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A Rejoinder to Flere and Kirbiš

Christian Religiosity and New Age Spirituality: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

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Flere and Kirbiš (2009) demonstrate positive relationships between measures of New Age, traditionalism, and what they call "general religiosity" among samples of university students from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Slovenia, and Alabama, USA. They assert that these findings contradict Houtman and Aupers's (2007) claim, published in this journal, that a decline of traditional moral values has led to a spread of post-Christian New Age spirituality. More

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specifically, Flere and Kirbiš cast doubt on Houtman and Aupers' (2007) assumption that New Age spirituality "stands alone" and is to be explained accordingly—an assumption supported by a great deal of evidence that has informed most theorizing on the subject to date. If New Age spirituality can indeed be subsumed under theistic Christian and Islamic religion, as Flere and Kirbiš suggest, that fact would have profound theoretical implications.

The charge by Flere and Kirbiš is, however, unconvincing and their findings are not incompatible with those of Houtman and Aupers (2007). Yet, the two sets of findings do invite further study of the relationship between theistic Christian religiosity and New Age spirituality in different religious contexts. Accordingly, we report findings of a cross-cultural analysis of this relationship, based on data from the Religious and Moral Pluralism (RAMP) survey.

New Age and Theistic Christianity

Houtman and Aupers (2007) set out to study what remains of the sacred after the decline of theistic Christianity in the West, thus attempting to map and explain what they call "post-Christian" spirituality. They conceptualize the latter as maintaining a critical distance from Christian faith, thus defining it as "post-Christian" on *a priori* grounds. This means, first and foremost, that in their study Houtman and Aupers are not looking for spiritual ideas that are combined with theistic Christian religiosity. This conceptualization is consistent with studies by Hanegraaff (1996) and Heelas (1996) (also cited by Flere and Kirbiš) that emphasize that *by definition* New Age spirituality rejects religious "faith" or "belief" in favor of "gnosis." As such, New Age spirituality features "strict emphasis on the self and on spiritual experience . . . not a concept of God, but, rather, . . . of 'the higher self' " (Hanegraaff 2002:259). It "(rejects) voices of authority associated with established orders . . . even rejecting 'beliefs' " (Heelas 1996:22). In the words of Adams, "[The] prescriptions of others, of tradition, of experts, of religious texts, and all such external sources are not considered legitimate" (quoted in Heelas 1996:22).

These considerations underlie the admittedly crude measure of post-Christian spirituality used by Houtman and Aupers, who acknowledge that the World Values Study is more useful for studying the decline of Christian religion than the growth of post-Christian spirituality. The absence of questions that tap into the primacy of *gnosis* led them to combine questions that indicate a desire to maintain a critical distance *vis-à-vis* theistic Christian religion on the one hand and *vis-à-vis* secular rationalism on the other. While underscoring the theoretical validity of their measure, they are quite frank about its crudity. Acknowledging the weak relationships between their five indicators, they state "these findings obviously do not indicate that a linear combination of our five dichotomous indicators constitutes a reliable measure of post-Christian spirituality. Neither do we claim that it constitutes a theoretically sophisticated measurement. What we do claim, however, is that an index based on these five indicators can nevertheless be used to crudely map and explain the spiritual turn in 14 Western countries since 1981" (2007:312).

Flere and Kirbiš counter that in the four contexts where they have collected their data, it is not uncommon for people to endorse spiritual ideas of a distinctly "New Age" variety along with "general religiosity." This finding, however, cannot be taken to contradict the assumption that New Age spirituality "stands alone" from theistic religiosity because this "general religiosity," curiously defined as a "form of orthodoxy" by Flere and Kirbiš (2009:164), is not the same as theistic religiosity. Indeed, although their measure doubtlessly relates strongly to theistic religiosity, it is not surprising to find an association with New Age spirituality, too. The first three of their five items, referring to belief in "God," "a soul," and "life after death," respectively, are likely to tap into New Age spirituality and theistic religiosity simultaneously. "Life after death" can, after all, be understood as either "resurrection" or "going to heaven" (orthodox, theistic interpretation) or as "reincarnation" or the spirit otherwise "living on" (New Age interpretation).

Along these same lines, data from the Kendal Project (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) demonstrate that "belief in a soul" is almost as typical of New Agers as of those who belong to mainstream churches of the congregational domain (75 percent and 92 percent, respectively). Similarly, the notion of "belief in God" is so deeply entrenched in the West that it hides a variety of meanings, probably including the "God within" of New Age (Barker 2004).

Given this cross-over contamination of "general religiosity" with New Age spirituality, the question remains: Are we dealing here with a mere methodological fallacy or with an actual fusion of orthodox theistic religiosity and New Age? Two additional remarks are appropriate here. First, even if such fusions exist in the real world (and such a case can indeed be made, as we will demonstrate below), these fusions do not constitute New Age in the "posttheistic" sense addressed by Hanegraaff (1996), Heelas (1996), and Houtman and Aupers (2007). Second, to the extent that such fusions do occur, it is important to study where and when, and whether the emphasis lies with fusion in terms of traditional remnants of the past, as Flere and Kirbiš suggest, or with "New Age" tendencies and "inputs" that, it appears, are currently transforming many theistic religious traditions. We think the second alternative is more plausible than the first, and we also think that the popularity of such fusions among young and well-educated persons—like the respondents of Flere and Kirbiš—rather than the poorly educated elderly would support this hypothesis. Needless to say, a sample of university students provides insufficient data to test this vital hypothesis.

New Age and Traditionalism

This brings us to the "traditionalism" of those who (allegedly) combine theistic religiosity with New Age spirituality. Houtman and Aupers measure (post)traditionalism as a combination of Inglehart's index for postmaterialism, which measures the degree to which one values individual liberty and self-expression, with three items that tap into the acceptance or rejection of traditional moral values (i.e., the traditional hierarchical relationship between parents and children, traditional values pertaining to sexuality, and traditional male and female gender roles). Houtman and Mascini (2002) referred to a similar measure as "moral individualism." Houtman and Aupers (2007), like Houtman and Mascini (2002) who analyzed data collected in the Netherlands, find substantial negative relationships between this type of traditionalism and post-Christian New Age spirituality.

Flere and Kirbiš, on the other hand, understand traditionalism as "a value complex that idealizes the past," adding that "rather than the mere observance of patterns stemming from the past, traditionalism is primarily a consciousness of the worth and the superior legitimacy of such patterns, whether they are genuinely old or even if their age and content is pure fiction" (2009:163). This is obviously something very different from what Aupers and Houtman mean by "tradionalism." Much like the measure of "general religiosity" discussed above, such a conception of traditionalism is, moreover, not inimical to New Age spirituality. Indeed, as Wouter Hanegraaff rightly emphasizes, New Age spirituality is "not emically regarded as new and unprecedented but as a revival of ancient wisdom traditions" (1996:302). Whereas New Agers regard the era dominated by Christianity and rationalist science as profoundly alienating, they tend to lose themselves in nostalgic yearnings and romantic speculations about pre-Christian times and premodern cultures. In other words, they feel that the New Age must be much like the "old age." They consider the "timeless truths and wisdoms of our ancestors"—much like those of ancient Egypt, India, or Tibet; those of "forgotten civilizations" such as Atlantis, Lemuria, or Mu; and those of the "age-old traditions" of native American Indians, Australian Aboriginals, or Siberian shamans—as invaluable sources of spiritual guidance.

It is hence not surprising that New Agers endorse all three items used by Flere and Kirbiš to measure traditionalism as "a value complex that idealizes the past:" "Tradition is a major guidance at the crossroads in my life," "Our ancestors may have been less knowledgeable in science, but they were wiser than most contemporaries," and "Customs observed by our ancestors should be

practiced even when it's difficult for me to grasp their meaning." Quite clearly, this is not the type of traditionalism that Houtman and Aupers have in mind, relating, for instance, to adherence to the principles that children should always obey their parents, that women should not be allowed to take up management positions, and that homosexuality is a disease that needs to be cured.

Of Concepts and Toothbrushes

We think it is clear that with their measure of "general religiosity" (that taps into both New Age and traditional theistic religiosity) and with their conspicuously "New Agey" notion of traditionalism, Flere and Kirbiš do not have a convincing case. Indeed, in the two articles, the notions of (post)traditionalism and of New Age—viewed as either posttheistic and hence "standing alone" by definition or not—differ so widely that it makes no sense to argue that the two sets of findings are incompatible.

Indeed, a failure to recognize that the same words are often used to refer to very different empirical phenomena—be it "New Age" and "(post)traditionalism" in this case or "modernity," "globalization," "social class," or whatever elsewhere—is one of the most awkward features of social-scientific discourse. For instance, as has been pointed out elsewhere (Houtman 2003), in the absence of a shared conceptualization of social class, and depending on the definition used, it is just as easy to "demonstrate empirically" that authoritarianism stems from an underprivileged class position (e.g., Kohn 1977; Lipset 1981) as it is to demonstrate that authoritarianism has nothing to do with class (e.g., Dekker and Ester 1987; Grabb 1979, 1980).

Flere and Kirbiš also do not appreciate the greater willingness among social scientists to use each others' toothbrushes than each others' definitions, as some have mockingly phrased it. This easily produces spurious debates about research findings believed to be "incompatible," when in fact there are no good reasons to assume such.

Christian Religiosity and New Age Spirituality: The Need for Cross-Cultural Comparison

Yet, the response by Flere and Kirbiš (2009) to Houtman and Aupers (2007) clearly invites further reflection and debate about the relationship between theistic Christian religiosity and (arguably) New Age spirituality. This relationship has been a recurring theme in exchanges about Heelas and Woodhead's *The Spiritual Revolution* (2005) since its appearance. They argue that "religion" is giving way to "spirituality" in the West. More precisely, their hypothesis is "that in the West those forms of religion that tell their followers to live their lives in conformity with external principles to the neglect of the cultivation of their unique subjective-lives will be in decline. Many churches and chapels are likely to fall into this category. By contrast, those forms of spirituality in the West that help people to live in accordance with the deepest, sacred dimensions of their own unique lives can be expected to be growing" (2005:7). Critics contend that by claiming such a shift from "life-as-religion" to "subjective-life spirituality," Heelas and Woodhead have constructed an opposition between the two that does not exist on the ground (see Henriksen 2005; Ketola 2005; Sutcliffe 2006; for responses and critical reassessment, see Heelas 2007, 2008:56–59, 2009/2010). Religion and (arguably) New Age spirituality, or so these critics hold, are perfectly compatible and do not exclude one another. This claim is similar to the one being made by Flere and Kirbiš (2009).

The two sets of findings under discussion raise the question of whether and how the relationship between theistic religiosity and (allegedly) New Age spirituality might differ in cultural contexts that differ in religiosity. To be more precise, do we find more of a post-Christian New Age spirituality, broken away from the Christian tradition and hence "standing on its own two feet," in the heavily secularized Northwestern European countries, while we find stronger interconnections

between the two in the more traditionally Christian and less secularized countries of, for instance, Southern Europe? In other words, is there any evidence of a narrower gap between theistic Christian religiosity and (allegedly) New Age spirituality in countries where the Christian churches stand most firmly?

Even apart from the lack of a more convincing measure of theistic religiosity, the four samples used by Flere and Kirbiš are far from ideal for answering this question. To be sure, their samples "represent very different cultures, three dominated by varied Christian traditions and one by the European Islamic tradition. The four samples also differ in the strength of religiosity. . . . This makes it an interesting, although not representative, cross-cultural set" (Flere and Kirbiš 2009:164). Although we agree with much of this, we want to underscore that all of their samples stem from countries that are much more religious than the "secularized" Northwestern European countries where post-Christian New Age spirituality has become most widespread according to Heelas and Woodhead (2005) and Houtman and Aupers (2007).[1] Consequently, we propose that a comparison between these two types of contexts (the more "secularized" and the predominantly religious) would provide a more convincing cross-cultural analysis of the relationship between theistic Christian religion and (allegedly) New Age spirituality.

Findings from the RAMP survey, conducted in the late 1990s in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and Sweden, do indeed suggest that theistic Christian religiosity and (allegedly) New Age spirituality may be more closely related in less secularized countries. Although findings based on this survey have not as yet been made widely available, a simple and straightforward analysis by Barker (2004) reports some remarkable findings. In particular, she demonstrates widespread adherence to the belief that "God is something within each person, rather than something out there" in massively Catholic Portugal and Italy. This belief is more widespread in these two countries than in all others and in Portugal it is even much more widespread than the belief in "a God with whom I can have a personal relationship" that one would expect in theistic Christian religion. This is quite an extraordinary finding. For how can one be a Catholic *and* believe that "God is something within each person, *rather than* something out there" (our emphasis)?

Rather than taking these findings to indicate a major shift in Portugal from theistic Catholicism to post-Christian New Age spirituality, Heelas and Houtman (2009) hypothesize that "spiritual" ideas such as a belief in "the God within" are more closely related to, and hence understood in terms of, Christian beliefs in massively Christian religious contexts than in the secularized Northwestern European countries. In the rest of this article, we want to test this hypothesis by means of a more detailed analysis of the data of the RAMP survey.[2]

Results of a Cross-Cultural Comparison

The RAMP Survey: Measurement

The RAMP survey designers have added the aforementioned response category "I believe that God is something within each person, rather than something out there" to the question "Which of these statements comes nearest to your own belief?" while retaining the four familiar response options: (1) "I believe in a God with whom I can have a personal relationship," (2) "I believe in an impersonal spirit or life force," (3) "I don't believe in any kind of God, spirit, or life force," and (4) "I really don't know what to believe." Adding this fifth response category has

[1] By "secularization" we refer here and elsewhere in this article to a decline of theistic Christian religion, a process that is closely related to the decline of traditional moral values pertaining to gender, the family, sexuality, etc.

[2] We thank Loek Halman and Peer Scheepers for their willingness to make the data of the RAMP survey available to us.

Table 1: "Concept of God" category by country (in %)

Country	Personal God	Spirit/Life Force	God Within	Don't Believe	Don't Know	Total
Belgium	21.5	23.9	30.8	10.8	13.1	100
Denmark	20.1	20.9	35.2	13.4	10.4	100
Finland	36.7	15.4	28.9	9.6	9.4	100
Great Britain	23.4	14.3	37.2	9.1	16.0	100
Hungary	32.9	7.8	24.6	14.8	19.9	100
Italy	50.4	7.2	35.9	4.6	1.9	100
The Netherlands	23.4	27.3	26.4	14.4	8.5	100
Norway	27.7	16.0	25.0	15.6	15.6	100
Poland	63.2	12.2	18.4	.9	5.3	100
Portugal	25.9	21.1	39.1	4.1	9.7	100
Sweden	18.0	19.7	36.0	11.6	14.7	100
Total	33.0	16.2	31.4	9.0	10.5	100

Cramer's $V = .196$ ($p < .001$).

resulted in findings that make one wonder whether the relationship between theistic Christianity and (allegedly) New Age spirituality may vary systematically between religious and secular contexts.

Table 1 shows the popularity of the five response categories, revealing substantial differences between the 11 countries. Setting aside "Don't believe" and "Don't know" as responses that indicate outlooks less involved with either religion or spirituality, we focus on the other three. "Belief in a personal God," which comes closest to theistic Christian religiosity, is least widespread in Northwestern European countries such as Great Britain, Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, Belgium, and Denmark. Belief in an impersonal spirit or life force, on the other hand, is quite widespread in these countries—not only in comparison with the percentages selecting the "personal God" option, but also in a more absolute sense; that is, in Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark it is even more widespread than belief in a personal God. In these countries, then, theistic Christianity seems relatively marginal and New Age spirituality relatively widespread—a pattern that is consistent with the claim by Houtman and Aupers (2007) about post-Christian spirituality being most widespread in the most secularized Northwestern European countries. Belief in an impersonal spirit or life force is, after all, central to the post-Christian New Age spirituality studied by Houtman and Aupers (see also Houtman and Mascini 2002). Note that this response category is also quite similar to the item "The entire Universe is an expression of a unified spiritual energy," used by Flere and Kirbiš (2009) in their measure of "New Age" spirituality. It is, however, worth bearing in mind that this is not *just* a measure of New Age spirituality, but also of panentheistic Christianity, an aspect of "traditional" theism that may be growing rather than shrinking today.

This brings us to the principal question that involves us here: Whether ideas such as these are more closely related to, and hence probably also understood in terms of, theistic Christianity in contexts where the latter is more widely established? Table 1 suqqests that such is, indeed, the case. Again, the findings for Portugal stand out as the most remarkable, with no less than 21 percent believing in an impersonal spirit or life force—almost as many as the 26 percent who believe in a personal God. This lends further credibility to the hypothesis that findings such as these cannot be taken at face value—that what may superficially look like "identical" responses may in fact mean quite different things in different religious contexts. More specifically, the case of Portugal suggests the presence in massively Christian contexts of conceptions of the sacred

Table 2: Mean Christian religiosity by country and "concept of God" category (scale 0–10)

Country	Personal God	Spirit/Life Force	God Within	Don't Believe	Don't Know	Total
Belgium	6.52	4.09	4.62	1.10	2.41	4.23
Denmark	6.38	4.14	3.97	1.66	2.54	4.05
Finland	6.92	4.58	4.59	1.36	2.93	5.07
Great Britain	6.88	3.30	4.20	.81	2.31	4.11
Hungary	6.74	4.28	4.39	.91	2.77	4.34
Italy	6.89	3.69	5.63	1.12	3.50	5.89
The Netherlands	7.16	3.47	3.91	1.10	1.86	3.99
Norway	6.65	3.76	4.22	1.56	3.15	4.35
Poland	7.54	6.06	6.46	1.10	4.79	6.97
Portugal	6.60	4.69	5.59	1.16	3.02	5.25
Sweden	6.37	3.51	3.48	1.41	2.69	3.76

that are not so much "post-Christian," as heavily theistic with "New Age" (and immanentist Christian) undertones—albeit sometimes quite vocal.

In order to more systematically study how the aforementioned religious/spiritual responses in the RAMP survey relate to theistic Christian religiosity, we use eight questions to measure the latter: belief in the Bible as God's word, belief in Jesus as God and man, belonging to a church, frequency of church attendance, frequency of prayer, self-identification as religious, belief in salvation, and belief in life after death (though not an optimal item, as explained above).[3] Scale scores have been recoded and range from 0 to 10. Note that this scale for Christian religiosity contains items that tap into theistic Christian beliefs as well as questions that measure traditional Christian institutional affiliations and practices. Although we may want to distinguish these two as separate dimensions of Christian religiosity, such a distinction does not exist on the ground, so that both sets of questions can be combined into a single scale. Needless to say, this also means that removing one or the other type of question from our scale does not affect our findings.

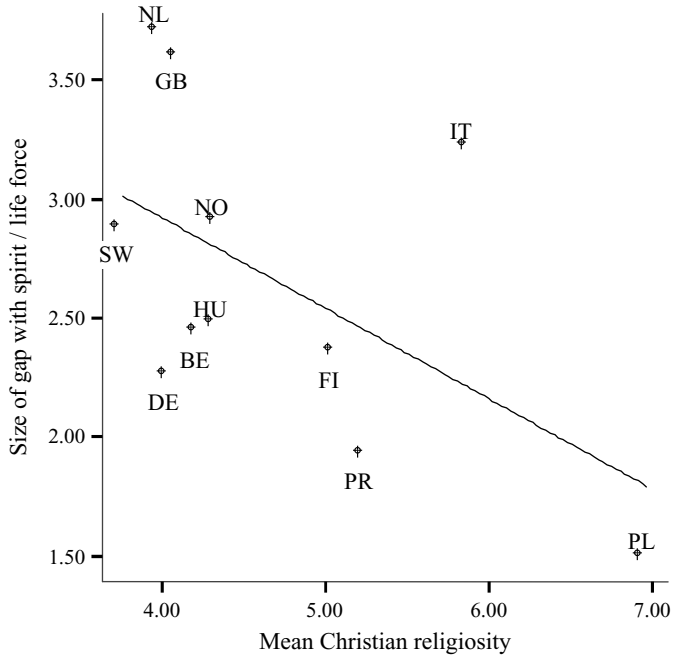
The RAMP Survey: Findings

Are belief in an impersonal spirit or life force and belief in "the God within" more closely related to Christian religiosity in the more religious countries, while they tend to be separate phenomena in more "secularized" countries? To determine whether this is the case, we have computed average scale scores for Christian religiosity for all five response categories in all 11 countries (Table 2).

In all 11 countries, those who believe in a personal God have a more Christian outlook than those who believe in either an impersonal spirit or life force or in "the God within." More important for our intentions here, however, the gap in Christian religiosity between those who believe in a personal God and those who have selected one of the latter two options seems wider in the most secularized countries. In massively Catholic Poland or Portugal, for instance, these gaps are narrower than in Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Sweden, three of the most secularized European countries. To test this hypothesis more systematically (keeping things as statistically simple as possible), we measure the size of this gap by subtracting the

[3] Cronbach's alpha is .77 in Poland and higher than .80 in all other countries, ranging from .81 in Sweden, Denmark, and Portugal to .88 in the Netherlands and .89 in Great Britain.

Figure 1
Size of the gap in Christian religiosity between those who believe in a personal God and those who believe in an impersonal spirit or life force (Pearson's $r = -.55$; $p < .05$; one-sided test)



mean Christian religiosity of those who believe in a spirit or life force from the mean Christian religiosity of those who believe in a personal God, doing the same for those who believe in "the God within."[4] This yields two new variables that indicate how far apart in terms of Christian religiosity the two "spiritual" categories are from those who believe in a personal God.

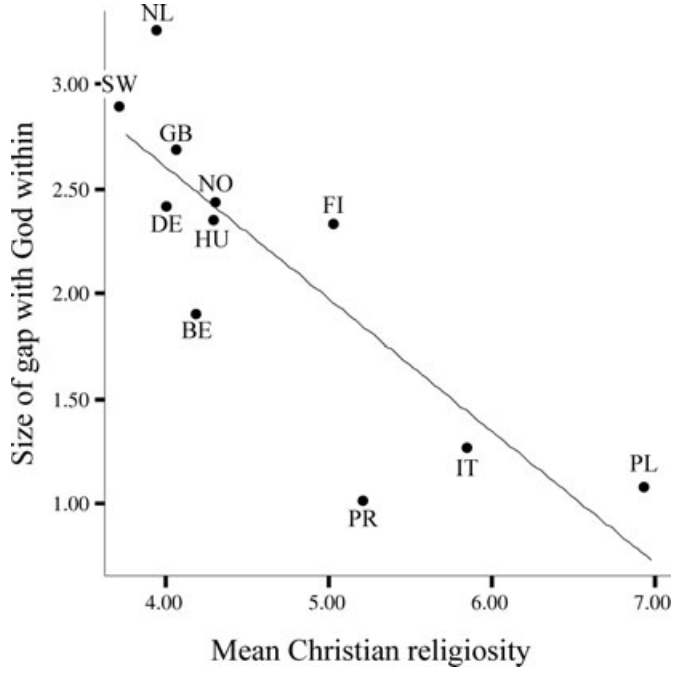
Figure 1 shows the relationship between the size of the gap in Christian religiosity between those who believe in a personal God and those who believe in an impersonal spirit or life force. Even with a mere 11 cases, it is clear that this gap is significantly wider in the more secularized countries and narrower in the more Christian ones (Pearson's $r = -.55$; $p < .05$; one-sided test). The gap is widest in the Netherlands and Great Britain and narrowest in Portugal and Poland. In other words, spirituality is less closely related to, and hence probably less incorporated in, what remains of theistic Christian religiosity in the most secularized countries.

The same pattern appears for the gap in Christian religiosity between those who believe in a personal God and those who believe in "the God within" (Figure 2). The only difference with Figure 1 worth mentioning[5] is that the relationship is even stronger in this case (Pearson's $r = -.83$; $p < .001$; one-sided test). In highly secularized countries such as Great Britain, Sweden, and the Netherlands, New Age spirituality sets itself more decidedly apart from what remains of theistic Christian religiosity, while the two are more closely related—most probably by virtue of reformulation or transformation—in countries like Portugal and Poland, where

[4] Although we stick to the statistically most simple test here, we wish to point out that more complex procedures produce similar results.

[5] Apart, perhaps, from the remarkably different positions occupied by Italy in the two figures, which suggests that in Italy, in marked contrast with Poland and Portugal, belief in an impersonal spirit or life force is less typically combined with theistic Christian beliefs and practices than belief in "the God within."

Figure 2
Size of the gap in Christian religiosity between those who believe in a personal God and those who believe in "the God within" (Pearson's $r = -.83$; $p < .001$; one-sided test)



theistic Christian religiosity remains much more firmly established and exerts a more powerful or plausible interpretive hold.

Conclusion and Debate

Houtman and Aupers (2007) claimed that New Age spirituality (conceptualized as distinct by definition from theistic Christian religiosity) has become most widespread in the most secularized and least morally traditional societies. This claim is not contradicted by the positive relationships between measures of New Age, traditionalism, and "general religiosity" among university students from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Slovenia, and Alabama, USA, that are reported by Flere and Kirbiš. The two sets of findings rather suggest that, particularly in the least secularized countries, much of what may at face value look like post-Christian New Age spirituality is in fact quite closely related to theistic Christian religiosity. This hypothesis is supported by our analysis of data from the RAMP survey: New Age spirituality is less closely related to what remains of theistic Christian religiosity in the most secularized countries. This suggests that a decline of theistic Christianity leads the two to grow increasingly apart.

Simultaneously, however, indications of a "spiritualization" of theistic religion must also be taken seriously—in Islam (Sufism) as well as in Christianity (Pentecostalism, evangelicalism, and the Catholic charismatic movement). Such "spiritualized" varieties of theistic religion range from those that emphasize the spirituality of the transcendent, theistic godhead, and that are, thus, far from identical to post-Christian New Age spirituality, to those that emphasize immanence to the extent of being on the fringes of doctrinal religion (Heelas 2008:54–56). In all varieties, however, there are strong indications that they are waxing rather than waning in the contemporary world (see Heelas and Woodhead 2005 for evidence and for the associated subjectivization thesis).

We think it is vitally important to further explore the relationship between "religion" and "spirituality" in future national and cross-cultural research. In particular, we think it is crucial to pay attention to the empirical and theoretical questions of whether, why, and when this relationship differs across contexts. This requires better measures of spirituality than those present in either the World Values Study or the RAMP survey—and the same goes for the other large international survey programs. Now that useful scales for New Age spirituality have become available (see, e.g., Granqvist and Hagekull 2001; Houtman and Mascini 2002; and also Flere and Kirbiš 2009), including a good set of items in the relevant questionnaires will reduce the data constraints that currently impede theoretical progress.

Ultimately, what is at stake is the extent to which "New Age" spirituality stands on its own two feet in various cultural and religious contexts, having broken, or in the process of breaking free of the plausibility systems of various forms of Christianity (in particular the more hierarchical and exclusivistic) and having developed as a significant rival to be understood, interpreted, and explained accordingly. To shift attention from what could well be misleading face value similarities or identities between "New Age" spirituality and theistic forms, questionnaire measures require more sensitive tongs, not hammers.

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