

Belonging without Believing: Life Narratives of Six Social Generations of Members of the Apostolic Society

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Abstract : This article addresses the religious beliefs of members of the Apostolic Society –a Dutch religious community wherein the oldest living members were raised with very different beliefs than those upheld today. Currently, the Apostolic Society is the largest liberal religious community of the Netherlands, consisting of roughly 15,000 members. It is characterized by its close-knit community life and the importance of its apostle: the spiritual leader who writes a weekly letter around which the Sunday morning service is centered. The society sees itself as ‘religious-humanistic’, inspired by its Judeo-Christian roots without being dogmatic. Only a century earlier, the beliefs of the religious community revolved more strongly around the Bible, the apostle is a link to Christ. Also, the community believed in the return of the Lord, resonating with the millenarian roots of community in 1830. Thus, the oldest living members have experienced fundamental changes in beliefs and rituals, yet remained members. This article reveals how members experience(d) their religious beliefs and feelings of belonging to the community, how these may or may not have changed over time, and what role the Apostolic Society played in their lives. The article presents a qualitative research approach based on two main pillars. First, life narrative interviews were conducted, to work inductively and allow different interview topics to emerge. Second, it uses generational theory, in three ways: 1) to select respondents; 2) to guide the interview methodology –by being sensitive to differences in socio-historical context and events experienced during formative years of interviewees of different social generations, and 3) to analyze and contextualize the qualitative interview data. The data were gathered from 27 respondents, belonging to six social generations. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed, using the Atlas.ti software program. First, the elder generations talk about growing up with the Apostolic Society being absolutely central in their daily and spiritual lives. They spent most of their time with fellow members and dedicated their free time to Apostolic activities. The central beliefs of the Apostolic Society were clear and strongly upheld, and they experienced strong belonging. Although they now see the set of central beliefs to be more individually interpretable and are relieved to not have to spend all that time to Apostolic activities anymore, they still regularly attend services and speak longingly of the past with its strong belief and belonging. Second, the younger generations speak of growing up in a non-dogmatic, religious-humanist set of beliefs, but still with a very strong belonging to the religious community. They now go irregularly to services, and talk about belonging, but not as strong as the elderly generations do. Third, across the generations, members spend more time outside of the Apostolic Society than within. The way they speak about their religious beliefs is fluid and differs as much within generations as between: for example, there is no central view on what God is. It seems the experience of members of the Apostolic Society across different generations can now be characterized as belonging without believing.

Keywords : generational theory, individual religious experiences, life narrative history interviews, qualitative research design

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