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The Importance of Social Science in the Study of Religion*

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Abstract

The author uses a range of contentious assertions about contemporary religion and spirituality to show the limits on what can be extrapolated from ethnographic work and to argue for the centrality of empirical positivistic social science to claims about the popularity and social significance of religious and spiritual phenomena.

Keywords: census, definition, false extrapolation, limits of fieldwork, statistics.

Introduction

This article is deliberately polemical and may seem tangential to the core interests of this journal but it makes and justifies an important point about the limits of fieldwork: ethnographic research has many important virtues but it rarely offers a firm foundation for generalization. Or, to consider the problem from the other end, it is important that fieldworkers appreciate the limits on what can be extrapolated from their research. For example, Tanya Luhrmann's excellent study of English

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pagan groups gives us great insight into the motives, attitudes, beliefs and practices of the small number of people she studied (Luhrmann, 1988). What it does not do is allow us to estimate the number of pagans in Britain, gauge the differential class or gender appeal of paganism, or assess whether paganism is growing or declining (and if either, at what rate). To explain why a robust reminder of the importance of social science is required, I begin by listing a few examples of poor reasoning and almost certainly mistaken observations. Some of the errors come from text-based research and some from quantitative research but the general case is made in relation to ethnography because that has been the dominant method in British empirical studies of religion (Wallis and Bruce, 1989).

False Extrapolation

A persistent weakness of treatments of religious phenomena is a fondness for inappropriately generalizing from a limited base of knowledge. Invariably when I lecture on secularization members of the audience will tell me that I must be wrong about the decline of the Christian churches in Britain because their churches are growing or their alternative spirituality milieu is large.

Shifting Definitions and Measures

Many people promiscuously shift between and conflate diverse measures of religious belief, identification, affiliation and behaviour so that arguments which properly require one sort of data are rebutted with another. For example, a report from the Von Hugel Institute asserts that “in the 2001 census, 80% of the country said that they believed in God” (Davis *et al.*, 2008: 25). The 2001 census did not ask about belief in God. The England and Wales version of the census followed a question about ethnicity with “What is your religion?” (which implies you have one) and gave a choice list of “Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh” etc. “Christian” was chosen by 72% of those completing the forms. The Scottish census was importantly different. The religion question came before the ethnicity one and was both more neutral and more specific. It asked “What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?” and gave as choices, “None, Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic, Other Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim” etc. The various Christian options were chosen by 65% of those completing the forms. What made the results unusual was that they were considerably higher than those produced by all contemporary sample surveys and that all indices of church membership and attendance were higher for Scotland than for England and Wales. Whatever the census results show, they cannot be taken as showing that “80% of the country said that they believed in God” (for a detailed discussion see Voas and Bruce, 2004).

A similar slippage between different indices and aspects of religiosity often occurs in discussions of non-Christian religions in Britain and elsewhere. Gross figures for implied membership of non-Christian ethnic communities are often treated as if they were comparable to measures of personal religious commitment. One essayist criticized Scottish historians for being preoccupied with Christian denominations (Sutcliffe, 2004: 92). To demonstrate the importance of neglected non-Christian religions in Scotland he cited data for “Pakistani Muslims” and for the Chinese community: the former a national identity with the religion assumed and the latter an ethnic identity that tells us nothing about religion. A somewhat similar failure to consider the meaning of data is seen in loose claims about the growth or decline of religions worldwide. It is common to see stories about the change in relative size of Islam, Christianity or Hinduism presented as if such shifts represented winners and losers in a competition for adherents when they almost invariably reflect simply differential rates of population growth in different countries and ethnic minority populations.

Rebutting a Tested Assertion with an Untested One

For two decades it has been common to claim that the decline of the British churches represents, not a loss of faith as such, but only a loss of faith in religious institutions. It is asserted that Britons are, as Grace Davie put it in the subtitle of her book *Religion in Britain Since 1945*: “believing without belonging” (Davie, 1994). This assertion is often supported only by evidence that the numbers of people who say they believe in God is considerably higher than the numbers of those who go to church but no attention is paid either to the evidential basis for the first claim or to trend figures. Having approvingly cited Davie, academic and Church of England cleric Martyn Percy writes: “statistical surveys continually support the thesis that England is a place where the vast majority of the population continue to affirm their belief in God, but then proceed to do little about it” (2004: 32). Table 1 below shows data for belief in God for Scotland but the English figures are very similar and they allow at best only a quarter of the population to be claimed for anything like the sort of God the Church of England worships.

Getting the Scale Wrong

Since the late 1970s scholars and journalists have been reporting and studying a variety of alternative spiritualities that are conventionally described as “the New Age.” Many case studies, and not just those produced by journalists, assert that New Age spirituality is popular and important. New expressions of religiosity are

Table 1. *Belief in God, Great Britain, 1990 and 2000 (%)*

	1990	2000
There is a personal God	32	26
There is some sort of higher power, spirit or life-force	41	21
There is something there	--	23
I don't really know what to believe	15	12
I don't really think there is any sort of God, spirit or life-force	10	15
None of these	1	3
	99	100

Source: Bruce, 2002: 138

presented as if they represented the new *zeitgeist* (for example Kemp, 2003). Many implicitly assert the same through the roundabout mechanism of explaining the growth of this phenomenon by a social cause that is commonplace: individualism or consumerism, for example. It should be obvious that both the direct assertion and the implication through the explanatory model require that a lot of people be "spiritual." Yet how often are those claims tested? There are a few major surveys and there is the pioneering work of Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2004). But most people working in this field seem happy to take the great increase in the availability of a wide variety of New Age ideas and therapies (which is a supply, not a demand, change) as proof that there must be a corresponding vast amount of interest in such things.

In the above examples, confusion is created by a lack of attention to the need for analytical clarity and appropriate evidence. Before we can talk about the current state or future of religion we need numbers and the right sort of numbers. But before we can count instances of the phenomenon that interests us, we must identify it.

Defining Religion and Spirituality

Before defining religion and spirituality, I want to offer a number of preliminary clarifications. It is sometimes argued that changes in the nature and popularity of religion and spirituality require new conceptualizations of the phenomena. I can see no warrant for this; quite the opposite, in fact. Fixity of definition is not a refusal to recognize change: it is essential to describing change. If we change our notions of, and measures of, hot and cold, we make it impossible to describe changes in temperature. Likewise the accurate description of change in the sphere of religion requires conceptual continuity. For example, the observation that the "church" form of religion is undermined by the growth of democracy and cultural diversity (a proposition that forms a key part of my explanation of secularization)

requires that we mean the same thing by “the church form of religion” when looking at 1100, 1400, 1900 and 2000.

That seems so obvious that it may be that what appear to be alternative suggestions are just examples of people talking past each other because a variety of intellectual tasks are being elided. I take it that we can, as W. J. Runciman suggests, usefully distinguish four tasks of the social scientist: reportage, description, explanation, and evaluation (1983: 1–56). We can *report* on events, situations and occurrences: what happened in Paris in 1792? We can *describe* how the participants felt or understood their situations: what did the revolutionaries think they were doing? We can *explain* why things happened: what were the causes of the French revolution? And we can *evaluate* their actions in the moral sense of judging things to be good or bad. Although all four purposes are entirely worthwhile, I take the fourth to be mostly the concern of the public policy specialist and the third – explanation – to be the primary goal of the social scientist. But we have to be clear about what it is we are explaining; hence logically accurate reportage is the essential first step. To return to my example, before I can explain the decline of the church form of religion (or describe how people felt about that or evaluate it) I need to report accurately its prevalence in 1400 and 2000.

A second preliminary remark: it may be obvious but it is still worth stating that I believe there is a real world independent of how we talk about it (or “discourse” to use the currently fashionable term). The case against relativism has been made often and clearly and need not be repeated (for example Gellner 1968 and Hacking 1999). This is not to say that we cannot learn from postmodernists, Foucauldians or Marxists but what we should learn is to be careful in our social science, not to abandon it. Anyone who thinks otherwise need read no further.

Defining Religion

The belief that there is an obdurate reality independent of how we think about it is no excuse for naiveté. It is not a warrant for supposing that either its conceptualization or recording will be easy but students of religion seem particularly prone to making heavy weather of such matters. One participant at the conference at which the original of this paper was presented took it for granted that we could not define the realm which his job title of “Professor of Religion” required him to study. There seems no obvious reason why we should find it any harder to define (and create operational measures for) “religion” than political scientists do to define “democracy,” historians “feudalism” or dentists “tooth decay.” I might add that many of the conference participants who thought it impossible to define religion had no problem at all using notions such as “horizontal transcendence.” Of course,

difficulties will arise but there is no reason why, as a starting point, we should suppose our intellectual tasks any harder than those of our colleagues who study other areas of social life or than those we encounter in our private lives where we daily work with such abstractions as fidelity, trust, family or the like.

Those who believe that conceptualization is possible tend to adopt one of two strategies: functional and substantive definition. Functional definitions identify religion in terms of what it does; substantive ones in terms of what it is. It is important to note (and I will come back to this) that recognizing that religion serves specific social purposes is not the same as defining religion as the thing that has those purposes. If we just take the great founding trio of sociology we could say that Emile Durkheim sees social cohesion, Max Weber sees theodicy, and Karl Marx sees ideological oppression as major consequences of religion (and as major causes of the continuation of religion) but none of them actually makes those consequences defining features of religion. For a truly functional definition of religion we can look at Edward Bailey's conceptualization of what he calls "implicit religion." In his manifesto for a Centre for the Study of Implicit Religion and Contemporary Spirituality, he offered three definitions of implicit religion (the emphases and punctuation are as in the original text):

1. *Commitment*. ... it directs our initial attention towards the empirical human experience (of *being* committed), which has the merit of placing the "content" or "object" of the experience, within the wider context, of *experiencing*. It is concerned, you might say, with "religion" as such, before turning to its "theological" component.
2. The second definition is *integrating foci*. Just as *Commitment* covers the whole "ladder" of levels of consciousness, so *integrating foci* covers the various "sizes" of society, the individual and the social, the face-to-face group and the societal ...
3. *Intensive concerns with extensive effects* (Bailey, 1997: 1).

Bailey is saying that commitment, social belonging, and feeling strongly about something are actually religious (even though in most instances of those things the people involved think they are secular). The obvious problem with this conceptualization is that it is very hard to think of anything that would not be encompassed.

Depicting gardening as religious seems rather pointless. It does not help us talk about religion and, paradoxically, it hinders functional analysis. It is perfectly proper to be interested in the social functions of some activity, attitude or institution. We can understand eighteenth-century patronage, for example, if we consider it not as a vice but as a form of resource allocation that well suits a hierarchical social structure based on birth rather than achievement. The notion of "functional

equivalent” is an important one. We learn a great deal about social evolution and social mutation if we compare the different ways that societies can allocate resources. But in order to demonstrate that some social institution has the functions imputed to it (rather than, for example, being counter-productive or a waste of space: that is, dysfunctional or afunctional), we have to be able to define the institution independent of its supposed functions. If not, we are merely renaming. To say that any social activity (for Bailey, “integrating foci”) is “implicitly religious” tells us no more about the world than does “This three-sided object is a triangle.” Actually it tells us less; with a narrow tautology we at least still know what a triangle is; with Bailey’s renaming we no longer know what religion is.

If instead of re-naming parts of the world (and without warrant imputing social functions to them) we try to develop testable empirical claims about functional equivalents we must begin with substantive differences. To say that football may share some features of a religion is to raise interesting research questions about the resources fans devote to football, the psychological states they attach to success and failure, the attitudes of some fans to the arenas in which their teams play, their capacity for unfounded optimism (and conversely their ability to construe historic victim myths) and so on. Put in those terms, the identification of parallels also raises the important counter-balance of the *differences*. Football fans do not have shared rituals that are held to guarantee divine approval (as distinct from idiosyncratic rituals such as always wearing a lucky shirt to home games). Football fans do not marry only those who support the same team. Few shun those who do not share their allegiance. Few suffer debilitating trauma when they lose faith, or construct elaborate moral and social codes around their footballing interests. Few found political parties that claim a distinctive moral and social agenda based on the principles of Scrumchester City FC. Few believe that the world was created by the directors of Scrumchester City FC or kept in its orbit by the club groundsman. Even those who like a bit of aggro will not seek to destroy the citadels of the Bundesliga in the belief that German football offends their God. Examining the parallels between football and religion can be interesting and illuminating but it is not helped at all by defining football as a religion. To do so is to establish by definition what should be demonstrated factually.

The notion of *implicit* religion seems particularly unhelpful. It should not be confused with the very important point that phenomena can be religious to varying degrees. At one extreme we have the self-consciously religious: praying, attending worship services, reading sacred texts, contemplating the life of the Buddha, and so on. At the other extreme we can imagine actions and states of mind that are influenced very slightly by religious ideas and motifs and we can even imagine that

the people in question may be largely unaware of those religious influences. For example, a father may take pride in the effort he puts into his parenting role and implicitly suppose that there is some obscure karmic order to the universe that means that good actions will be rewarded even where there is no obvious this-worldly mechanism for such a result and where the reality seems otherwise. Someone who supposes that a cheat will “get his come-uppance” may be relying on an unconsidered or implicit hope of a supernatural order. We may reasonably want to say that such a view is implicitly religious. However, we should also want to distinguish such views from thoroughly secular alternatives. It is quite possible to have a biological and secular model of the long-term rewards of good parenting. It is quite possible to suppose a thoroughly secular and mundane model of how cheats may get their just desserts.

In summary: there are great difficulties with functional definitions. Firstly, they are extremely difficult to apply consistently and we see that in the fact that proponents of such an approach usually go one of two ways. They either fall back on an examination of beliefs and institutions which are religious in the more obvious substantive sense or they treat everything as religious. Secondly, they assume the very thing that needs to be explored: just what functions does this or that religion perform in this or that setting? Thirdly, they rule out secularization by definitional fiat: if we define religion as that thing that provides social cohesion, for example, we more or less rule out the possibility that people can exist without religion.

There are difficulties with substantive definitions. They may suit western cultures but ill fit some non-western or traditional cultures. Where people daily commune with the spirits of their ancestors or take steps to avoid ubiquitous witchcraft, it may not be easy to discriminate the natural from the supernatural in the minds of those concerned. But a definition that fits with broad contemporary common sense reflection on the matter is usually not a very bad place to start. Moreover, the utility of a definition must in the end depend upon the success of the explanations in which it is employed. That is, the purpose of a definition is to bring together analytically similar phenomena, aspects of which we believe we can explain in the same terms. I define religion substantively because this allows me to formulate a number of theories which I believe have considerable explanatory scope. Religion, then, *consists of beliefs, actions and institutions which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose*. Such a formulation seems to encompass what ordinary people mean when they talk of religion.

As a pre-emptive rebuttal of a common criticism, let me say that I see nothing in this definition that confines it to the West, or even to theistic salvation religions.

Leaving aside for a moment the fact that most Hindus and Buddhists do actually worship deities, this definition seems to fit perfectly well even the most philosophical brands of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Whose Definition?

At this point it is worth stating something which should be obvious but nonetheless continues to create some confusion. A functionalist definition of religion is an outsider's or analyst's concept; it defines the phenomenon by features of which ordinary believers may at best be only dimly aware. But while substantive definitions more obviously accord with lay people's notions, they too are imposed from outside. In Runciman's schema (1983), the analyst may use "description" to help formulate the categories that are used in "reportage" but, once formulated, the categories that are used for that reportage must be independent of the descriptions. That is, the analyst must be prepared to argue with his or her respondents.

At the broadest level of defining religion (and its adjectival forms) this happens less often than you might expect. Those who are unfamiliar with large-scale survey data might be surprised at the extent to which the data generated by objective and subjective measures coincide. That is, people (taken severally and jointly) are often quite consistent. For example, in British surveys we find that measures of church attendance, self-descriptions as religious, and assent to core doctrinal propositions often fit very closely.

In some cases arguments between the actor and the observer are merely problems of translation and can be resolved by further explication. Many years ago in a personal interview, the Revd Ian Paisley (founder of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster) responded badly when I described his organization as a "sect." He bristled: "We are a Christian church!" When I explained that by "sect" sociologists meant having clear membership tests, radically dividing the saved from the unsaved, having a strong interest in doctrinal conformity, expecting all members to live up to the highest standards of behavioural conformity, and extracting considerable (even sacrificial) commitment from the typical member (and not just the unusually pious), he quickly got the idea and agreed that, yes, the FPCU was "sectarian" in the sociological sense. The insider and outsider came to the joint understanding that the insider expected any body worthy of the title of "church" to be sect-like!

In other cases, a clash between the external conception and the actor's view may be more than a translation issue and may trigger the search for explanation. For example, in the 1990s Scots with salaried non-manual occupations were more likely than their English counterparts (mistakenly in the terms of the sociologist of

class) to describe themselves as working class. This is an interesting anomaly which leads us to raise political and cultural questions about the role that class images play in national identity. Similarly in the field of religion, if we find that some people who never attend church, do not pray, do not read the Bible, do not think that Christ is the son of God, and so on, nonetheless describe themselves as “Christian,” then we have an interesting clash which can be explored to great benefit. The point is that such anomalies only arise because our analytic concepts are independent of our respondents’ self-images. I will put my key point this way: if we aim to explain social phenomena we cannot confine ourselves to “*verstehen*” or understanding or Runciman’s “description.”

Defining Spirituality

Religion is relatively easy to identify because, although a private religion is not ruled out by definition, the socio-logic is that only those systems supported by significant numbers of people (or in pre-democratic societies, numbers of significant people) survive long enough to trouble the analyst. Defining spirituality is much more difficult because, as I will argue, what is usually meant by it rests heavily on the subjective and on the amorphous.

My reading of both actors’ responses and commentators’ glosses is that the term “spirituality” may be applied to at least four analytically separable things.

First, it may simply represent the subjective component of religion and be a synonym for piety. This is what we have when our survey respondents describe themselves as regular church attenders, assert entirely conventional Christian beliefs, and describe themselves as both religious and spiritual. “Spiritual” here means that they are really serious about their religion and it may also carry an implied criticism of some others whose religious behaviour is mere conformity. Second, it may represent a claim to sensitivity. Describing urban working-class culture in the north of England in the 1940s, Richard Hoggart (1957: 98–99) perceptively made the point that “Christian” was often used as a way of asserting general virtue; it was a synonym for “ethical.”

I’m as good a Christian as you, though I don’t go to church,” they say. With that often goes the implied reversal: “You’re as bad as I am, even though you do.” The regular churchgoer, it is inferred, may be less virtuous than some of those who never attend. If he is very regular and something of a figure at church, he may well be a bit of a hypocrite – whereas the man who makes no pretensions, but does his best, is probably much nearer being a Christian. After all, doing your best to be an “ordinary decent” person – that is what Christianity means, really (1957: 99).

My guess is that, with the decline of Christianity, much of that usage has passed to the term “spiritual” but with a new twist. Hoggart’s non-churchgoing people wished to avoid being labelled immoral. Current use of “spiritual” seems intended less to rebut immorality and more to fend off accusations of insensitivity and shallowness. Increased personal liberty seems to have made some people less concerned about conforming to externally imposed moral codes but created a new concern for possible judgements of our personalities. Being spiritual may be claimed against an implied alternative of dull, insensitive, beastly and unromantic.

Third, “spirituality” may be used to designate a putative middle ground between the conventionally religious and the avowedly secular. This is certainly done by critics of the secularization thesis who first postulate avowed secularism (or the complete absence of supernaturalist beliefs) as the state required to fulfil the secularization thesis and then claim those who are neither conventionally religious nor paid-up members of a rationalist association as “spiritual.” Consider the evolution of the common survey question on belief in God. From the 1950s to the 1990s Gallup and other polling organizations usually asked people to choose between variants of four positions we see represented in the “1990” column of Table 1: (a) There is a personal God; (b) There is some sort of higher power, spirit or life-force; (c) I don’t really know what to think; and (d) I don’t really think there is any sort of God, spirit or life-force. The first of those is classic theism: the expected Christian response. The third is intended to capture agnosticism and the fourth atheism. Quite what the second category is capturing in a non-Hindu or Buddhist population is not clear but something very interesting happened when a polling organization added a new option.

As the respondents in the two surveys are not the same and the polls are ten years apart, we cannot be sure that the differences in responses are caused by a change in the measurement instrument (rather than representing, for example, real change in beliefs or enduring differences between two populations). But the fact that so many people in 2000 chose “There is something there” suggests that many of those who chose “higher power” in 1990 were not actually committed adherents to some notion of cosmic consciousness but were non-religious people who were reluctant to commit themselves to agnosticism or atheism. Support for that view can be found in data from a Scottish survey (Bruce and Glendinning, 2003). Table 2 shows in its columns the responses to the above “belief in God” question and in its rows the division of respondents according to how they answered the question “Whether you attend religious services or not, would you say you were religious, spiritual or neither?”

Table 2. *Belief in God and Self-Description as Religions or Spiritual, Scotland 2001 (%)*

Column percentages	There is a personal God	There is some sort of spirit or life-force	There is something there	I don't really know what to think	I don't really think there's anything	None of these things	Total
Religious*	60	33	31	8	5	6	33
Spiritual	15	31	8	2	3	4	15
Neither	21	32	57	85	90	87	48
Can't choose	3	4	4	5	2	2	4
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Bases N =	406	443	386	170	102	91	1598

Source: 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey

*Those respondents who said they were both spiritual and religious, on re-checking, were considered religious

As we can see, 60% of those who claimed to believe in a personal God also described themselves as religious. Those who said they believed in some sort of spirit or life-force spread equally across religious, spiritual and neither. But consider those who said "There is something there." One-third of them called themselves religious, only 8% called themselves "spiritual" and more than half said "neither." This rather suggests that the "There is something there" option represents something closer to the procedural point of agnosticism than to non-theistic spirituality: it reflects an unwillingness to commit or a lack of interest in the issue. And, to work back a stage, it certainly calls into question the high levels of spirituality inferred from surveys which offer only four options and take the "life-force or higher-power" respondents to be "spiritual."

Thus far I have suggested three usages of "spirituality" that are largely distractions from our purposes in constructing a useful definition: as a synonym for piety, as a synonym for sensitivity, and as a largely inappropriate way of claiming the undecided or uninterested for the "really religious" camp. At the risk of sounding like a stuck record, I will now repeat the point I made about defining religion. If, for a moment, we stop making programmatic assertions about the difficulty of conceptualizing our subject matter and look at what we do, we find among analysts and ordinary people a considerable amount of agreement. I suggest that we can readily identify spirituality (of the sort that interests those of us who study the changing fate of religion in the modern world) by three features. Its ideological core is a belief in some sort of supernatural force or entity which differs from that of conventional religion in having no location outside the self, except in some all-pervasive notion of the cosmic consciousness. A phrase common in the New Age centre at Findhorn – "coming into your power" – nicely captures the sense that

enlightenment, rather than allowing access to something external, makes you aware of what you already have. Its second component is the idea that believing in the spirit changes how one sees and feels about the world. Its third component is the idea that becoming aware of our spiritual nature should make us better people. These three features fit perfectly well with what Heelas and Woodhead mean by spirituality: “subjective-life forms of the sacred, which emphasise inner sources of significance and authority and the cultivation or sacralisation of unique subjective-lives” and which they contrast with more conventionally religious conceptions “which emphasise a transcendent source of significance and authority to which individuals must conform at the expense of the cultivation of their unique subjective-lives” (Heelas and Woodhead, 2004: 9).

The above may seem like a rather long-winded way of making a simple point but I think it makes it: it is not that difficult to define religion and spirituality. Nor, though I can only touch briefly on these issues here, is it all that difficult to move from widely-accepted definitions to operational measures. For example, all theistic religions have communal ceremonies in which the deity or deities are worshipped, honoured and placated. Even the most plain and anti-ritualistic forms of reformed Protestantism require that believers gather together periodically to reaffirm their beliefs and to worship God. Hence for the major world religions it is not difficult, as the World Values survey does, to construct questions which collect information about one aspect of religiosity. We can debate (and, more importantly, study) the differences in results generated by different instruments. We can ask a stand-alone question such as “Did you attend church, synagogue, temple or some other place of worship in the last seven days?” or we can insert “Attending church” into a long list of alternative answers offered for the question “Which of the following have you done in the last week.” As you might expect, the former generally produces higher church attendance rates than the latter. We can try “Apart from such special occasions and weddings and funerals, how often would you say you attend church, synagogue, temple these days?” And although these examples are taken from standards instruments used in Christian and Jewish contexts, it is not difficult to devise suitable variants for other religions. Nor are we confined to asking the public. We can count attendance at places of worship or we can ask the clergy to count and report attendances. And when, as in the Heelas and Woodhead project, we can compare “body counts” with clergy estimates we find that the figures produced are very close.

As all religions and spiritual disciplines require adherents to believe things and do things, it is quite possible (if sometimes difficult) to construct plausible measures that will allow us to collect information about other aspects of the nature and

extent of religiosity or spirituality. It is worth adding a final point about definitions and operational measures in the study of religion: those who design, administer, analysis and interpret surveys are generally no more naive or ill-informed than those who study religion by ethnographic and qualitative methods. Precisely because they have to make them work, the designers of surveys are all too aware of the technical difficulties in question construction and arrangement. Empirical social scientists do not assert that studying religion or spirituality is simple; we assert only that it is no more difficult than studying other social phenomena such as politics and economies.

Things We Do Not Know Unless We Do Statistics

So that the limited nature of my point can be absolutely clear, I want to stress that the social-scientific method is not the only possible approach to the study of religion and spirituality. Theologians, art historians, archaeologists, literary critics, anthropologists and philosophers can all tell us useful things about religion. Demarcation problems arise because many of those who do not use (or worse, avowedly reject) positivistic, empirical social science nonetheless make factual claims about the popularity of this or that form of religion or spirituality. Darren Kemp (2003), for example, makes specific assertions about the growing importance of New Age spirituality which cannot be tested by his method of describing a wide variety of New Age ideas and practices. Michael York concludes a descriptive account of the New Age in three settings by saying: "Whilst the numbers involved with new forms of religiosity remain hard to identify precisely, we can at least recognise the ubiquity and growth of the diffuse religious consumer supermarket which demonstrates an increasingly vital presence in both urban Holland and rural southern France" (2003: 131). The references to size – "ubiquity," "growth," "increasingly vital presence" – all imply that there is a lot going on. What appears to be an important qualification – the difficulty of precise identification – is neither here nor there. Just looking at my car and my cat I find it hard to estimate their weights but I have no trouble knowing one is vastly larger than the other. Like the good magician (in the entertainment rather than the New Age sense) who deflects our attention from the real site of action with a lure, York pleads guilty to imprecision so that he can get away with the trick of avoiding estimating the extent of the phenomenon.

In a discursive essay on religion in modern Scotland, Sutcliffe approvingly cites a theologian writing: "most unchurched people in Scotland today are more likely to construct their worldview from aspects of the New Age outlook than from elements of mainstream Christianity" (2004: 91). The theologian could justify the phrase

“more likely” in the same way I can justify the assertion that, because I am elderly, I am more likely to be mistaken for Lauren Bacall than for Madonna: true but trite because I am not going to be mistaken for either. But he obviously wishes us to take “more likely” as also meaning “likely” or “quite likely.” There is no evidence for this claim. Sutcliffe himself uses bad prose to make implausible assertions against the secularization paradigm:

our attention should shift ... from theorisations of secularisation as a “de-religioning” factor in the modern world to a revisionist theory of secularisation as the laicisation and domestication of religious discourse and action in the culture at large... This relocates rather than erases religion: we look now for vibrant – if necessarily unstable – sites beyond the boundaries of those large social institutions (the churches) which have historically been treated as the hegemonic signifiers of “religion” (2004: 88).

The implication is that we will find what we are looking for. He goes on to list a wide variety of observations which we can summarize as follows: Scotland now has citizens who belong to a wide range of non-Christian religions, it has a major New Age centre at Findhorn, and there is a lot of other New Agey stuff going on (which he illustrates with a detailed account of a fire-walking ceremony). Actually the proportion of Scots who claimed a non-Christian religious identity in the 2001 Census was just 1.87%, the Findhorn Foundation is overwhelmingly staffed and visited by foreigners, and, although the range of alternative spiritual activities one can identify is very large, the numbers of people in any way involved in any is tiny.

The key point is this: positivistic social science is not the only way to study religion but it is the only basis for claims of size and significance: there is only one arithmetic. I now want to reinforce that assertion by looking briefly at some popular contemporary propositions about changes in the popularity of religion and spirituality in a manner which will, I hope, show why we need social science.

Religious Adherence in Former Communist European States

An edited collection on *Religion in International Relations* repeatedly uses the following and similar phrases: “the global resurgence of religion,” “desecularization of the world,” “a renaissance of religious traditions” and “worldwide resurgence of religion” (Petito and Hatzopoulos, 2003). One place where we might expect signs of this worldwide resurgence is in the former communist countries of eastern Europe where since 1945 (and earlier in the case of Russia and its immediate neighbours) the power of the state had been deployed to suppress religious institutions and sentiments. The collapse of communism has certainly resulted in a restoration of

previously hegemonic religious institutions and to a new fondness for asserting religion as part of the re-discovered titular national identity, but there has not been any great “revival” of personal religiosity (Norris and Inglehart, 2004: ch. 5) John Anderson notes “in Bulgaria and Russia most surveys reported that around 2–6 per cent of the population were ‘regular’ attenders” (2003: 169). The clearest evidence against any great religious revival in the former communist world is provided by the age cohort associations of a variety of indices in the World Values survey. As Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004: 124) show, young people are marked less religious than their parents; “the analysis of individual religiosity in post-Communist Europe therefore largely confirms the patterns found earlier in Western Europe.” Using different survey data, Olaf Müller also concludes “we cannot expect a huge increase in traditional forms of religiosity in most East European countries” (2008: 80).

The Popularity of “Strong Religion”

Since the publication of Dean Kelley’s *Why the Conservative Churches are Growing* (1972) provided a robust presentation of the idea that conservative Protestantism in the USA was faring better than its mainstream and liberal alternatives because of intrinsic features, very many scholars (myself included) have spent much time and energy arguing over precisely which features of conservatism explained its appeal. It turns out that we were wasting our time. Using large-scale data sets, Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley and Melissa Wilde demonstrated that the largest part of the variation in fates of different religious organizations is explained by differential fertility (2001). People switching from mainstream to conservative denominations accounted for only 4% of the total change; 76% of religious change is explained by differences in family size. That is, even if Unitarian and Southern Baptist families were equally effective in retaining their children in their respective faiths, the former would have declined and the latter would have grown because the Baptist families typically have more children. Hence if there is anything in the relative success of conservative Protestantism in the US that should exercise us it concerns matters some way from the original Kelley-inspired argument; instead of trying to explain the superior resilience of sectarian religion to secularization we need to explain why Southern Baptists like large families and why they marry at a younger age which permits greater fertility. The large-scale survey work of demographers told us something vital which those of us engaged in detailed ethnographic studies of conservative and liberal churches could not see.

The Scale of the New Age

Heelas and Woodhead (2004) have made a pioneering effort to measure the popularity of what they call the “holistic milieu” in Kendal, a town in the north-west of England which seems sufficiently typical to be taken as more or less representative of Britain. Their conclusion (based on a praiseworthy effort to identify every form of group activity and one-to-one service provision) is that somewhere between 1% and 2% of the population was involved in such activities as yoga, tai chi, aromatherapy, spiritual healing and the like in a typical week. What is immediately obvious if one looks at the list of activities they found is that the most popular ones are also the ones that seem least obviously spiritual. Heelas and Woodhead allow us to add the insider’s perspective to our own judgements because they asked their respondents a number of questions about the extent to which they saw their activities as spiritual and about the importance of spiritual growth. The results fit pretty closely with what an outsider would expect. In the one-to-one activities the practitioners were more likely than their customers to see what they were doing as spiritual. And the most popular activities were those least likely to be seen as spiritual.

In a somewhat technical discussion of the data Voas and I conclude that somewhere around 600 people in and around Kendal are involved in holistic milieu activities each week and that some 45% of them, or 270 people, regard what they are doing as “spiritual” (Voas and Bruce 2008). Is 270 a large or a small number? That depends on the comparison. It is about the size of the home crowd for my local football club – the Inverurie Locos – which plays in the Highland League (the fifth tier of Scottish senior football) and it is slightly fewer than the number of people who danced at the Hogmanay ceilidh at which my dance band played in 2006.

If we are to regard holistic milieu spirituality as compensation for the decline of the Christian churches we need to get the scale right. The churchgoing population of Kendal is 7.9%. If we increase that to 15% to give some idea of those who are at all interested in Christianity, we have left 85% of the population or almost 32,000 people who are not in the mainstream of religion and who are thus, in theory, available for recruitment to some alternative. Perhaps a better way of guessing the potential market is to take the proportion of people who attended church in 1851, when England could reasonably be described as a Christian society. Horace Mann’s Census of Religious Worship lists attendances in Kendal at 47.7%. Because Mann’s survey counted attendances rather than attenders, we have to compensate for double (and, very rarely, triple) attendance. Following Alasdair Crockett’s pioneering work (1998), we might reasonably set the figure as 38%. If churchgoing in Kendal were as

popular now as it was in 1851, there would be 14,500 churchgoers rather than the current 3,000. We can thus say that the current performance of the Christian churches in Kendal leaves more than 11,000 people unchurched, compared to the 1851 proportions. Set against that scale of decline, the 270 people involved in the holistic milieu for spiritual reasons seems very small. The spiritual innovation, which some scholars wish to describe as the *zeitgeist*, is attracting less than 3% of the people made available by the decline of the spirit of the previous age.

Believing without Belonging

Above I mentioned the popular notion that the decline of the churches in western Europe should be seen, not as a consequence of a decline in the persuasiveness of religious beliefs, but as a product of the declining popularity of involvement in religious organizations. Sometimes this is phrased in terms of the general concern about declining willingness to engage in public association which has been popularized by Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* (2000). The "believing-without-belonging" notion is not easy to test because its proponents differ on just what is implied by "believing." Davie has in places suggested a hard version – "More and more people within British society are, it appears, wanting to believe but without putting this into practice" – but she has also pre-emptively saved the thesis from refutation by broadening the "definition of religion to include questions about the meaning of life, the purpose of mankind's existence, the future of the planet and man's responsibilities to his fellow man" (1990: 462–63). For the reasons I gave above, there seems little point in re-labelling thoughtful atheists and agnostics as "religious." We can take as our proof text this version of the thesis: "While many Europeans have ceased to participate in religious institutions, they have not yet abandoned many of their deep-seated religious inclinations" (1999: 68). Davie supports the claim by showing that belief in God is more popular than church attendance. What she doesn't do is consider trajectory. Alasdair Crockett and David Voas (2006) combined all the responses to the British Social Attitudes surveys from 1983 to 2002 to produce a body of data for about 60,000 respondents and graphed indices of religious identification, church attendance and support for specific religious beliefs. What they showed was that all three were declining in tandem and that, if we wished to make something of small differences, belief was actually declining faster than religious identity and church attendance.

Voas and Crockett might be wrong. The important point is that the "believing without belonging" depiction of contemporary religious culture can only be tested by very large-scale data. No small-scale community study, no matter how well done, can test that description.

Techniques of Analysis

A social-scientific approach to religion is not exhausted by the collection of large-scale statistical data. It is important that we analyse such data with the best available appropriate techniques. In particular it is important that we go beyond the examination of simple correlations. In one part of our analysis of the material from the 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes survey, Glendinning and I explored responses to a battery of socio-moral questions. Initially we found quite strong connections between religious affiliation (we were expecting a Catholic/Protestant divide) and frequency of church attendance on the one hand and attitudes to abortion, homosexuality and the like on the other. Had we stopped there we could have concluded that religiosity was a major determinant of attitudes but multivariate analysis revealed that the major determinant was not religiosity but age. The more pious and the more morally conservative were also the older people in the sample.

It does not seem too harsh to suggest that the quality of statistical analysis in the study of religion falls far short of what is now commonplace in the study of social class or political behaviour, to cite just two examples with which I am familiar. Why this is the case I am not sure but it probably has something to do with the disciplinary ambiguity of religion, which unlike the study of social class, straddles the social sciences and the arts. Whatever the explanation, the problem remains the same: if we are to make plausible empirical assertions about religion and spirituality as social phenomena we need not only to collect the right sort of data but we need also to analyse it in the right way.

Conclusion

Philosophical introspection, literary criticism and psychoanalysis may help us define our concepts and alert us to social phenomena worthy of investigation. Ethnographic fieldwork is vital for helping us understand what people are doing and why. But of themselves these approaches do not help us understand the current state of religion because they offer no basis for generalization. The Chicago sociologist Herbert Blumer was one of the founders of symbolic interactionism and one of the severest critics of what he called “scientism” in sociology. Over a long and highly influential career, Blumer repeatedly criticized the pretensions of quantitative research. Yet when he was invited to present a detailed appreciation of one of the masterpieces of the qualitative tradition – William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki’s *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* – Blumer (1979/1939) concluded that its case study method did not meet the test of the four criteria he expected of any scientific instrument: that the data generated be representative, adequate and reliable and allow decisive testing of competing theoretical schemes.

Multivariate analysis of large-scale data sets is not a sufficient condition for understanding contemporary religion: the tone-deaf remain unmusical whatever instruments they are playing. But it is a necessary condition. And even poor quantitative work has the advantage that the evidence on which its conclusions are based is publicly available for the rest of us to interrogate. I will illustrate that point with a comparison of two studies of the New Age. Tadeusz Doktór (2004) tries to assess the growth of “New Age” spirituality in central and eastern Europe using data from the International Social Science Program (ISSP) surveys of 1991 and 1998 and reports a conclusion that is very different from the one we drew from the Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) data and the Kendal project. While we found a strong positive connection between class (taking that as a summary of occupation, income and education) and interest in the New Age, Doktór concludes that New Age beliefs are more popular in the least developed countries of Europe. The explanation of the discrepancy is almost certainly a technical one. Scholars in Britain and America use some version of the idea of “seeing the self as divine” and “discovering divine power within oneself” as the constitutive feature of New Age spirituality and, not surprisingly, find most of it among prosperous well-educated people. Doktór has used interest in the occult and forms of divination, which is a rather different matter and might sensibly be expected among those who feel themselves somewhat powerless. The explanation of the disagreement is much less important than this procedural point. With Doktór’s work the reader can work backwards from the conflicting conclusions through the various stages of analysis to the original questions in the ISSP and SSA surveys. The sampling frame, the questions and the responses are publicly available for further interrogation.

The work of two anthropologists, one of whom spent 15 months living in Glastonbury and being actively involved in a variety of New Age activities (Prince and Riches, 2001) is very different. The main conclusion of the study is that the New Age milieu sustains: “a mode of social organisation and a body of beliefs and ideas whose features in many crucial respects display striking similarities with the social and cultural forms of ‘original human society’ – that is to say, human society in its evolutionary basic form” (2001: xiiv). Despite having read the book closely and, I hope, sympathetically, I disagree with that conclusion and I am able to point to a number of anecdotes presented in the book which do not well fit the idea that Glastonbury New Agers form something akin to the classic “tribe” but it is in the nature of such ethnographic work that I cannot work back from conclusion, through analysis to original observations.

Ethnographic work is important. My argument for the primacy of a social-scientific approach is confined to a certain class of empirical assertions about

religion as social phenomenon. If people wish merely to describe the actions and beliefs of a particular group of people and make no assertions about their social importance and make no claims about growth or decline, fine. If people wish to explain religious texts or describe church architecture they may be able to avoid arithmetic (although they will often support assertions about the relative importance of things by telling us how often they feature). But if we wish to assert that Britons are “believing but not belonging” or that Britain is experiencing a “spiritual revolution” or that growth in certain churches refutes the secularization approach, then we have to produce appropriate evidence and that requires social science.

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