Modern Europe* is 'A Memory Mutates,' and we should remember that there need not be anything static about vicarious memory: as long as it has an element of continuity, it may prove to be remarkably adaptive. One significant way in which religious memory adapts is through fusion with emerging or alternative memories. Davie's own examples of these include new religious movements, other faiths such as Islam, and secularism itself (2000a, Ch. 7).

From a missional perspective, it has sometimes been argued that southern Christianity has the potential to rejuvenate European Christianity, and this would be one example of an alternative memory helping shape the religious memory of Europe. Davie has tended to write about vicarious religion monolithically, but it is not difficult to conceive of a multiform vicarious religion that incorporates different strands of Christian belief and practice. Migration into Europe has brought different Christian religious traditions and religious memories, and these could sit alongside the dominant European religious memory. Once we conceive of such a nexus, the possibility occurs that this multiform nexus would be capable of vicariously practising religion for a greater number of people, if it were able to incorporate different rituals, beliefs and values.

## **Section V – Vicarious Religion and Christian Mission in Europe: Some Reservations**

The six subsections above indicate that there are certainly some potentially fruitful applications of the concept of vicarious religion to understanding the context and future of mission in Europe. In this section, however, we balance this by making some reservations and more negative observations.

### **(1) Which 'Europe'?**

Davie's field research has been conducted chiefly in Britain, Scandinavia and France, and her writings generally reflect this fact. The concept of vicarious religion seems to be truer of certain countries than others, and Davie falls short of specifying precisely which countries she believes it applies to. She acknowledges that her "Europe" is effectively western Europe;<sup>13</sup> at times it seems smaller still, relating only to Protestant countries – this is the implication of her claim that perhaps vicarious religion equates to "Catholic identity" elsewhere (Davie 2000a, 59). As such, the concept of vicarious religion can only partially describe the context of European mission, since European Christianity has Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox strands (as well as other religions altogether). Davie's "Europe" is a smaller geographical and religious construct than Europe is in reality.

### **(2) Examples Used to Substantiate Vicarious Religion**

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<sup>13</sup> In her introduction to *Europe – The Exceptional Case*, Davie explains her use of the term 'Europe,' and seemingly uses this definition implicitly in her other works: "When speaking of Europe, I will in fact be referring to Western Europe in the sense of Western Christianity. I will not be including the Orthodox parts of Europe, nor the complex marchlands that lie between the two halves of the continent... [because] it is too soon to say whether the Eastern European case will follow the Western one... or whether a substantially new variant or variants will emerge" (2002, xi).

Davie claims that the ongoing popularity of baptisms, church weddings and funerals tells us much about people's vicarious religion (2000a, 71ff). She also claims that media and popular outrage over church scandals are examples that people feel deeply that certain views should be held by those who maintain religion vicariously for them. This latter claim is very difficult to prove one way or another, and could as easily be driven by the press' appetite for scandal. But beyond these examples, Davie says that vicarious religion is most clearly revealed in moments of *national stress* (2006b, 28).

Throughout her various published works, I have found Davie using six different examples, viz. the public and state reaction to the death of French President Mitterrand (1996); reaction to the death of Princess Diana (1997); reaction to the death of Pope John Paul II (2005); reaction to the sinking of the Baltic ferry *Estonia* with the loss of 900 lives (1994); reaction to the abduction and murder of two schoolgirls in Soham (2002); and British reaction to the terrorist attacks in America (2001). It is immediately noticeable that all six of Davie's examples are actually the same phenomenon – how the public responds to death. These variations on a single theme certainly tell us something about *temporary* reactions to *unique* events, but perhaps less about the ongoing religious state of Europe in general. We must also question the claim that religion is best understood at times of national stress; it does not seem that this assertion has been well established at all.

### **(3) Differently Religious**

Central to Davie's argument about the current state of religion in Europe is the belief that Europe is not areligious but "differently religious" (1999, 65 and 2002, 19). Many of the signs that to Davie are evidence of Europeans being differently religious would, to arguably most non-Europeans, indicate *absence* of religion (in this case, Christianity). Low church attendance, lack of Christian behaviour and values, and a restricted public role for expressions of faith would lead many to conclude that Europe is areligious, or secular. For Davie to fully convince that Europe is *differently* religious, she would need to be clear about what an areligious Europe would look like – and how is that different from the relatively secular states of western Europe now. At what point does 'differently religious' become 'no longer religious' is a question she fails to address. On the level of the individual, the concept of vicarious religion does not enable us to answer the question how much faith or religion one person can abdicate to another person or institution and, in any meaningful sense, still be a part of it.

### **(4) Lack of Resonance**

When describing the fact that Europeans want their faith to be carried on vicariously by others, Davie makes the interesting claim that Europeans are "grateful" for this service (2000a, 59) and, "quite clearly, approve" of it (2006b, 22). This writer would argue, however, that there is widespread apathy and often outright hostility towards the church, and rather less evidence of gratitude or enthusiasm for its vicarious role.

We have available an interesting, though not altogether unbiased, example from the liberal British newspaper, *The Guardian*, for which Grace Davie wrote a short article in June 2009 under the heading "Christian, but not as we know it." In this article she confronts the question, 'Is Europe's future Christian?', concluding "'yes' but not in the same way that it is now." Whilst avoiding the technical term vicarious religion, Davie is clearly rehearsing this familiar argument, claiming that churches "continue to have a significant role in the lives of both individuals and communities, most obviously at times of celebration or loss."<sup>14</sup> The interesting thing here is the comments that Davie's article prompted – which were

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<sup>14</sup> Davie's original article, together with readers' responses, can be found at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/jun/01/europe-christianity-religion> [Accessed 10 March 2010].

overwhelmingly against an active Christianity in Europe: of 128 posted comments, just 11 responses were broadly in favour of Davie's argument and 78 were broadly against it (the remaining 39 comments were either neutral or not relevant). Even if we take into account reader bias for *The Guardian*, this is a very high figure and not one that speaks strongly of "grateful" Europeans benefiting from vicarious religion. Most people posting a comment were advocating a secular Europe, and of those who wanted to maintain a Christian legacy, some were proposing this for *cultural* rather than religious reasons. It seems that the concept of vicarious religion does not necessarily resonate with ordinary Europeans.

## Conclusion

We can conclude by recognizing that, of Davie's various concepts, vicarious religion is the most insightful and should ultimately prove to be the most helpful to sociologists of religion. I have also tried to outline six ways in which this concept may affect missiological thinking and missional practice concerning Europe in the twenty-first century, followed by four concerns about its application.

The concept of vicarious religion has to some extent succeeded in moving debate about religion in Europe beyond polarised assertions that Europe is secular – or not – or will be soon. Consequently, we are forced to consider whether religion in Europe has changed or, using Davie's preferred word, "mutated" into a new form. This form may be less obvious and less participatory but persists nonetheless, ready for occasions when people wish to draw on its spiritual reserves. An approach, such as Davie's, which recognises such grey or shadow areas will better explain the subtleties of modern life, than a dualistic or statistical approach alone. Whether or not we agree with Davie's description of the religious scene in Europe today, few would deny it is undergoing change and Davie has created a plausible way of interpreting it. The challenge for others is to respond with ideas that similarly try to explain the persistence of religion and its continuing function as a provider of meaning, particularly in times of crisis or key moments in life. Between the minority of Europeans who attend church (or mosque or synagogue) regularly, and the minority who actively describe themselves as secular, lies a large majority of Europeans who have not yet been adequately explained or described by sociologists.

In one explanation of vicarious religion, Davie describes it as "an institutionalized form of free-riding" (2007, 77) questioning whether this is *necessarily* a bad thing. Christians in Europe must wrestle with the same question which ultimately asks what are we expecting of those who consider themselves Christian. This is a pertinent question precisely because in Europe there is a very long tradition of the Christian faith being a matter of personal choice – whereas in other parts of the world, there is sometimes an element of familial, tribal or communal faith that would have to be opted out of, rather than opted into, and which makes fewer demands of its followers. The European religious tradition has also tended to be very cerebral and intellectual; it seems that a shift is taking place towards more experiential religion, and the concept of vicarious religion may be a better way of understanding (and accommodating) this shift.

To understand the European context for Christian mission, Christians must root themselves in God's word, the Bible, but they must also understand the culture into which they wish to communicate God's truth. The discipline of sociology continues to offer many ways of observing and analysing religious and cultural phenomena, and Grace Davie's concept of vicarious religion has made many Christians reconsider the context in which they seek to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, and the means by which they may do so. Whilst many staunch Christians would argue that faith cannot be held vicariously, our sociological and missiological starting point is not where we would have others be, but rather where they are now. The concept of vicarious religion is useful precisely because it goes some way towards describing the (western) European religious picture as it is now. Even whilst recognizing its

limited geographical applicability and acknowledging its methodological weaknesses, the missiologist should make good use of this helpful conceptual tool.

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