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## **Counting Spirituality?**

### **Survey Methodology after the Spiritual Turn**

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#### **Introduction**

“A great era has begun: the spiritual ‘awakening,’” Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc wrote in 1911 (quoted in Taylor 1992: 65). Apart from the more bohemian types in the capitals of Europe, few at that time would have agreed. Even around thirty years ago, when John Naisbitt (1982) claimed that spirituality was a growing “megatrend,” most would have taken this as an ill-founded exaggeration. Few among upper-middle or professional ranks would now dismiss contentions of this kind so lightly. Spirituality has run riot. A radical shift is under way, from religious tradition where spirituality is ignored or marginalized to spirituality beyond religious tradition (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Colin Campbell (2007: 41) has even gone so far as to detect “a fundamental revolution in Western civilization, one that can be compared in significance to the Renaissance, the Reformation, or the Enlightenment.”

What we refer to as “inner-life spirituality,” “spiritualities of life” or “New Age spirituality” in what follows (we will use the terms interchangeably) is easy enough to define in terms of its ontology and epistemology. Unlike the Christian ontology of a transcendent personal God who has created the world and the cosmos and must therefore exist beyond His own

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creation, inner-life spirituality assumes an indwelling non-theistic higher power (“energy,” “life-force,” “power,” “nature,” “vitality,” “passion,” “life,” etcetera) and as such conceives of the sacred as immanent and hence situated within the world and the cosmos themselves.

Epistemologically, it rejects propositional beliefs of the type associated with the Christian tradition and instead embraces the *gnosis* of experience, holding the sacred to be knowable by virtue of sheer consciousness, awareness, sensation, feeling, apprehension (“grasping” by way of sensing), intuition, sometimes inner “seeing” or “hearing.” Other ways of knowing the sacred – like believing in the propositional beliefs of tradition, attending to sacred texts, heeding the words of prophets or messiahs, reading the poetry of the mystics of old – are adjudicated “second hand” because of inevitable distortions due to interpretation, translation, manipulation, and the like (Hanegraaff 1996, Heelas 1996).

This type of inner-life spirituality really sprang to life with eighteenth-century Romanticism, when Romantics like Shelley equated the sacred with what lies within. Today, “life,” “life itself,” is still one of its most frequently encountered sources (Heelas 2008). How far the shift towards inner-life spirituality diagnosed by Heelas and Woodhead (2005) and Campbell (2007) has advanced meanwhile, particularly since the counter culture of the sixties, is however a contested issue. Survey research appears to be the most suitable methodology to provide clarity on this matter, but survey researchers encounter major difficulties in trying to do so. We first address the Christian bias of the long-standing international survey programs and how this obstructs reliable insight into the spread of spiritualities of life of the “New Age” variety. We then move to a discussion of the rare spirituality questions that have nonetheless been used in some of these programs to demonstrate that even though these questions yield quite suggestive findings, they still leave much to be desired. Finally, we address the more fundamental question of the usefulness of survey methodology in a world where religion and spirituality increasingly find their homes outside the institutional bulwarks that dominated the religious field of the past.

## **2. The Matter of “Fuzzy Fidelity”**

Some time ago, one of us reflected on the development of a “betwixt and between” zone: a “middle ground” where many forms of the sacred are to be found, including New Age

spiritualities of life (Heelas 2002: 359-61). More recently, Voas (2009) carried out another “middle ground” research exercise, the term itself having previously been used by Voas and Crockett (2005: 24). And indeed, a primary task facing the study of religion and spirituality in the contemporary west is to explore the “middle ground” with regular church attenders to one side, atheists and agnostics to the other. A primary task because in most European countries (and elsewhere, no doubt) it is the most populated territory of the sacred, and apparently expanding in size. Do we find what Voas (2009: 161) calls “fuzzy fidelity,” namely retention of “some loyalty to tradition, though in a rather uncommitted way”? Do we find significant interest in more substantial forms of spirituality, specifically New Age spiritualities of life, operating largely or entirely beyond Christian orthodoxy (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Houtman and Mascini 2002, Houtman and Aupers 2007)? Do we find evidence that Charles Taylor’s (2007) “exclusive humanism” of the “immanent frame” of “a secular age” is re-rendered by way of a “New Age” sacralization of humanistic values and assumptions? For that matter, does the evidence support Grace Davie’s (1994) “believing without belonging” thesis, when the primary form of “believing” is Christian-informed? These are among the most important questions today’s social-scientific study of religion faces.

Voas sees “fuzzy fidelity” as a “staging post on the road from religious to secular hegemony” (2009: 167) and argues, primarily based on the European Social Survey (ESS), that “Many people are neither regular churchgoers nor self-consciously non-religious” (2009: 155). Involving “casual loyalty to tradition,” he takes “fuzzy fidelity” to be a matter of “residual involvement” with the Christian tradition (2009: 155; our emphasis) – an interpretation which is close to Davie’s “nominal” believing without belonging (1994: 56). What are called “nominal Christians,” Voas concludes, “comprise more than half the population in most European countries” (2009: 162): a percentage not all that different from that previously found by Heelas in connection with his considerably less Christian-orientated identification of the “middle ground” in Britain, namely 66 per cent (2002: 361).

Significantly, Voas scarcely mentions spirituality as a significant occupant of the “middle ground.” True, the “Sheilaists” of Bellah et al. (1985) enter the picture (even though Voas does not provide any evidence regarding their numerical significance) – but as “fuzzy Christians” (Voas 2009: 162) rather than as exemplary of the “stand alone” spirituality of what the “New Age” is about. Use of the term “fuzzy fidelity” to cover Sheilaism and the like instead gives the

misleading impression that it is somehow vague or fuzzy (see Aupers and Houtman 2006, Heelas 2008, Woodhead 2010). Interestingly, Voas more than hints that fuzzy fidelity is not always so closely linked with the Christian tradition. He makes reference, for example, to belief in “something out there” and “quasi-religious ideas,” “inconsistent with the teachings of the major Christian denominations” (2009: 161, 162); and, even more significantly, makes the points that “Many people would like to be known as ‘spiritual’” (2009: 162), and that a “more substantial proportion of the population [more substantial than those involved in holistic activities] will privately follow a variety of self-spirituality” (ibid). Voas (2009: 164) also mentions the religion module of the International Social Survey Programme, specifically its data about those who “don’t believe in a personal God, but [who] do believe in a Higher Power of some kind.”

Indeed, in their analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), Houtman and Aupers (2007) have interpreted neither-Christian-nor-secular outlooks as indicating New Age spirituality rather than “fuzzy fidelity,” in effect rejecting the notion that the former can meaningfully be conceived as belonging to a “middle ground.” Unlike Voas (2009), and basically following Hanegraaff (1996), they rather conceptualize New Age spirituality as a third option beyond the customary ones of faith and belief on the one hand and science, reason and secularism on the other – that is, as a third corner of a triangle rather than a mixture of traditional theistic Christian religiosity and non-religiosity (Houtman and Aupers 2007). Voas’s (2009: 167) construal of “fuzzy fidelity” as a “staging post on the road from religious to secular hegemony” is hence merely a questionable hypothesis in need of testing. In the current paper, we will however not further elaborate on this and stick to the “middle ground” label to avoid confusion.

All of the foregoing leads to the great flaw of Voas’s analysis of the “middle ground.” Quite simply, the data which he largely depends on is taken from the 2002/2003 wave of the European Social Survey (ESS): a survey which does not ask *any* questions of the kind which could tap into New Age spirituality to provide an indication of its numerical significance within the middle ground. Had the ESS not been so strongly focused on Christian religiosity, thereby standing in the way of a more spirituality-encompassing interpretation of what is taking place in the middle ground, Voas might well have felt forced to draw different conclusions. With its questionnaire design serving to more or less ignore whatever New Age spirituality might exist in this territory, however, it is hardly surprising that “fuzzy fidelity” is predominantly taken to be linked with the Christian tradition. In more or less ignoring spirituality by virtue of how the

survey was designed in the first place, the ESS almost certainly fails to provide anything approaching an accurate picture. Much like other large international survey programs such as the World Values Survey, the focus of the European Social Survey on theistic Christianity serves to ignore, obscure, and distort the role played by New Age spirituality.

The problem with survey programs like these, in short, is that they are much more useful for mapping the gradual decline of the religious formations of the past (i.e., church-based Christianity) than for studying the increased role of New Age spirituality. This shortcoming informs claims about “fuzzy fidelity” that characterize the “middle ground” negatively by highlighting what it does *not* feature (i.e., church-based Christianity) and stands in the way of a more positive and empirically accurate analysis of what is actually happening on the ground.

### **3. Vicissitudes of Spirituality Questions in Contemporary Survey Programs**

Despite the virtual absence of spirituality questions in today’s large-scale survey programs, some progress has been made by including a question aimed at grasping respondents’ ontologies of the sacred in at least some of them. It does so by asking, “Which of these statements comes closest to your beliefs?,” offering four response options: “I believe in a God with whom I can have a personal relationship,” “I believe in an impersonal spirit or life force,” “I don’t believe in any kind of God, spirit, or life force,” and “I really don’t know what to believe.” Even though this question prompts most respondents to select one of its four response options, eliciting substantial popularity of what appears to be inner-life spirituality, we argue below that findings are nonetheless less clear cut than they ideally should be. Prospects for reliably mapping spiritual epistemologies as ways of relating to ontologies of the sacred, we subsequently argue, are even bleaker and for that reason probably not a good idea.

#### *3.1. Ontologies of Immanence and Transcendence*

Problems of indeterminacy can be illustrated by the outcomes of the RAMP (Religion and Modern Pluralism) UK survey (1997) and the Soul of Britain survey (Heald 2000). Both questionnaires contain the question mentioned above and both have added a fifth response category: RAMP has added “I believe that God is something within each person, rather than

something out there” and Soul of Britain has added “There is something there.” The outcomes can be found in Table 1.

First of all, it is clear that in both surveys about half of the respondents select another option than “belief in a personal God,” “don’t know” or “don’t believe”: 51 per cent in the case of RAMP (“God within” plus “impersonal spirit or life force”) and 44 per cent in the case of the Soul of Britain (“some sort of spirit or life force” plus “something there”). Because these answers appear to reflect the inner-life spirituality that is largely neglected in Voas’s analysis, this underscores the need for a more detailed empirical analysis of what is actually going on in today’s extensive “middle ground” between traditional theistic Christian religiosity and non-religiosity. But what exactly is to be made of these outcomes?

*Table 1. Ontologies of the Sacred in the Soul of Britain Survey (2000) and the RAMP (Great Britain) Survey (1997) (in %).*

The Soul of Britain (2000)		RAMP (Great Britain) (1997)	
There is a personal God	26	I believe in a God with whom I can have a personal relationship	23
There is some sort of spirit or life force	21	I believe in an impersonal spirit or life force	14
There is something there	23	-	
-		I believe that God is something within each person, rather than something out there	37
I don’t really know what to think	12	I really don’t know what to believe	16
I don’t really think there is any sort of God, spirit or life force	15	I don’t believe in any kind of God, spirit or life force	9
None of these	3	-	
Total	100		100

That respondents were invited to select the option that suits them best rather than the option that actually suits them well is obviously a problem. Even though previous research by Houtman and Mascini (2002: 462-3) confirmed that the response option “I believe in a God with whom I can have a personal relationship” is closely related to church-based Christianity, whereas “I believe in an impersonal spirit or life force” is central to a New Age worldview, the wording of the latter response option may nonetheless also entice Christians with theistic spiritual leanings to select it. For although Christianity in the West has throughout the twentieth century mostly emphasized the radical transcendence of the sacred— as exemplified by the dualistic, “wholly other” of theologians like Karl Barth (see Taylor 2007 for a concise summary) –, a spiritual shift has meanwhile occurred in western Christianity, too (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). In contrast to inner-life spirituality, however, what lies within as immanent is conceived here as ultimately stemming from what lies beyond as transcendent.

Whether it is the belief that the world/cosmos has been created by the sacred, and thereby contains elements of its creator, or the belief that the sacred enters this world as, say, the Holy Spirit, the immanent is here taken to be ultimately *dependent on* the transcendent. The resulting *theistic spirituality* hence still revolves around the experience of the sacred as *ultimately transcendent*, i.e., situated beyond the world or the cosmos as a whole. Nonetheless, if Christians with such theistic spiritual leanings find that “I believe in a God with whom I can have a personal relationship” fails to adequately express their spiritual outlook, they may prefer to instead select the response option “I believe in an impersonal spirit or life force.” As a consequence, it remains tricky to interpret this response option as always and necessarily indicating inner-life spirituality.

In addition to this problem, there are the indeterminacy and vagueness of Soul’s “there is something there” option and the markedly different percentages found for “spirit or life force” in the two surveys. The latter difference may either be due to Soul’s omission of the word *impersonal* (which may make this option even more acceptable to Christians who identify with theistic spirituality) or to its reliance on “something there” rather than “God within” as the fifth category (or a combination of these two, of course). Be this as it may, it is perfectly clear that responses are strongly influenced by the response options provided.

To further explore this, we compare the findings of the RAMP survey for all eleven countries it covered. Table 2 shows the popularity of the five RAMP categories for Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal and

Sweden. Setting aside “Don’t believe” and “Don’t know” as responses that appear to indicate outlooks that have not much to do with either religion or spirituality, we focus on the three others. “Belief in a personal God,” the option that comes closest to theistic Christian religiosity, is least widespread in Northwestern European countries like Great Britain, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark. In these same countries, the two apparently spiritual options combined (“I believe that God is something within each person, rather than something out there” plus “I believe in an impersonal spirit or life force”) account for more than 50 per cent of the population – much more than elsewhere. With the single exception of Great Britain, where more people believe in a personal God than in a spirit or life force, belief in a personal God is less widespread in these countries than either belief in an impersonal spirit or life force or belief in the God within.

*Table 2. Ontologies of the Sacred by Country (in %).*

Country	Personal God	Spirit / life force	God within	Don't believe	Don't know	Total
Belgium	22	24	31	11	13	100
Denmark	20	21	35	13	10	100
Finland	37	15	29	10	9	100
Great Britain	23	14	37	9	16	100
Hungary	33	8	25	15	20	100
Italy	50	7	36	5	2	100
Netherlands	23	27	26	14	9	100
Norway	28	16	25	16	16	100
Poland	63	12	18	1	5	100
Portugal	26	21	39	4	10	100
Sweden	18	20	36	12	15	100
Total	33	16	31	9	11	100

Cramer’s V=0.196 (p<0.001)

Even though belief in an impersonal spirit or life force may also be selected by Christians with spiritual leanings, these patterns appear to confirm the claim by Houtman and Aupers (2007) that New Age spirituality has become most widespread in the Northwestern European countries where

theistic Christianity has become increasingly marginal. The widespread adherence to belief in the “God within” in massively Catholic countries like Portugal and Italy sits however quite uneasily with the assumption that this response option indicates inner-life spirituality too (Barker 2004). It is not only more popular in these two countries than in almost all others, but is in Portugal even more widespread than belief in “a God with whom I can have a personal relationship.” Evoking images of large numbers of Portuguese walking around uttering (or muttering) the Shirley MacLaine mantra, “I am God, I am God, I am God,” this is an extraordinary finding and not exactly what one would expect to find in a country like this. For how can one be a Catholic *and* believe that “God is something within each person, *rather than* something out there” (our emphasis)? It is unlikely that findings of this variety can be taken at face value and it is hard to know what precisely respondents want to convey when they select them.

Indeed, Houtman, Aupers and Heelas (2009) have provided evidence that the responses “I believe that God is something within each person, rather than something out there” and “I believe in an impersonal spirit or life force” may both mean different things in massively Catholic countries like Poland and Portugal than in heavily “secularized” Northwestern European countries like Great Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden. Whereas the two beliefs appear to be quite common among Christians in the former, they appear to indicate affinity with an inner-life spirituality that is basically unrelated to Christianity and as such stands on its own two feet in the latter. Needless to say, this apparent lack of cross-cultural comparability only adds to the methodological problems.

Even though a determinate assessment of the popularity of inner-life spirituality is clearly not on the table, it would nonetheless be hard to deny that large percentages of people in the West give “spiritual” answers these days, indicating that the landscape of the sacred has changed dramatically. With the earlier critique of “fuzzy fidelity” as mere watered-down Christianity in mind, more and better questionnaires to probe the “middle ground” more carefully in future research are badly needed.

### *3.2. Epistemology and Spiritual Experiences*

Problems: change the questionnaire options, change the results; change the national religious context, change the meaning of the apparently “same” response. Attempting to map the relevant spiritual epistemologies by means of survey research will probably raise even more difficulties.

For how on earth are investigators interested in people's struggles to move beyond secularity going to devise adequate questionnaires to capture the epistemological strategies used in this? Are questionnaires up to the job of reporting counts of the ways in which people attempt to relate to what lies beyond, whatever form the latter may have? Even with the best will in the world it is difficult to see how questionnaires can ever be developed to take into account the variegated ways of conceptualizing relationships with the (putatively) sacred.

This is because spiritual ways of relating to the sacred entail epistemologies that go beyond ways of knowing which involve propositional beliefs about sacred "objects" (Lindbeck 1984). They include experiencing what could be of sacred significance, the "willing suspension of disbelief" of which Coleridge wrote, the questioning mode of being in two minds about the existence of the sacred, the person emphatically believing and not believing at one and the same time (think of Musil 1961), the person with "the yearn" (a state of affairs so emphasized by Simmel 1997). Thus this includes all those variegated ways which are taken to permit some sort of encounter with the sacred or what could possibly be sacred: the hunch; the "might"; the "dream"; the idealistic aspiration; the imagination (Wallis Stevens); the intimation; the "as if" experience; the self-validating but inexpressible experience per se, when the source of the experience is left in limbo; the act of apprehending (in the sense of "grasping") the source; the act of "believing in" the sacred in the absence of propositional beliefs ("beyond beliefs"); the symbolic (artistic, poetic, musical, etcetera) expression of "the inspired" or what is experienced, ontologically, beyond or within the self; the "assent"... Such epistemologies are surely more difficult to operationalize by means of survey questions than ways of thinking or talking about relationships with the sacred that are held and framed as assent to propositional beliefs, as for those orthodox, textual theists who hold beliefs of the "Jesus is the Son of God" variety (Lindbeck 1984).

Many of the relevant ways of thinking or talking about the relationship with what is taken to be the sacred are probably too variegated (perhaps even non-specifiable) to be adequately captured and counted by means of questionnaire options. And then, it can be added, there are all those problems raised by the consideration that people change their minds (not least under the influence of questioning by researchers); float from one "grope" to another; strive in somewhat different ways, at different times, to articulate what it is to find, or to seek to find, "the more" which lies beyond, or "under," the secular frame. If questionnaires were to be developed, they

would presumably be impossibly long; basically impractical for surveys of any size. However, without a fairly comprehensive list of questionnaire options, the danger is that reported experiences, apprehensions, etcetera, to do with spirituality will be inadequately or misleadingly recorded.

Another major problem in mapping epistemologies is that considerable numbers of people in the contemporary West may “know” (apprehend, experience, sense, feel) that there is something “more” beyond secularity, but find it very difficult, or perhaps even impossible, to say anything much, if anything at all, about what this “more” actually is. Such inability to pinpoint ontologies of the sacred with any degree of precision would of course make it very difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish inner-life spirituality from theistic spirituality.

#### **4. Counting Spirituality and Religion beyond Church Membership?**

##### *4.1. Moving from Religious Institutions to Religious Discourse*

Survey researchers’ still widespread practice of counting church members and/or churchgoers as a way of gauging how religious a society actually is, is informed by the sociology of religion’s traditional focus on the Christian religion and its institutional bulwarks, the churches. Even though Thomas Luckmann as early as 1967 influentially critiqued this bias in his book *The Invisible Religion*, it is still very much in place today, particularly in survey research. This is exemplified by the virtual absence of spirituality questions in the questionnaires of today’s large survey programs and by Voas’s strongly church-centered analysis of the “middle ground,” as critiqued above.

In a world where religious and spiritual discourses, worldviews and beliefs have increasingly escaped these institutional bulwarks to find new homes in social networks, media, and markets (Besecke 2010, Noomen et al. 2011), such a focus on religion’s institutional manifestations has become an obstacle to empirical and theoretical advancement in the social-scientific study of religion (Houtman 2008). In the ensuing religious field, where church religion is giving way to spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) and where “believing” is no longer necessarily accompanied by “belonging” (Davie 1994), the organizational-institutional and cultural domains have drifted apart to become (relatively) different spheres rather than closely

integrated ones. Under these circumstances, the traditional focus of sociology of religion on religion's institutional manifestations means that much of the religious field – indeed, its most dynamic and rapidly expanding part – disappears out of sight. Privileging religion's institutional manifestations as somehow more “real” and more important than its discursive cultural manifestations becomes a major source of distortion under these circumstances.

Let us give some examples of what happens if culture and meaning are downplayed by focusing on institutional affiliations. Consider second-generation Muslim youngsters in the West today who reject their parents' “mosque-and-local-community-oriented” Islam as insincere and flawed and who search for a “pure,” “de-localized” and “de-culturalized” Islam. They can hardly be portrayed as “less religious” than their parents because of this, as their identification with fundamentalist Salafism demonstrates (De Koning 2008, Roeland et al. 2010) Also consider youngsters who still live with their devout Christian parents, and because of that cannot easily withdraw from the church. Does this make them as “truly” religious as their parents are? Are we, indeed, prepared to believe that the Scandinavian countries with their state churches (which means, in practice, many nominal church members, yet limited acceptance of traditional Christian beliefs and doctrines) are deeply religious?

These examples suffice to demonstrate that institutional ties and religious meanings do not necessarily coincide. They certainly no longer do so in the West today, where religious and spiritual discourses, worldviews and beliefs have increasingly found their homes outside religious institutions (Houtman 2008, Roeland et al. 2010). This calls for a major rehauling of survey research in the sociology of religion generally, but is particularly vital for the quantitative study of New Age spirituality. For whereas a failure to shift attention away from institutional allegiances means missing much of what goes on in the religious field, it even means defining New Age spirituality virtually out of existence. This is because of the latter's marked anti-institutionalism – its firm rejection of conformity to religious institutions, formal organizations, and “external” authorities, and its emphasis on “following one's personal spiritual path” by taking one's personal experiences, feelings and intuitions seriously.

#### *4.2. Counting without Institutional Allegiances to Rely on?*

Unfortunately, however, survey research cannot provide counts of the numbers of people who identify with particular worldviews, discourses or beliefs. It can easily provide estimates of the

numbers of people who participate in holistic activities like yoga; who are members of a church, a political party, a sports club, or whatever; who are older than 65 or younger than 18; who have an academic training; who are married, single or widowed; etcetera. Dealing with the study of religious and spiritual discourses, worldviews and beliefs, however, things become more complicated than counting the “obviously” numerical. The necessity of moving survey research in the sociology of religion beyond its traditional focus on institutional allegiances like church membership and churchgoing hence comes with a hefty price: numerical counts of religiosity and spirituality become basically impossible.

For those who find this too high a price, it is important to critically consider the shortcomings of the established research practice. For making inferences about religious worldviews and beliefs on the basis of institutional allegiances alone has its drawbacks, too, of course. For one thing, it systematically ignores the possibility of what we may – inspired by Davie (1994) – mockingly refer to as “belonging without believing,” which is most likely in densely-knit religious communities and among youngsters who cannot escape the control of their parents. The established research practice of relying on institutional allegiances hence risks erring on two sides: it not only misses manifestations of religion or spirituality outside the churches, but also risks assuming the presence of religious belief where there actually is none. Needless to say, this problem does not only apply to counts of church membership, but also to “body counts” of the holistic milieu, as provided by Heelas and Woodhead (2005). Around half of the participants in holistic, New Age activities in Britain turn out not to accord spiritual significance to their practices, for instance (Heelas 2007).

That survey research cannot be used to find out how many people are “religious” or “spiritual” (or “racist,” “sexist,” “morally conservative,” “politically progressive,” or whatever, for that matter) is so for two related reasons, both elaborated in Max Weber’s (1922) methodology of the social sciences. Firstly, there is the necessity of making a distinction between social reality “out there” and the analytical categories used to study it: analytical ideal types should not be confused with social reality itself (see Campbell 2007 for a recent discussion and an extensive example). Secondly, there is the inevitability of “value-relatedness”: we cannot help but study social reality from a particular perspective or point of view that informs our theoretical conceptualizations and the analytical boundaries informed by these. The latter are hence

inevitably one-sided and value-laden and can as such not be taken to be universal, even less so in today's radically pluralist world (see also Becker 1967).

No such thing as a “true” or “correct” Weberian “ideal type” can hence ever exist, because “ideal types” are merely theoretically constructed “pure” types to be used by researchers as measuring rods that do not, in principle, coincide with anything existing in the real world. To give a simple example from the natural sciences, nothing in the “real” world is exactly as long as the “real” (“ideal-typical”) meter, as defined after the French Revolution by the French Academy of Sciences as equal to one ten-millionth of the length of the meridian through Paris from pole to equator. In a similar fashion, the “true” New Ager or the “true” Muslim does not exist either: they are inevitably theoretical constructions by researchers, too (at best, as in the case of the meter, by a community of researchers).

The point at which a person can be considered “truly” religious or “spiritual” (or “truly” racist, sexist, morally conservative, politically progressive, etcetera) is inevitably contested – especially, and more visibly and obviously so, in a society in which all of these phenomena are themselves deeply contested. According to fundamentalist Muslims, for instance, even many devout Muslims do not deserve to be counted as “true” Muslims. Vice versa, zealous atheists are likely to count as “truly” religious all those who refuse to bluntly reject religion as naïve superstition. In other words: the outcomes of classificatory counts depend as much on what occurs in the “world out there” as on analytical boundary drawing by researchers. The latter is ultimately arbitrary, in the sense that it cannot be “proven” that one proposed analytical classification is “better” or “more true” than another. As a consequence, survey research cannot give a clue either about the “true” number of New Agers, Christians, Muslims, or any other category defined by its affinity with a particular worldview, discourse, or belief.

#### *4.3. The Impossibility of Counting Exposed by Likert Scaling*

Does this entail a lapse into a postmodern relativism that denies all possibilities of gaining knowledge about an “objective social reality out there”? Far from it. As argued above, this limitation of survey research is in fact already acknowledged in Max Weber's methodology of the social sciences – hardly a postmodern source. Does it mean that surveys are useless if we want to study the fortunes of New Age spirituality, then? Again, far from it. Indeed, every skilled survey

methodologist familiar with Likert scaling is aware of this impossibility of providing numerical counts for categories defined by affinity with a worldview, discourse, or belief.

The point of departure of Likert scaling is that every attitude, opinion or belief can be measured by means of a set of statements, each of them to be evaluated by respondents on the basis of a set of agree/disagree response options. The stronger the correlations between the resulting responses, the more the statements apparently tap into the same attitude, opinion or belief, and the more reliable the scale that can be constructed by combining these responses. Nonetheless, statements that together constitute a reliable scale may differ widely in terms of their so-called “item difficulties”: the percentages of positive and negative evaluations found (percentages that do not necessarily coincide with “agree” and “disagree” responses, because typically a mixture of positively and negatively formulated statements is used). One can, for instance, easily have twenty Likert items that all demonstrably tap into the same attitude, opinion or belief, with some of these items suggesting the latter’s virtual non-existence and others its virtual omnipresence. The awkward problem which ensues is that, strictly speaking, one can conclude no more than that a belief measured in this way is embraced by somewhere between zero and one hundred per cent of the population – which is of course true by definition and hence does not require research.

This problem even applies to relatively simple phenomena like “belief in God within.” Such a belief can be measured, for instance, by means of the five following items that are very similar to one another (there are, of course, many more possibilities): (1) “I know that God is something within each person”; (2) “I think that God is something within each person”; (3) “I do not believe that God is something within each person”; (4) “God is something within each person”; (5) “I believe that God is something within each person.” The crucial point is that responses to these five items will be strongly correlated, so that each can be predicted quite accurately from the others. They hence all five tap into a single underlying dimension, in this case interpreted as “belief in God within” (note that this remains inevitably a matter of interpretation on the part of the researcher that cannot be proven statistically), and they can hence in principle be used to construct a reliable scale.

Yet, it is quite clear that item (2) will produce higher percentages of “belief in God within” than item (1), while reversed item (3) is likely to evoke even more “belief in God within” than item (2). Even though slight changes in item wording do not affect their usefulness for

measuring the phenomenon at stake, then, such changes may nonetheless have major consequences for the frequencies found. Move from “A is not a nice man” to “A is a jerk” and watch the number of people who are negative about “A” decline; move from “A is not a nice man” to “A is a nice man” and watch the number of people who are negative about “A” increase. The five aforementioned items have moreover been selected from a universe of items that is in principle infinite, so that there are inevitably numerous items that produce extremely low percentages of belief in God within alongside numerous items that produce extremely high percentages. Because there are no reasons to accept that the percentage produced by either of these items is more “true” about the “real” number of people believing in God within than that produced by any other that might have been selected, the number of agrees and disagrees for any selected item does not tell us anything about the number of people who believe in God within.

Because percentages of “agreement” and “disagreement” evoked by Likert items are logically independent of the inter-correlations that demonstrate that they measure one and the same phenomenon, in short, these percentages say basically nothing about how widespread the phenomenon at hand actually is. This is because these percentages are inevitably relative to the exact question wording one has chosen and this problem cannot be solved (only clumsily masked) by selecting just a single item for the measurement of a particular belief. Even though it is hence in principle fairly easy to reliably measure “belief in God within” (or, for that matter, any other belief), it is impossible to draw conclusions from the resulting findings about how widespread such a belief actually is.

## **5. Conclusion and Debate**

With a few partial exceptions, surveys to date are like dinosaurs: evolved for landscapes of the sacred of the past, ill-calibrated for the landscapes which appear to be in evidence today. They have not given New Age spirituality the opportunity it deserves; the opportunity for those who more or less identify with it to have a reasonably accurate say, if a say at all. These dinosaurian questionnaires have adversely affected the sociological study of spirituality and religion: we simply do not know where we are.

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Moreover, the apparent shortcomings of the single-question measurements that are available call for improvement and the impossibility of “nose counting” in a religious field where institutions have become increasingly marginal needs to be acknowledged. For religious belief and spirituality simply cannot be counted and any claim to the contrary entails either deliberate deceit or is informed by methodological ignorance. A failure to move beyond the registration of institutional allegiances would however lead to a continuation of the process of maneuvering the most dynamic and rapidly expanding part of today’s religious field out of sight and even defining New Age spirituality completely out of existence. A major rehaul of survey research in sociology of religion is hence called for, supported by more and better spirituality questions in the questionnaires of the large international survey programs – questions that can be used to construct reliable scales (e.g., Granqvist and Hagekull 2001, Houtman and Mascini 2002).

The resulting data about inner-life spirituality, we suggest, should then be used to go beyond naïve ambitions of “nose counting” by moving forward to what survey methodology is actually good at; much better than any qualitative methodology. This is the testing of theories by systematically assessing whether affinity with inner-life spirituality is more typically found in particular population categories, birth cohorts and countries rather than others. Unlike practices of descriptive “nose counting” this does not require acceptance of the ill-founded assumption that frequencies somehow gauge a “true” numerical presence in an “absolute” sense. Such theory testing respects the fact that these numbers are always and necessarily relative to the questions and response categories used. Because the latter are standardized for all respondents, they do nonetheless allow for conclusions of the “more here, less there” variety – findings that have implications for the tenability of hypotheses and theories, even though acknowledging the metaphysical status of the notion of “true” absolute numbers.

Due to the dinosaurian nature of today’s international survey programs, sociologists of religion have thus far hardly been able to make use of the powerful instrument of survey methodology for documenting the massive shift towards New Age spirituality that has taken place. Had a set of good spirituality questions been stubbornly repeated every few years in the past few decades, they could have done so, without a need to be concerned about “correct”, “undistorted” or “true” counts in any “absolute” sense. Unfortunately, however, this has not been done and the intellectual stagnation this has caused cannot be undone after the fact. A failure to include a good set of spirituality questions in survey questionnaires rapidly now, would however

mean that the sociological study of religion and spirituality risks falling behind the times once and for all. Sociologists of religion and spirituality can simply no longer afford to continue looking in the wrong direction – the direction of the crumbling religious formations of the past rather than the emerging contours of the future of the sacred.

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