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Western bias in the sociology of religion

Universalist discourses in sociology and particularist indicators in four key surveys

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Abstract

In Western sociology three main themes govern the study of religion: secularization, changes towards more individualized religions, and changes in the supply-side of religious institutions. Empirical surveys on these themes are also fielded beyond Western contexts. This paper addresses the indicators used in these surveys. It is argued that the surveys fall short of tapping religious experiences in a non-Western context and of dealing with the basic debates in the sociology of religion. They are non-inclusive, 'othering', and inappropriate to test basic theoretical assumptions, for instance, the change towards more individualized forms of religion. Moreover, the studies could learn from life course sociology from which it can be argued that people are in search of meaning and purpose that acknowledges uncertainty, insufficiency and individual reflexivity. This search excludes the traditional, one-God-one-truth religions serviced by all-knowing experts.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to outline the main discourses on religion in Western sociology and survey whether or not these discourses are valuable for the empirical study of religion in non-Western societies. Doing so necessitates a clear description of concepts and indicators that are used in the predominantly empirical scientific study of religion, drawing also on empirical evidence from large-scale comparative surveys. This paper will not go into the issue of religion from theological or philosophical points of view. It will mainly build on sociological perspectives and especially so on perspectives aimed at acquiring cross-culturally comparative and quantitative empirical insights. This paper will hence first and foremost perceive religion, in all its rich facets, as a sociological and empirical phenomenon. It will first display the main discourses (section 2) and then shortly dwell on the need to update empirical studies of religion, both for enhancing the cultural fit of these surveys and thus more accurately tap into the perspectives of non-Western publics, and, equally important, for gaining the very opportunity to address the key points of debate in the main discourses on religion (section 3). Next, the key indicators used in key cross-cultural, large-scale, and quantitative studies are presented (section 4) and finally some conclusions are drawn on where the discourse and indicators seem off-balance, especially when one aims to field a study of religion in non-Western societies (section 5).

2. Discourses

Secularization

The key word in sociological discourses on religion is secularization. Secularization is heralded for its liberating and emancipating blessings as well as blamed for almost every thinkable contemporary evil. Secularization is believed to, on the one hand, go hand in hand with modernization (if it is not equated to modernization) and, on the other hand, to be a rather particular regional phenomenon taking root in Northwestern European Christian societies only. In many cases it is not clear that social scientists are dealing with the same issue when debating secularization. Is it declining rates of church membership, likewise decelerating frequencies of

church visits, or is it a much more general process indicating an increasing orientation of people on worldly issues, on the immanent instead of the transcendent? An orientation that relates to falling levels of the interest in, the impact of, and the involvement in projections of a decisive reality that supersedes daily reality (Dekker, 1987; Haller, 1990; Verweij, 1998; Wallis & Bruce, 1992). Moreover, as modernization progresses, the emphasis is believed to not only shift from the divine to the human, but also from faith to rationality, from value to efficiency, from truth to value, quality to quantity, superstition to science, continuity to change (Lawrence, 1998).

The basic assumption, that also lies at the heart of classic sociology, is that modernization diminishes the role of religion in the daily lives of individuals and in society as a whole. Of course, this assumption is subject to criticism and not only from empirical researchers. First of all, it seems to (willingly or unwillingly) normatively suggest that reason and manifest experience are superior to faith and transcendent experience. This explicitly Enlightenment-based normative judgment is of course part of a belief system itself. Moreover, the relationship modernization-secularization is rather imprecise. Is modernization's impact due to all simultaneously working processes or to particular processes of modernization: is it the increased specialization of occupations, is it urbanization, is it industrialization or the rise of the post-industrial information-age society, is it the development of the welfare state, or are all of these (and more) processes responsible for emptying the churches? And what is it exactly in these processes that make people leave the church, that makes it difficult for religious groups to sustain, and that makes society as a whole function without an overarching institution such as the church. Without these specifications, the reference to modernization in a catch-all manner is not very helpful.

Empirically there are objections too. It is pointed out that as traditional providers of belief systems may have lost shares of the religious market, new religious and/or transcendent meaning providing movements, including 'New Age'-type of movements that dwell on mystic, occult and esoteric issues, have gained popularity (e.g., Robbins, 1988; De Hart, 1993). Another

empirical objection counter-argues that fundamentalist religions that emphasize absolute truths, a life and society fully determined by religion, and an active resistance to modernization, are on the rise in many parts of the world, including the Christian West and in Christian religion (e.g., Gellner, 1992). Not per se a hard objection, but a serious annotation from the empirical side is that religious relevance does not decline linearly in time (e.g., Roof, 1985). Cultural and historical traditions around the globe impede or speed up the modernization impacts on the relevance of religion. Another and rather harshly debated issue is the exceptional way either the European or the North American religious market is going. In the eyes of Europeans, experiencing strong secularization, the US with their still very vibrant religious movements are the exception to the rule (the rule being that modernization leads to secularization; see e.g. Bruce, 1999), although the US is believed to show some sign of increased secularization as well (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). Many US-based social scientists claim the contrasting argument, think Europe is the exception, point at the seemingly everlasting vitality of religion in the US, and even refute the very idea that modernization leads to serious and sustainable secularization (e.g., Berger, 2001; Brown, 1992; Casanova, 2001; Davie, 2002; Finke, 1992; Stark, 1999; Stark & Iannaccone, 1994). As usual, things are more subtle as in Europe secularization does not have a similar state or even pace of development in every corner of this vast continent. Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, but also the UK are in the forefront of secularization if looking at church membership and attendance. Southern European countries and, since the crumbling of communism, also the Mid and Eastern European countries still have a sizeable (albeit slightly declining) proportion of people adhering to traditional religion. What is clear is that modernization does not have a one-on-one relationship with secularization. The diverging levels of secularization cannot be fully explained by pointing at modernization in an abstract and all-encompassing way.

A key author in the field, Karel Dobbelaere (1981; 1995; 2002), suggests taking a three-level stance in the issue of secularization. At the societal level there is the functional differentiation between religious and secular institutions with the latter taking increasingly care

of tasks that previously were executed by the former such as in education and health care. Secularization means that religion ceased to be of ultimate significance in the working of the social system. It also means that it results from processes of functional differentiation, autonomization and Vergesellschaftung (societalization) of societal subsystems allowing for the development of functional rationality (see also Luhmann, 1977, 1982). The economy, for instance, lost its religious ethos (Weber, 1920), as, consequently, did the political system (parting from traditional charismatic authority) and with the process religion itself became a subsystem (Wilson, 1982; 1998). The loss of status and power of the traditional religions, referring to the second level of religious organizations, allowed for alternative religions to improve their position on the religious market,. These organizations, in turn, are becoming less transcendent and more this-worldly and world-affirming as the secularization process progresses. They offer people diverse means to attain immediate insights, ultimate knowledge, assertive potencies, and automatic success. At the individual, micro-level a secularization-in-mind is witnessed with the church-community becoming a chosen community (Bellah et al., 1985), an individualization of choices, and a compartmentalization of people's religious and secular orientations. This is reflected in religious bricolage referring to an individual patchwork or re-composition of what is on the menu of different religion, a religion à la carte that fits the era of the end of the grand narrative in which now codes are mixed borrowing not only from religions but also from popular culture, scientific discourses, and other unexpected sources. The three-level separation of the secularization process is interesting when considering subsequent debates and empirical studies. Studies that take on the task of addressing all three levels empirically do not exist. As Halman and Pettersson (2006) argue, the relationship of secularization at for instance the societal level and the mental level of laypeople is still an open question. In spite of that, the secularization thesis according to some eager US-scientists should be brought to the graveyard of failed theories (Stark, 1997; Stark & Finke, 2000; see also further below).

Religious pluralism

At this stage it is interesting to take a closer look at the debate on religious pluralism often related to the phenomenon of (and worries about) moral pluralism. In a classic view, pluralism in religion relates to the interaction of religion with geographical identity (national, regional, etc.) and to power and countervailing power (Beckford, 2000; Martin, 1978; Draulans & Halman, 2003; Halman & Draulans, 2004). Religion is firmly related to power and authority, both as a source of legitimacy and in concrete relationships with authority. One form of pluralism, complete pluralism, refers to competing denominations with weak connections to authority or elites (cf. Bellah's 'civic religion'; Bellah, 1970), another, qualified pluralism, to competition between and within churches related to elites (e.g., the UK and Scandinavia), and yet another, segmented pluralism, delineates rival groups living in separate regions (e.g., Dutch and German Protestant and Catholic regions). The different degrees of secularization are also believed to relate to denominational composition. In Protestant societies personal responsibility is more emphasized than in Catholic ones where the church is the mediator between the individual and God and where a collective identity is enforced more strongly (Jagodzinski & Dobbelaere, 1995). The same goes for churches that have strong historical and political ties to nation state institutions and are able to maintain a presence at that level (Davie, 2000). In this latter case and in Catholic societies secularization seems to have hit less hard.

Related to the issue of pluralism is the idea of diversifying religious markets in late modern societies (either Western or non-Western), an idea with which secularization theory is put under fire. Of course, very influential is the theory of Luckmann (1963, 1967) on the rise of an 'invisible' religion, religion that gained popularity outside the traditional institutional frameworks and churches. The theory shares with secularization theory that much of the churches have lost power to determine all spheres of life which, in turn, have become more autonomous and allow individuals to pick their own choice of world views. Especially because individuals are able to subjectively sample the set of values without religious institutions, new 'invisible' religions emerge, religions that do no longer necessitate an institutional framework

but all aim at giving meaning in its broadest sense to one's existence and the world around (and beyond) one's self. The case against secularization theory is that religiosity as such is not on the decline, but that only the traditional forms are, now that people who live in a late modern, highly differentiated and pluriform society seek for forms of religion that fit their lives in this type of society best. The theory opened doors to include alternative religious movements and individual religious experiences in the scientific study of religion, including New Age spirituality. It also generated discussion on what not to include when studying religion. Some suggest to make a clear-cut differentiation between what is a religious and a non-religious experience. Verweij (1998) reports that individuals who create their own world view with which to answer the existential questions on the meaning of life, seek objects or people having charismatic power that helps individuals to block the existential question even before it is posed. Anything that is attributed this charismatic power is prone to be seen as a religious phenomenon and that might include national anthems, sports teams, the Universal Human Rights, the queen of the Netherlands, etc. As everything seems to be fit for inclusion, the criterion of charismatic power does not seem very helpful. Another key author in this pluralization and shift towards alternative religions debate is Ronald Inglehart. For instance in his 1997-work on modernization and postmodernization he rejects the idea of either a worldwide decline of religiosity or, the reversed, a global trend towards fundamentalism, as media accounts and anecdotal evidence have it (Inglehart, 1997; see also Norris & Inglehart, 2004). Instead, in social-economically, and politically secure societies the need for reassurance provided by religion is on the decline (making traditional believers in these societies counteract), in the vast number of insecure countries it is on the rise. At the same time in the more advanced societies, the number of people contemplating on the meaning and purpose of life is on the rise, especially among those who turned their backs to traditional beliefs and established religious organizations and who, if at all go for organizations, seek for answers in non-hierarchical, non-all-encompassing, non-absolutist and more individually tailor-made initiatives (see also Jagodzinski, 2003). Here also, not the

quest for religious experience is on the decline, but the traditional supply to indulge in this experience is.

Supply-side theory

This gives way to another very influential perspective, the more recent rational choice discourse on religion, also framed as the market place or the supply-side theory (Finke, 1997; Stark & Iannaccone, 1994; Stark, 1997; Warner, 1993). If the secularization thesis upholds that pluralism may weaken religious activity, the supply-side theory poses the exact opposite. The underlying (under-researched) thesis is that people are either off-set or stimulated to engage religiously by competition between churches on religious truths. In the secularization's case this competition undermines authority of churches to guide people in their life decisions and hence, to automatically socialize new cohorts of church-go-ers in their particular strand of religion. Pluralism 'ipso facto plunges religion into a crisis of credibility' (Berger, 1967: 150). The supply-side theory argues that because of competition religious activity is promoted as each church aims to earn its market share. The more plural a market is, the more competition, the more churches aim to accommodate their members (in line with free market logic) and thus the higher the rate of religious activity of the citizenry. Vice versa, a church that is dominating the market is believed to take less care of its members, having little incentive to satisfy, and is in the end confronted with declining activities and secularization.

Common tests of the supply-side theory usually use church membership as a core indicator of activity (e.g., Finke & Stark, 1988). Not only the validity of the use of this crude indicator to tap activity can be debated (it includes nominally affiliated members who never participate in activities and excludes the active without formal membership), also the cross-cultural validity of the indicator itself can be disputed. What if there are many different religions but only a few of which one can really become a member? Much therefore seems to depend on the denominational composition at a given time and place. In certain cities and counties of the US where the choice of churches to become a member of is extremely high, the theory might be

testable, but at many others places, especially those outside the US, it might well not be. In these places choice is limited, maybe especially so the choice for churches to become a member of. Yet, even if choice is limited than one can argue that some denominations are more successful, more than others are, in promoting membership, acquiring new members and in keeping them in, regardless therefore of the level of competition. Arguably, Islamic religion is powerful in this respect. Moreover, in many (non-Western) societies with little, if not formally outlawed competition between religions, the level of activity is not necessarily low, let alone on the decline. Again, societies that endorse Islam may serve as an example. Also, in Europe contrasting results are reported with studies showing that pluralism correlates negatively with religiosity and church attendance (Draulans & Halman, 2003) and studies that support the idea that pluralism is a process in which religious supply is more attractive and yields higher levels of religiosity and affiliation (e.g., Pettersson & Hamberg, 1997).

The basics of the supply-side theory seem to build on the disputable ideal of free choice. Although the theory is a rational choice model it hardly pays attention to this process of choice. What is more, it is explicitly assumed that the 'demand' for religion is a constant across time and place (Finke, 1997; Stark & Brainbridge, 1987). Changes in religious adherence and activity are therefore solely attributed to changes in the supply of religion, i.e. in the number, position, and activities of the churches supplying religious experience. The perspective of (groups of) individuals is under-researched in this rational choice theory. It seems an accepted fact that people want to experience religion and be religiously active, what is more, that they want this at similar levels in all times of history and places of the globe. This is taken from the belief (!) that religion evolves as a response to universal human sufferings and tragedies, especially the inescapable process of decline and death. Declaring these issues universal and invariant tautologically explains the universal and invariant demand for religion. However implicit, the theory ignores the basic 'disenchantment' assumption of secularization theory that states that religion subsides on these issues simply because other non-religious, more 'rational' and 'scientific' and socio-political explanations have increasingly replaced the religious explanation

of suffering, tragedy, and even death. The need and thus the demand for religion in secularization theory is far from a constant. Moreover, imagine that many go to church for reasons other than getting a final answer to the reasons for suffering and death, for instance because it is sociable, it is a no-questions-asked habit, or it is something better to conform with, then changes in society that affect the sociable, the habitual, the force to conform, are likely to change the demand for religion.

3. The contemporary value of comparative religious values surveys

Since the supply-side theory the debates in sociology of religion are heated again. Of course, most debates are regularly fueled by empirical studies on people's religious activities. The number of studies focused at methodological cross-culturally comparative issues in the debate are, however, disappointingly low. This no doubt relates to the dominance in the debate of Western if not US-based social scientists who dwell on data and concepts that seem to apply best to their religious markets. It is striking that researchers that declare processes universal across the globe and an invariant part of the basic human condition, do avoid to include concepts, indicators, and data on societies and cultures that might be different from theirs. A thorough study that particularly focuses at the difficulties and possibilities to test the hypotheses of the basic strands in the sociology of religion with concepts and indicators that apply to different types of societies and cultures is still missing. This hiatus cannot, of course, be corrected satisfactorily and exhaustively in a concise paper such as this. What will be done is present some of the key concepts and indicators used in the most famed social science surveys that include a large number of different, yet predominantly Western societies. These studies are the European Values Studies (EVS) and World Values Survey (WVS), the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), and the Religious and Moral Pluralism (RAMP) study.

Doing so is valuable at least for two basic purposes. First, it may reveal how useful these surveys are for really addressing the key points of debate between the different positions in the (Western) sociology of religion. Second, the quest may also present the main

opportunities and obstacles related to proliferating these surveys across Western boundaries. It is beyond the capacity of this paper to extensively compare with all different types of non-Western religious life. Yet, making a first and exemplary comparison with East-Asian religious life already shows that surveys that go beyond Western contexts and far to the East (which, e.g., WVS and ISSP do) will have to accommodate publics that simultaneously adhere to different and sometimes even opposing religions and/or adhere to these different religions at different moments and contexts of life (see Sasaki & Suzuki, 2002; Tanabe, 1999; Teiser, 1999). Also they will have to make room for a large number of dieties that at the same time can be regarded human, non-human, and super-human (Lopez, 1995). They will have to tap both personalized and communal rituals that both can be actively experienced without a central role of expert-foremen explaining what to do when and why and without a fixed institutionalized place of worship or even of doctrine (Jagodzinski, 2003; Jagodzinski & Manabe, 2003). Moreover, they will have to acknowledge the central role of sacrifices and especially material offerings and other types of material and this-worldly goals in beliefs and practices (Reader & Tanabe, 1998). Also, they will have to take account of the embeddedness of these beliefs in practices in family life, work and even in citizen/state relationships. Virtues in these fields are almost merged to the point of inseparability: respecting one's family, honouring ancestors and the elderly (including a senior co-worker or a benevolent government official), having children (sons), becoming or at least appearing prosperous and well-to-do, are important in daily practices and rituals in and beyond the religious domain (Teiser, 1999). This preliminary sketch may help to clarify the difficulties comparative religious values surveys encounter when exported beyond the Western context. There is, however, also ample reason to elaborate on these difficulties when these studies would 'only' confine themselves to the Western context. It is not unlikely, as the secularization discussion presented above hoped to clarify, that also within 'the West' the popularity of drawing from different religious menus has increased. Moreover, with the more multicultural populace in many Western nations, including people who adhere to syncretist and polytheist ways of experiencing religion, the urgency to update comparative religious values

surveys becomes apparent. In the next section we will see how the state-of-the-art surveys in the field on the indicator-level are doing in this respect.

4. Indicators

At the end of the 1970s EVS was explicitly initiated to survey the state and shift in religious values, attitudes, and behaviors and hence includes a wide range of indicators in this field. EVS now includes data from 1981, 1990 and 1999/2000, with the latter year covering almost all former Mid- and Eastern European countries. WVS includes rich data on religion as well as it started as the non-European add-on of EVS and expanded to a very large amount of countries in the 1990s. An equally large number of publications dealing with religion (as a single topic or part of a volume on other values as well) has been generated from both studies. Specifically focusing on religion is for instance the volume by Halman and Riis (2003; see also Halman & De Moor, 1993). The ISSP is a continuing program of collaborating social scientists of (today) 39 western and non-Western countries. They field cross-culturally comparative surveys on specific topics each year that they repeat (and improve) after about five to seven years. Religion was the topic of the 1991 and 1998 waves (and will be the topic again in 2008). The surveys include a core module of cross-cultural comparative questions and a country-specific module (e.g., in which religion questions specific to Japan are asked). RAMP includes data from 11, mainly Northern European countries of the 1997-1999 period. Using the original codebooks, the core indicators of these studies were explored. These indicators are discussed below.

Denomination

One of the core questions in the series of questions on religion in any survey is about denomination: 'Do you belong to a religious denomination' is usually the first question (as it is in EVS) and if the answer is yes, the next question is 'Which one' offering a country-specific pre-coded list of world religions (e.g., Roman Catholic, Church of England, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Orthodox) and a opportunity to enter another one if one's choice is not on the

list. In RAMP the question is subtly different. The difference is however very consequential: 'Do you consider yourself as belonging to a church/denomination or religious group or community'. The extra word 'consider' opens ways for respondents to contemplate and reflect on their membership, much more than the EVS-question does. The EVS-question more closely taps denomination distributions that also include those who are only nominally a member of a church or religious grouping. These nominal members are likely to respond negatively to the RAMP questions given the opportunity here to think about one's ties with the religious groupings. In a sense the RAMP question is a fine example of postmodernity entering questionnaire building. It strongly reflects the issue of secularization at the individual level in which the individual is required to first reflect on his/her own decision before choosing a religion to which he/she feels connected. Reflexivity, the individualization of choices and religion as a chosen community all come to the fore by simply entering the word 'consider' into the question. The downside of this is that the results may vary greatly from the ones tapped by EVS and, yet, however, it cannot be established with certainty that the difference in responses to both the EVS and RAMP questions are resulting from this wording issue or from the secularization forces at the different moments in time in which the EVS (1981, 1990, 1999/2000) and RAMP surveys (1997/1998) were fielded. ISSP (1991 and 1998) has a question on religious denomination that almost every participating country in the study asked in its own way. In 1998 the Dutch asked the above mentioned RAMP question, the Germans asked 'to which religious group do you belong', the Czechs 'what religion are you', the Japanese 'What is your religious preference'. The responses to these very different questions are presented in one table, but one can exert serious doubts on the value of comparing any of the scores across countries. It also has a set of questions on denomination that cannot be compared to the other studies. It refers to the religion the respondent was raised in ('What religion, if any, were you raised in? Was it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?'). Another question taps the 'religious preference' of the respondent's husband or wife.

What is, from a historical perspective, perhaps not surprising in a Western context-only survey, but is very surprising for surveys that go beyond this context, is that only the denomination question includes the clearest response opportunities for those adhering to other than monotheistic religions. Most questions following the one on denomination refer to 'God' in a singular meaning especially as a singular entity (a God, a Higher Power) to whom one can have a personal relationship, whose actual words can be found in the Bible, who concerns Himself with every human being, etc. (see, e.g., ISSP 1998, that includes countries such as Japan, or WVS that includes many other non-Western countries). Even if only considering the Western context it is at least somewhat non-inclusive to tap only monotheistic beliefs when one takes account of the increasing number of immigrants from polytheistic religious countries and also, in general, people who (simultaneously) adhere to other types of religion on the waves of postmodernization and globalization.

Related to the latter remark is the question of choice. It is remarkable that the theoretical discussion on secularization offers the perspective of *bricolage* of religious beliefs and practices from different religions (all in one person, and if necessary or so desired, combined at one moment in time), but that the vast majority of questions in the religion surveys, including the one on denomination, relies on (forced) choice between either religion A, religion B or religion C, etc. (see the rather directive introduction of the question from ISSP mentioned above). It is stipulated that choice is more open, as secularization at the individual level predicts, and people are apt to combine different beliefs and practices, but what is missing in the surveys are good questions to tap this development. Without such questions the secularization theory adherents (or their adversaries) have no instruments to arrive at conclusions on their key assumptions.

Church attendance

In most studies on religion in Western social science church attendance is a key indicator of religious practice. Usually it is analyzed as a single item, sometimes it is seen as part of a dimension of religious values and behaviors (e.g. Halman & Pettersson, 2006). People around

the globe are asked ‘how often (they) attend religious services’, apart from weddings, funerals and baptisms. They can reply, e.g. in EVS, on a 7-point Likert-scale ranging from never to several times a week.¹ The question is repeated to refer to attendance at age of 12 of the respondent. In RAMP church attendance is a 8-point scale going from every day to never. Attending religious services is, formally speaking, not the same as attending church. Engaging in the former may not necessarily relate to or require a religious community or religious organization, let alone a church building; all facets to which the latter refers more explicitly. The phrasing ‘attending religious services’ itself also can be interpreted as referring to something that one can or has to undergo, something too that is executed by some other (the priest) in a ceremony (a service) in which the subject him- or herself takes on a subordinate, passive or at least a consumerist role. This phrasing seems to relate more closely to religions that have institutionalized frequent services delivered by authority figures within these religions to the lay public, such as the Christian religions. They seem less applicable to religions in which these ‘middlemen’ are less frequently (if at all) involved in the religious experiences and routines of believers and in which the latter take on a more active role (compare Buddhism or Shinto in Japan; see also Jagodzinski & Manabe, 2003).

In ISSP church attendance is measured in different questions. First the attendance to religious services of the respondent’s mother and father at the respondent’s childhood (it is left at the respondent’s discretion to decide when that was) is measured on a 9-point scale ranging from never to several times a week. Only in Japan they made a restriction to tap attendance other than for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Then it is asked how often the respondent attended religious services at the age of 11 and 12 (with again only the Japanese restricting this question to non-life event related attendance). Then there is a question on present attendance, a question that again suffers from some country diversity in terms of wording and response categories (6-point scale that bundles different phrasing per category of different countries, but ranges from ‘once a week or more, nearly every week’ to never). Finally, there is a question about the frequency of taking part ‘in the activities or organizations of a church or place of

worship, other than attending services' (ranging from never to several times a week). It is almost needless to say that the latter question is difficult to interpret cross-culturally, especially when comparing cultures with religions that entail blurred distinctions between 'activities' and 'services'.

As stated church attendance is sometimes part of a latent dimension, for instance one that taps religious values and behaviors. Halman & Pettersson (2006) include it in their measurement of church-oriented religion. Not only church attendance, but also church adequacy (does the church give adequate answers to specific problems in life) and church confidence (having no to a great deal of confidence on a 4-point scale) are included. Church-oriented religion is separated from belief-oriented religion that includes the belief in a personal God, the importance of God in one's life, and beliefs in respectively life after death, heaven and hell. The two religion-types correlate extremely high (.90) in this analysis building mainly on EVS 1981-2000 (referring to 12 countries in Europe and the USA). This seems to at least preliminarily refute the idea that church and belief orientations are unrelated in late modern times. The distinction between the two is interesting for (theoretical) debates, but seems to blur to irrelevance in people's minds.

Religious practices

Religious practices entail not only church attendance in the surveys, but also other phenomena, such as praying. EVS in all its three waves asks: 'Do you take some moments of prayer, meditation or contemplation or something like that', another good example how postmodernity affects questionnaire builders themselves. The question combines all types of reflexive actions; traditional or new, Western or non-Western, part of teachings of religions and/or part of practices aimed at wellness and physiological benefits 'only', everything can be included in the answers. Very indicative of the vague catch-all character of the question too is of course the addition 'or something like that' in the question wording. The answers, however, can only be yes or no. ISSP 1991 and 1998 just include the frequency of praying, but is more open to

differentiation with 11 answer possibilities (from never and to several times a day). RAMP asks the same question in a 8-point format (from everyday to never). Surprisingly missing in the other surveys are questions in RAMP about religious services for birth, marriage, and death. However, the RAMP survey is not asking for practice, but for importance, according to the respondents, of having these services. It is remarkable that all surveys, hence, miss any indication of the real frequency of practices that, precisely because they relate to high-impact life-events, many, especially secularization theorists believe are one of the few practices in which traditional churches still may have a function.

Religious beliefs

The above already touches upon a few other widely used concepts and indicators in the empirical study of religion. Besides denomination and religious practices there are religious beliefs which in Western-style surveys usually are operationalized by assessing the belief (or disbelief) of respondents in several doctrines of religions. In EVS 1981 the list (to which one can reply with a yes or a no) consists of God, life after death, a soul, the devil, hell, heaven, sin, and re-incarnation. On the list of EVS 1990 resurrection of the dead was added and in 1999/2000 the list included God, life after death, hell, heaven, sin and telepathy. Re-incarnation and angels were separate questions with for the former more information on what this phenomenon entails. In ISSP 1991 and 1998 the list includes life after death, heaven, hell and religious miracles, but here there is room for doubt as the respondents can respond with definitely yes (or no) or probably yes (or no). RAMP asks detailed questions on life after death and salvation. Respondents could speculate on what would happen to them after death: nothing; there is something, but I don't know what; we go either to heaven or hell; we all go to heaven; we are re-incarnated (a concept that is further explained); we merge into some kind of eternal bliss; other; or I don't know whether there is anything or not. The latter answer category, intuitively speaking, seems to overlap with 'there is something, but I don't know'. The question on salvation relates strongly to the opposing views of Catholics and Protestants: the question on

‘being saved depends on one’s behavior in life’ could be answered as follows: I don’t believe in salvation; only those who led a good life can be saved; or, salvation does not depend on how one has led one’s life. This question was followed by another one on the conditions of salvation and whether or not this applies to everyone or only to people who are religious or have a particular religion. RAMP also asks a number of questions on religious beliefs that are valid for Christians only, especially on concepts of Jesus (e.g., Jesus as both man and God).

The concept of God is part of religious beliefs. The Western concept of (a) ‘God with whom one can have a personal relationship’, a question that one can find across all surveys, builds on the idea that God is a deity that is loving and caring, that takes personal interest in the world and in its believers, and that hence not only interacts with them but can also intervene in their lives (Halman, 1991). As early as 1981 in EVS, a battery of answers was presented to respondents in this field (repeated in 1990 and 1999/2000). Respondents could indicate what they believed most, the existence of a personal God, of some sort of spirit or life force, that they did not know what to think or that they did not believe in any sort of spirit, God or life force.

ISSP 1991 includes a complicated battery to tap the concept of God. The battery does not seem mutually exclusive and people may very well agree with more than one item (although they are allowed to choose only one). For example the first three non-God-believers categories are: I don’t believe in God; I don’t know whether there is a God and I don’t believe there is any way to find out; I don’t believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind. The second category may well include believers in God who take on rational, empirical perspective. The third category confuses believers in a God as a general deity, but who do not believe in a personal God in the modernist Judeo-Christian conception. Similar problems arise at the ‘believers’-end of the battery: I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others; While I have doubts, I feel I do believe in God; I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it. Not only the changing verbs may pose a problem for respondents: they find themselves, they feel, respectively they know to believe. Also it might be possible that one knows that God exists, but that on a day-to-day basis has doubts or feels contradictions. In this

(and as shown in other) case(s) it is impossible to make a proper choice. Surprisingly this question was repeated in ISSP 1998. In both waves however a straightforward item is included that asks for the (dis)agreement of the statement that there is a God who concerns Himself with every human being personally. This item is of course one-sided with God who engages Himself with people, instead of a two-way interaction between God and people as meant by EVS. Also several other items tap,beit among publics of only a few ISSP countries, perceptions of God as either a mother or father, master or spouse, judge or lover, friend or king.

In RAMP the question was less complicated. Besides the first two God concepts of EVS one could also choose for God as something within each person rather than something out there. Bear in mind that respondents had to choose one type of description, the one that came closest to their beliefs. Yet, in a situation of ultimate *bricolage* such a preferential choice might be outdated; for the true postmodernist, de- and recomposing his/her own religion, anything goes. This is extreme, but still, it would be interesting to see whether people (from some societies) would opt for several simultaneously possible concepts of God. Adapting one-choice question into a ranking question would be a proper alternative, an alternative with which comparability is not per se hampered and yet creates new opportunities for analyses, for instance into bricolage as an issue of secularization at the individual level. EVS 1999 includes a more direct question to tap secularization at the individual level. It has a rather abstract question relating to the phenomenon of religious bricolage asking respondents which is the most important on 10-point semantic differential scale with 1 representing the respondent's attributed importance 'to stick to a particular faith' and 10 'to explore teachings of different religious traditions'.ⁱⁱ In RAMP there is an almost similar question asking for an opinion on whether or not people, even if they belong to a particular religion, should be free to draw on teaching from other religious traditions. Of course, this question has an 'other' perspective, instead of an 'I' perspective and is therefore not comparable.

Importance of religion

The importance of religion both from a societal and individual perspective is another key field in religion surveys. EVS 1981 asks for opinions on the adequacy of the respondent's church to answer to the moral needs of the individual, the problems of family life, and man's (sic) spiritual needs (answer categories again yes or no). Also it wants to know whether or not respondents think religion will be more, less or equally important in the future. These questions of course go into the secularization debate on the declining importance of the institution of the church and of religion as such in society, for other institutions (e.g., the family), and for individuals. In EVS 1990 the first category at the first question now included not only moral needs but also moral problems, "man's" spiritual needs changed into people's spiritual needs, and an extra category referred to social problems facing our country today, which more closely taps opinions on the societal relevance of churches. Moreover it is asked whether or not the respondent thinks it proper that churches speak out on a number of social and personal issues: from disarmament, third world problems, euthanasia, homosexuality, etc. (answers yes or no). This 1990 question seems to replace the 1981 one on the future of religion and comes probably closest to assessing the relevance of the church for other, now more autonomously operating societal domains. However, the question is dropped in 1999/2000. The 1981- and 1990-question on the church answering adequately to moral problems and needs, etc., is still in. In EVS 1999/2000 there is one other question with which to assess the societal importance of religion. It refers to the role of religion and religious leaders in politics and public office: respondent's agreement or disagreement (on a 5-point scale) with the inadequacy of politicians who do not believe in God (also in ISSP 1991), religious leaders who influence people's voting and government decisions respectively (both also in ISSP 1991 and 1998), and the benefit for society of people with strong religious beliefs holding public office.

ISSP 1991 also taps opinions on the power of churches and religious organizations in the societies of the respondents (1 far too much and 5 far too little). In ISSP 1998 this question is repeated and supplemented by an item tapping respondent's (dis)agreement with the

statement that the respondent's country would be a better country if religion had less influence. ISSP 1991 asked respondents whether in their opinion there should be daily prayers at state schools, a question deleted from the ISSP 1998 list.

RAMP has a retrospective question on the influence of religion 'in the world' asking respondents to look back 20 years and assess whether or not the influence has in- or decreased. The impact of religion on several life domains is addressed by asking for the tolerance towards strong religious rituals: girls covering their heads in school, people taking soft drugs (?), parents preventing children from having blood transfusion, people committing suicide. The same goes for questions that seek to assess the separation of church and society: should religious symbols be forbidden in state schools, should religious schools be supported financially, should one swear an oath with reference to God/the Bible in court, should main (?) religions be consulted when making laws about moral questions (e.g., abortion and euthanasia). Finally there are questions about the desired and perceived influence of main religions (?) on politics. All questions, not surprisingly for surveys of the public, suffer from the problem that the impact of religion or churches (mainstream or not) on society cannot be addressed, something that is in the end required if secularization theory or its alternatives are to be falsified. Ultimately, it are all 'just' opinions. Of course, one cannot blame the surveys for this. The surveys mentioned here also at best cover the 1980s onwards and hence cannot tap all the (theoretically explored) causes and consequences (and certainly not at all levels) of processes (such as secularization) that are among us at least since classic sociology started.

Turning to the importance of religion for the individual, EVS 1981, 1990 and 1999/2000 tap the importance of God in the respondent's life on a 10 point scale (from not at all to very) and the extent to which respondents find comfort and strength from religion (yes or no). ISSP 1991 asks respondents in one item whether they agree or disagree with a general idea that the course of our lives is decided by God and in another item whether they think we each make our own fate. The first item is dropped from the ISSP 1998 list, hence a construct that taps the

balance between God's and one's own influence on life can no longer be made. RAMP asks for the influence of religious beliefs on respondent's daily life and on making important decisions.

Religiosity

A strongly related theme in religious surveys is on individual-level religiosity. In EVS 1981 people are asked to assess themselves in terms of religiosity: whether or you are a religious person, not a religious person or a convinced atheist. The width of choice is somewhat limited in the question, but still the question was again part of EVS 1990 and 1999/2000. A very general question that is not per se tapping religiosity, but which is often used in the debate on non-church related susceptibility of religiosity is about the frequency of thinking about the meaning and purpose of life (also in WVS: see the arguments of Inglehart above; answer categories 1 often, 4 never). In many discussions on the definition of religion it is this type of engagement, of being involved in this type of questions about the meaning of life, that makes people susceptible for religious answers.ⁱⁱⁱ

ISSP 1991 and ISSP 1998 tap a self-assessment of religiosity in which people could describe themselves as (1) extremely religious to (7) extremely non-religious. A question asked predominantly in Anglo-Saxon countries in both ISSP waves is focusing on the idea of being born again when encountering Christ: Would you say, that you have been 'born again' or have had a 'born again' experience – that is a turning point in your life when you committed yourself to Christ?' (answers: yes or no).

RAMP also has a detailed religiosity self-assessment instrument. It asks respondents, whether or not they go to church or place of worship, to indicate to what extent they are 'a religious person' (1 is not at all religious and 7 is very religious; only a few respondents reply 8 indicating that they do not know what is meant with religious! – consider that a fair number of countries included in RAMP are traditionally seen as ultimately secularized). Additionally, respondents can answer, regardless of their self-assessed religiosity, whether or not they have a spiritual life, explained as something that goes beyond a merely intellectual and emotional life

(1 is definitely not and 7 is definitely yes). The word 'merely' seems somewhat suggestive here and might lead to an overestimation of spirituality (few will want to be known as only two-dimensional people without a spiritual side). Another question asks for the closeness people feel to the church they say they belong to (1 very close, 4 not at all). It is somewhat disappointing that this question is filtered and only replied by those who consider themselves belonging to a church (see discussion above). Many who have left the church and do no longer consider themselves member, might still feel close to it, for whatever reason. A very difficult issue is the measurement of a religious experience. Having had a religious experience and admitting to it, is telling of one's religiosity, either in a traditional or an alternative sense. In RAMP respondents were asked if they ever had an experience of something that exists, but transcends (goes beyond) everyday reality, and which you may or may not call God. Vast majorities reply never (1) and only a few all the time (5). It is remarkable that the addition 'may or may not call God' is in the question. This makes the question again predominantly monotheistic and respondents most probably associate it with religious experiences as meant by the main traditional religions.

New religions

Non-traditional experiences of transcendence witnessed in new religions and in new individual religious rituals are the final subject here. Already in EVS 1981 a number of questions on the theme were asked. A series of experiences is tapped: feeling in touch with someone far away, seen things that were happening at a great distance, feeling in touch with someone who died, feeling close to a powerful, spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself. Of course, these question may also apply to the traditional, pre-new age and pre-clairvoyant times, but it can be argued that these are more likely part of new religions and individualized spiritual (if not religious) experiences than of the traditional religions and of ritualized experiences in these religions. Yet, a sharper delineation from traditionally and newly evoked experiences would have been welcomed. Besides this question and the question on religious beliefs asking for a

personal God and some sort of spirit or life force mentioned earlier, there are no questions on new religions or rituals in EVS 1981, nor in EVS 1990. There are in the 1999/2000 versions, but it is still impossible to depict trends as a time series is lacking. EVS 1999/2000 asks respondent if they “believe in supernatural forces, which may be expressed in terms like a Life Force, a Mighty Power, God, a Spirit, a Universal Law, a Cosmic Conscience or a Source of all creation”. Of course, it would have been helpful to separate the traditional God from the other powers if one aims to assess the adherence to alternatives. Furthermore, the possession of and believe in a lucky charm such as a mascot or a talisman is recorded, as is the frequency of consulting a horoscope and taking account of these horoscopes in daily life.

In a smaller selection of ISSP 1991 and 1998 countries it was asked whether it was definitely true (1) or definitely not true (4) that good luck charms sometimes do bring good luck, that some fortune tellers can really foresee the future, some faith healers really do have God-given healing powers, and that a person’s star sign at birth, or horoscope, can affect the course of one’s future. ISSP taps opinions with these questions (among only a few countries, as said), and no information on the extent to which people themselves participate in these activities.

More alternative questions in RAMP relate to the possession of, and the believe in the protection of having a crucifix or Saint Christopher medal, which is of course a very Christian, if not a very Catholic question. The EVS-questions on the mascot, talisman or any other lucky charm and on the horoscope are in RAMP too.

4. Conclusions

One of the key issues is the lack of insight in religions other than the traditional monotheistic ones. As shown, people who participate in religious surveys and who adhere to these religions have the opportunity to state so at the start of most questionnaires, but in general that is the only opportunity. At the subsequent stages of most surveys conceived of in the West and mainly used among Western publics, people who uphold beliefs related to polytheistic religions are left in

the dark. If these surveys were contained to Western publics this might seem not such a grandiose issue, although one could argue that as a result of immigration and globalization publics in the West are both less homogeneous in terms of monotheistic religion heritage as well as, regardless of their heritage, more susceptible for polytheistic beliefs. This in itself would justify the call for more efforts to tap polytheism in religious surveys in the West. Moreover, these surveys tend to diffuse around the globe basically unchanged (see ISSP and WVS). Publics in other corners of the globe than the Western ones are granted one opportunity to state their non-Western religious affiliation and next are confronted with numerous questions that are Western (cf. the idea of a personal God), are (thus) predominantly Christian, are dealing with doctrinal issues between Christian factions (cf. the idea of being saved results from worldly efforts or not), and that sometimes even are straightforwardly Catholic. In some non-Western countries, as we have seen, only a limited number of these questions are not fielded. Mostly, for the sake of having opportunities of comparisons, many typically Western questions are presented to publics in non-Western countries. Maybe except for the questions on re-incarnation and on the tendency to explore teachings of different religions there are hardly any questions to which these publics may comfortably respond.

Not only is employing mostly traditional monotheistic Western-Christian questions non-inclusive and a persistent way of ‘othering’ non-Western beliefs, it is also running against the basic points of debate in the sociology of religion. It is non-inclusive as it neglects those who are not socialized or familiarized with the traditional Western concepts of religion, as stated above. It is also a way of ‘othering’, as Masuzawa (2005) eloquently calls it referring to the nineteenth-century invention of classifying world religions, publics from a range of regions as wide as North Africa to the Pacific East whose religions were seen as specific, historically unique traditions unlike the world religions (especially Christianity) that presented a generic supernatural and hence universalistic belief system. As Masuzawa argues, and as can be found in this article reviewing indicators of religious surveys, these perceptions continue to shape religious studies in the academy. This is also in fact rather surprising as the debate in the

sociology of religion seems almost naturally to call these studies and surveys to open up to non-Western, polytheistic beliefs. Questions forcing people to choose one religion, to contemplate on one God or one Superpower, to attend services mediated by an authority figure, et cetera, run against the basic assumption in the secularization and pluralism debates that today individuals, from the West or not, re-compose their own religious belief based upon what is on the menu of different religions (see Dobbelaere's argument in the introduction) and/or turn their back on established religion and its hierarchical know-all organizations to seek for answers in non-absolutist, non-all-encompassing self-made religious experiences and activities (see Inglehart's argument above). True or not, valid or not, found among broad segments of the publics or not, what is important is that surveys come up with questions that deal with this basic assumption of individualized religious *bricolage* and start accommodating one the most central points of theoretical debate of secularization and/or religious pluralization at the individual level. A good start would be to give people more choice, more than one and more than a yes or a no to many question reviewed here. Another option may be to include more questions on individualized forms of religious activities and experiences and in doing so to go beyond the mystic, clairvoyant, and occult (another form of 'othering': respondents may get the impression that it one either adheres to the institutionalized traditional one-God-related beliefs – on which the large majority of questions go – or indulges in the obscure). A simple example may suffice: in many societies, Western or not, people go to a place of worship to pay respect, light a candle or some incense, touch or wash a statue, or do some other activity, and then go again. In other cases people invite a religious authority figure at their homes to get some type of blessing for their home and family. Others may own some type of altar at their home or have placed important memorable artifacts on their chimneys that have an almost sacred if not simply a straightforward religious meaning to them. These and other examples of non-institutionalized and individualized religious activities should be part of surveys that aim to resolve central debates in the sociology of religion, whether or not they are planning to field their surveys beyond Western borders.

A final remark on the balance between theory and surveys dwells on the reasons why people at all shift towards alternative forms of religion. The meaning people attach to 'new religions' or to recomposing their own beliefs from existing sources or religion is a black box in the surveys and is even rather underdeveloped in the theories discussed here. One could argue that the reasons to do so and the meanings attached to it relate to profound changes in the lives of people living in late-modernity (Vinken, 2004). In many advanced societies people have the obligation, whether they want this or not, to take more control over their own life courses. In the fields of education, work, parenting, caring, securing after-working-life income, et cetera, institutional planning and control are waning. More and more people, consequently, are engaged in thinking about their future life course, while acknowledging that the future is uncertain and that their abilities to master the future are insufficient and need constant updating. This process of reflexivity itself may boost people's search for purpose and meaning, especially purpose and meaning in which uncertainty, insufficiency and individual reflexivity are acknowledged. This might well exclude the traditional, one-God-one-truth religions serviced by all-knowing experts and align more with alternative, i.e. individualized forms of religion. Moreover, the result of institutional withdrawal and rising individual responsibility over the life course is that (the more fortunate) individuals have more opportunity to bricolage. It has become more likely that people at a certain age are in highly non-similar life course positions and, vice versa, that people in similar life course positions (a parent, a student, an employee) are of different ages. Similarly, it is likely that similar people (the same age, the same social status, et cetera) believe differently and that different people believe the same. Because of the increased self-directedness following changing life course arrangements people will believe and combine beliefs to their own liking over their life course. What is more, with institutions withdrawing, people's dependency on others in their direct social environment and on previous choices in their life course, gains in relative importance. Given that we lack sociological notions on the reasons why people shift towards alternative religions, the sociology of religion and especially in its empirical studies might do with basic sociological notions like those from life course sociology. Life course

transitions are sociological *par excellence* as they relate to the impact of changing social relationships of individuals. Having co-students, colleagues, a spouse, a child, are crucial for decisions people make, not only, for instance, on their future working life, but also on the basic issues of faith. When changes in these configurations accelerate on the waves of an individualizing life course, changes in future prospects and in beliefs will also gain impetus; changes that look like *bricolage* for those who believe in consistency over the life course, but are more likely to be seen as accommodating at the given moment in the life course.

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Notes

ⁱ The EVS question is complicated and seems not to have an at least ordinal format. Answer categories are: 1 more than once a week; 2 once a week; 3 once a month; 4 Christmas/Easter day; 5 other specific

holy day; 6 once a year; 7 less often; 8 never, practically never. Moreover, the format may pose a problem for anyone going to church only for Christmas, hence once a year.

ⁱⁱ Other beliefs are tapped in EVS and ISSP, but these beliefs do not appear every year or in every country. Only in EVS 1981, e.g., there is a battery on the applicability of the Ten Commandments for one's self and for other people. In ISSP 1998 questions on The Bible are asked (e.g., it is the actual word of God), questions that were not asked in Japan.

ⁱⁱⁱ In EVS 1990 there more questions on the relationship between the meaning of life and death and God (or not), but these are again dropped in EVS 1999/2000. Some of these question appear in ISSP 1998 as well.