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### **Unchurched Spirituality**

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### **Abstract and Keywords**

This article questions the assumption that the present decline in church-based religion in Europe is part of a long-term process of decline. It also raises the issue of further research into the extent to which the decline in standard religion has contributed to the growth of spirituality outside the churches, and the apparently problematic relationship of that spirituality to science. Overall, the article is cautious in its conclusions regarding the relationship of church-based religion and spirituality, as well as on the question of the origins and strength of the social and cultural forces driving the phenomenon of unchurched spirituality. It also expresses methodological concerns relating to definition. These are but some of the issues to which research needs to turn its attention in a more systematic and sustained manner.

Keywords: church-based religion, Europe, standard religion, spirituality, science

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ONE of the main questions debated by sociologists of religion has been the development of religion in modern societies. Is religion doomed to lose its importance, or can we expect religion to survive, either in the traditional forms or in new forms? This debate has largely focused on the situation in Western Europe, where the religious development since 1750 has been described as 'the decline of Christendom' (McLeod 2003).

During the second half of the twentieth century, many European countries experienced a decline in church-based religion. In particular, declining church attendance was an important aspect of this process, and a characteristic of the development that has been described as the secularization process. For a relatively long time many scholars have assumed that this decline of church-based religion was equivalent to a decline of religion per se. Moreover, it was often assumed that this development, although it was particularly evident in Europe, would not remain unique to Europe but would become a characteristic of modern societies in general. Religion, some researchers maintained, would necessarily lose

ground as a consequence of economic development, the spread of education, and modernization.

Other scholars, however, have maintained that the decline in organized religion that is evident in many parts of Europe has not implied a decline in religion as such. Instead, there are indications that other forms of religion—for example, unorganized religion or spirituality outside the churches—have gained ground.

Thus, a crucial question would seem to be this: does the decline in some aspects of religious adherence, notably church attendance, imply that religion per se is declining? Or, should this development perhaps be seen as a zero-sum game, where a decline in some forms of religion is accompanied by an increase in other forms? A discussion of this question is complicated by the fact that certain concepts that are central for the discussion, in particular the concepts 'religion' and 'spirituality', can be defined in various ways. Moreover, the choice of definitions will, at least to some extent, determine what answer scholars give to this question.

Sociological studies of individual, unchurched religion or spirituality have often focused on European conditions (McGuire 2000: 108). One reason for this is that scholars have been interested in the question of possible relationships between traditional religious adherence and spirituality outside the churches. This question is of particular interest with regard to Europe because of the decline in church adherence in many European countries during the past century. However, individual religion or spirituality in North America has also been the topic of important studies. Needless to say, unorganized individual religion or spirituality in various forms exists in other parts of the world as well, but this essay will focus on the European and American context.

## Definitions of 'Spirituality'

In the academic world, the term 'spirituality' has been used to denote several different, but interrelated, concepts. In studies of the history of Christianity and other religions the term has for a long time been used to denote forms of piety that are associated with mystical and monastic traditions. Spirituality in this sense is still an important field of research, notably among church historians, but also among scholars in other fields, e.g. theology, history of religions, and the psychology of religion. In this use of the term, spirituality stands for a form of religiosity with a strong emphasis on the individual's (or a group's) relation to God or a transcendent reality, in which spiritual exercises such as prayer, meditation, and fasting are often important elements. Spirituality in this sense is not a phenomenon that exists independently of or outside traditional religious

institutions. Rather, it can be seen as one aspect of institutional religion, e.g. of traditional Christianity, although the degree to which a person's religiosity can be described as 'spiritual' in this sense will differ between individual believers.

More recently, however, the term 'spirituality' has increasingly come to be used to denote forms of religiosity that exist *outside* traditional religious institutions, and in particular—since the focus has been on Europe and North America—outside the Christian churches. Among sociologists of religion this use of the term 'spirituality' is now common.

(p. 744) To give a survey of the scholarly literature on spirituality is an undertaking that is complicated by the fact that the term 'spirituality' is extremely ambiguous. Although the word is widely used, both by the general public, by religious professionals, and by scholars, it is often used without a definition or with definitions that are not sufficiently precise. To be sure, attempts have been made to clarify the various ways in which the term is used, but it has also been pointed out that the concept is obscure, vague, and 'fuzzy' (e.g. Zinnbauer et al. 1997; Rose 2001).

Hence, an essay on (unchurched) spirituality must necessarily contain a brief overview of how the term has been used. Obviously, such an overview will be far from comprehensive; rather, the aim is to give some examples of the various ways in which the term is used among sociologists of religion. The emphasis will be on how the term has been used by scholars, but I will begin with a short presentation of the findings of a few studies of how the term 'spirituality' is used among the general public and among religious professionals, respectively.

Not only is 'spirituality' defined in very diverse ways both among religious professionals and among scholars (see below), but there is also considerable variation in the way in which the term is understood and used among the general public (see, e.g., Roof 1999: 34–5). However, sociologists of religion have paid relatively little attention to the ways in which the general public understand and use the term (Zinnbauer et al. 1997: 551). This is surprising, considering that an understanding of the development and prevalence of contemporary spirituality and of the relationship between religion and spirituality requires studies of how people interpret survey questions related to the concept 'spirituality'.

In a study of how different groups of Americans from a wide range of religious backgrounds understood the terms 'spiritual' and 'religious', Zinnbauer *et al.* found evidence of both convergence and divergence in the understandings of these concepts. While 93 per cent of the respondents identified themselves as spiritual, and 78 per cent identified themselves as religious, there were variations in the definitions of these terms. Zinnbauer *et al.* point out that the findings of their study 'illustrate the necessity for

researchers to recognize the many meanings attributed to religiousness and spirituality by different religious and cultural groups, and the different ways in which these groups consider themselves religious and/or spiritual' (1997: 562). This study was not based on random samples, however, but on samples drawn from institutions where people were more likely to be religiously involved than Americans in general.

More recently, data from various surveys investigating the relationship between being 'religious' and being 'spiritual' have been compared and discussed by Marler and Hadaway (2002). This study demonstrates how different ways of sampling (e.g., random samples as opposed to convenience samples) and different formulations of survey questions affect the results of surveys and make comparisons between different surveys hazardous. The authors found that the question as to whether Americans have become 'more spiritual' and 'less religious' could not (p. 745) be answered definitively, since there were important differences between surveys with regard to questions, wording, and methods of sampling. However, they concluded that the relationship between 'being religious' and 'being spiritual' is not a zero-sum proposition. Instead, 'the most significant finding about the relationship between "being religious" and "being spiritual" is that most Americans see themselves as both' (Marler and Hadaway 2002: 297). A similar conclusion can be drawn from Wade Clark Roof's study of the Boomer Generation, in which he found a substantial overlap between those who described themselves as 'religious' and those who described themselves as 'spiritual': 74 per cent said they were 'religious', and 73 per cent said they were 'spiritual'. Of those who described themselves as religious, 79 per cent also claimed to be spiritual. However, there were also people who claimed to be spiritual but not religious, or religious but not spiritual (Roof 1999: 173).

In a study of how the term was used among professionals from the five major religious traditions, Rose found that while considerable differences in the understanding of the term existed, there was also evidence of a basic set of characteristics. In particular, three criteria for the appropriate use of the term 'spirituality' seemed to be agreed upon by many of the respondents: 'some form of continuous religious or comparable experience, particular maintained effort or practice, and the experience of love' (Rose 2001: 193). Rose concluded that the term 'spirituality', as it was used by the religious professionals in his study, had a much more specific meaning than it has in current usage and was used to denote in part the same aspects as the term 'religion'. While the overall view among the respondents seemed to be that the two terms have similar meanings, the term 'spirituality' was understood as being 'more expansive' (pp. 193, 205).

## The Concept 'Spirituality' in Sociology of Religion

To what extent can spirituality be regarded as a modern, or perhaps even postmodern, phenomenon? Scholars differ in their answers to that question. While some see spirituality as something that has increasingly characterized Western societies during the past half-century, others emphasize the similarities between contemporary forms of spirituality and the characteristics of popular religion, not only in its contemporary but also in its pre-modern forms (McGuire 2000). These different views are related to different definitions of the concept 'spirituality'. In the following, I will give a few examples of the different ways in which sociologists of religion nowadays use the term 'spirituality'.

Stark, Hamberg, and Miller (2005: 7) note that 'recently, discussions of popular religion have been dominated by spirituality, a label which is applied to an immense variety of beliefs, feelings, and practices concerned with things of the spirit as opposed to the material'. Although the concept is seldom defined in any (p. 746) precise way, 'all forms of spirituality assume the *existence of the supernatural (whether Gods or essences)* and that *benefits can be gained from supernatural sources*. The term also connotes that these beliefs are *not necessarily associated with organized congregations* and *often do not constitute creeds*, for all that exponents often freely pick and choose from an array of creedlike bodies of doctrine.' Since the forms of spirituality that are discussed in this essay are usually not associated with organized congregations, the term 'unchurched spirituality' may be used to distinguish them from other forms of spirituality, e.g. in the monastic tradition. However, the terms 'spirituality' and 'unchurched spirituality' will often be used synonymously in the following, since this reflects the way in which the term 'spirituality' is used among sociologists of religion.

In a discussion of individual religion in a social and historical context, Meredith McGuire (2000) argues for the need to pay attention to 'the personal beliefs and practices by which individual spiritual lives are shaped and transformed, expressed and experienced, over time'. In McGuire's use of the concept, spirituality is 'a way of conceptualizing individual involvement in religion that allows for the considerable diversity of meanings and ritual practices which ordinary people use in their everyday lives' (2000: 99). She stresses the parallels between contemporary forms of spirituality and popular religion (2000: 103). With this understanding of the concept, contemporary spirituality has many characteristics in common with folk religion or popular religion, and is understood as a phenomenon that can be traced many centuries back, even though its expressions may vary over time.

The definitions of spirituality cited above are wide. For instance, as mentioned, spirituality has characteristics in common with folk religion, and it is not seen as a modern phenomenon only. An example of a different understanding of 'spirituality' is found in the work of Paul Heelas (2002: 358), in which 'religion' is defined 'in terms of obedience to a transcendent God and a tradition which mediates his authority', and 'spirituality' is defined as 'experience of the divine as immanent in life'. According to Heelas, the following key characteristics have come to be associated with 'spirituality': it 'has to do with the personal; that which is interior or immanent; that which is one's experienced relationship with the sacred; and that wisdom or knowledge which derives from such experiences. At heart, spirituality has come to mean "life".'

### **Spirituality and Religion—Changes in the Use of the Concepts?**

The literature concerning spirituality shows that there are great differences between scholars with regard to the views held of the relationships that may exist between religion and spirituality, both historically and with regard to the (p. 747) contemporary situation. These diverging views can at least in part be ascribed to the fact that the concept 'spirituality' is defined in different ways—or, indeed, sometimes not defined at all. Moreover, not only 'spirituality' but also 'religion' can be defined in various ways, and there have been changes over time in the use of both concepts (see, e.g., Zinnbauer et al. 1997).

Sociologists of religion have traditionally used either substantive or functional definitions of religiousness (see, e.g., Berger 1969: 175-7). Substantive definitions are narrower and more specific than functional definitions. They are more explicit about the content of religion and define what religion *is*. They focus on the beliefs and practices of individuals in relation to a higher power or divine being. Functional definitions are usually broader and emphasize what religion *does* for the individual and for the social group. They focus on the function that religion serves in the life of the individual (McGuire 1992: 11-15; Zinnbauer et al. 1997: 550).

Functional definitions tend to include all that substantive definitions identify as religion, but are usually much broader (McGuire 1992: 14). It is pointed out by Zinnbauer et al. (1997: 551), however, that both these types of definitions have been 'broad enough to subsume the "spiritual" as well as both individual and institutional beliefs and activities. As spirituality has become differentiated from religiousness, however, it has taken with it some of the elements formally (*sic!*) included within religiousness. Therefore, recent definitions of religiousness have become more narrow and less inclusive.'

In contemporary sociology of religion there is, of course, great variation among scholars regarding the definitions of religion and religiousness that are chosen. However, Zinnbauer *et al.* may be right in their claim that there has been a shift in the way the terms 'religiousness' and 'spirituality' are used. This is worth noting, since it may have implications for the assessment of hypotheses and assertions about contemporary trends of secularization and the future of religion in modern societies. For instance, the question of whether or not 'religiousness' has declined in Europe in recent decades can be answered in different ways, depending on how 'religiousness' is defined.

Secularization is a concept that has been defined in various ways, but it is usually understood as 'a historical development by which religion has lost (or is losing) a presumed central place in society' (McGuire 1992: 249). One aspect of this process is a decline in the social power of religious institutions, which has undoubtedly taken place in Europe; but often this process has also been understood to imply a decline in personal piety (Stark and Finke 2000: 59-60).

If 'secularization' is defined as a decline in 'religiousness', where religiousness is narrowly understood as adherence to traditional Christian beliefs and practices, many European countries have undoubtedly become more secularized in recent decades. With such a definition of religiousness, recent developments may be seen as evidence for the assertion that the secularization process is well under way in Europe.

(p. 748) With a wider definition of religion or religiousness, however, the development in Europe would be interpreted differently. An example of this is given by Stark and Iannaccone (1994: 232), who define religion as 'any system of beliefs and practices concerned with ultimate meaning that assumes the existence of the supernatural'. With the use of this definition, not only church-oriented forms of religion, but also much of what might be denoted as unchurched spirituality, falls within the boundaries of religion, and it would be misleading to draw a sharp distinction between religion and (unchurched) spirituality. Hence, it is not surprising that Stark and Iannaccone do not find evidence for the secularization of Europe; indeed, they suggest that 'the concept of secularization be dropped for lack of cases to which it could apply' (p. 230), and conclude that 'the evolutionary future of religion is not extinction. The empirical evidence is that the vitality of religious firms can fluctuate greatly over time, rising as well as falling, although subjective religiousness seems to vary far less' (p. 249).

Thus, if we use a narrow definition of religion, where 'religion' is understood as equivalent to traditional church-oriented religion, we may conclude that religion has declined in many European countries, while (unchurched) spirituality has increased. If we use a wider definition of religion, however, we may instead conclude that there is no evidence of a long-term decline of religion, even though the forms of religiousness have

changed over time, and traditional forms of religion have been partly replaced by the phenomena that are often referred to as 'spirituality'. The question of religious change in Europe can thus be answered in different ways, depending on our definitions.

## Characteristics of Contemporary Unchurched Spirituality

Since the term 'spirituality' is used in different senses, descriptions of its main characteristics also vary to some extent. Nevertheless, descriptions of spirituality tend to have important themes in common.

Some scholars point to characteristics that contemporary spirituality has in common with popular religion. According to McGuire (2000: 103), important features of contemporary spirituality include 'holism, autonomy, eclecticism, tolerance, this-worldly activism and pragmatism, appreciation of materiality, and blurring of boundaries between sacred and profane'. It has also been pointed out that much that is now called 'spirituality' is not religion but magic, as in the case of, e.g., astrology, crystals, tarot, intuitive medicine, bio-rhythms, numerology, and (p. 749) telepathy. Other forms of spirituality involve religion, with or without belief in gods, but they often lack congregations or creeds, and sometimes both (Stark, Hamberg, and Miller 2005: 7).

Scholars who see contemporary spirituality as a modern phenomenon often stress individualism, a focus on the 'self'; subjectivism, an emphasis on quest and personal experience; and changes in the attitudes to religious institutions as important aspects of spirituality. Obviously these themes are closely related.

Heelas (2002) uses the concept 'spiritualities of life', and distinguishes between New Age spiritualities of life and theistic spiritualities of life. The New Age spiritualities of life 'equate spirituality with the life which we are born with, and all the potentials which this is experienced as possessing' (p. 375). The theistic spiritualities of life combine components of traditional Christian beliefs with elements from New Age spiritualities of life (p. 366). They stand for forms of religious activity which 'combine use of tradition with reliance on what the Holy Spirit (or similar inspirers or transformers) have to offer with regard to the salvation of life in the here-and-now' (p. 375). According to Heelas (p. 370), both New Age and theistic spiritualities of life involve 'a remarkably similar dynamic', since they both promise release from the wrong kind of selfhood in the present life, 'the here and now'.



Heelas argues (2002: 363–9) that New Age spiritualities of life are no longer confined to New Age—that is, to those who are willing to accept this label—but are a growing force in mainstream culture. He also argues that theistic spiritualities of life are a growing force within institutionalized traditional religion, and sees this as evidence that a shift from religion to spirituality, in his words ‘a spiritual revolution’, is taking place even within religion. In particular, this is seen in the increased importance ascribed to the Holy Spirit relative to tradition. Heelas stresses the subjective, emotional aspects of these theistic forms of spirituality. Small groups of believers, whose participants discuss scripture and share insights on the basis of their own life experiences, play an important role. Personal conviction is seen as more important than theological doctrines, and personal experience of the sacred and of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in daily life is emphasized.

It might be argued, however, that some of the characteristics that Heelas regards as typical of theistic spiritualities of life have also characterized many Christian groups in history. Christian revival movements have often had strong emotional elements, and they have often stressed the importance of personal experience of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So a spirituality in which these elements are central is not necessarily a new phenomenon that has developed in modern societies. Rather, such forms of theistic spirituality may have a long historical record. On the other hand, it can perhaps be argued that the very strong focus on the individual in contemporary spirituality is a new element that may distinguish contemporary theistic spirituality from earlier forms of Christian spirituality. While in traditional (p. 750) Christian spirituality the relationship between God and man was strongly centred on God, the focus in contemporary theistic spirituality seems to have shifted towards the human person.

Wade Clark Roof (1999) discusses religious change in the United States with a focus on the generation born after the Second World War, the ‘Baby Boomers’, whom he sees as the principal carriers of ‘an emerging spiritual quest culture’ (p. 49). Like Heelas, Roof emphasizes experience as an important characteristic of contemporary spirituality: ‘Generally, primacy is placed not on reason or inherited faith, but on experience, or anticipation of experience, engaging the whole person and activating, or reactivating, individual as well as collective energies’ (p. 469).

Roof sees spirituality as encompassing four ‘big’ themes: ‘a source of values and meaning beyond oneself, a way of understanding, inner awareness, and personal integration’. What is at stake is a viable conception of the ‘self’. ‘Contemporary quests for spirituality are really yearnings for a reconstructed interior life, deliberate and formative efforts aimed at forging an integrated self and transcending the limits of the given’ (Roof 1999: 35).

Roof (1999) also found evidence of an emerging boundary definition of social and psychological consequence: namely, defining oneself as primarily 'spiritual' or 'religious'. 'More often than we expected, we encountered people who spoke with conviction about their discoveries of the spiritual and how it had changed their lives—including rescue "from religion" that was too limiting' (p. 137). He concludes that in American religious life, there is a tension 'between personal religious experience and its institutional expression; between "religiously based spirituality" as found within the religious establishment and the less-structured styles of "free-floating spirituality" outside of it' (p. 143).

The relationship between contemporary spirituality and participation in organized religion is a crucial question, and an important aspect of contemporary spirituality has been described as 'believing without belonging' (Davie 1994). The phenomenon of people who are 'believers but not belongers' has been discussed both in the American and in the European context (Roof and Mc Kinney 1987: 52; Davie 1990; 1994; Lambert 2004; Glendinning 2006), and recent data indicate that the share of the population who are believers but not belongers is increasing in Europe (Lambert 2004).

In Scandinavia, the reverse situation can be said to exist. Since a large share of the population belong to the Lutheran churches but do not share the beliefs of the church, they might be described as 'belongers but not believers', if belonging is defined as formal membership (Hamberg 1990: 39). However, the definition of 'belonging' is crucial. In the Scandinavian countries the percentage of the population who believe in God is considerably higher than the percentage who attend worship services (Lambert 2003: 69–73). Hence, if 'belongers' are defined as persons who have regular contacts with their church, many Scandinavians can (p. 751) indeed be defined as 'believers but not belongers', and various forms of unchurched spirituality are widely diffused among them.

Individualism, a focus on the 'self', has often been noted as an aspect of contemporary spirituality. It is possible that there is a relationship between the importance attached to the 'self' and a strong focus on health that has been found in Swedish studies (Hamberg 2003). Survey data indicate that among Swedes health now is a dominant value in life, more important than family and friends or material values. Several factors may contribute to this emphasis on health, but an important factor is probably an increasing individualism, which includes such themes as self-expression, self-realization, and personal autonomy, which tend to bestow a sacred status upon the individual (Luckmann 1990). Illness and death being the ultimate threat to the individual's existence, the increasing importance accorded to self-realization and personal autonomy may well lead to a growing concern for preserving or improving one's health.

## Religion and Unchurched Spirituality—Future Developments?

We may safely assume that the decline in church-oriented religion that has been notable in parts of Europe during the twentieth century has led to an increase in spirituality outside the churches. When a church religion has passed through several generations of non-participants, religious socialization becomes ineffective, and the religion assumes the characteristics of a folk religion (Stark, Hamberg, and Miller 2005). Hence, if participation in institutional religion should continue to decline, we can expect unchurched spirituality to become even more prevalent than it is today.

What assumptions can we make about the future of religion in the Western world, and more particularly in Europe? Will organized religion in its present forms continue to decline, and if so, will it be replaced by other forms of religion and unchurched spirituality?

The decline in adherence to Christian beliefs and practices in Europe during the past half-century has often led to the assumption that this is part of a long-term decline in church religion that will continue into the future. However, this assumption can be questioned. For instance, recent survey data indicate a possible trend-break that has been described by Yves Lambert (2004: 42) as a 'religious mutation in Europe'. While the 1981 and 1990 European Values Study surveys indicated increasing secularization in Western Europe, the survey in 1999 revealed significant changes. Lambert finds evidence both for a Christian renewal and for the development of religiosity without belonging. These tendencies were especially (p. 752) notable among young people. In all countries, young people who declared themselves Christian seemed to be more religious in 1999 than in 1981 and 1990. 'À la carte Christianity' that, together with uncertainty of beliefs and relativism, was previously spreading among Christians, in particular among the young, a trend that was considered typical of late modernity, remains dominant, but it is in slight decline among the young. Lambert concludes that 'from a religious point of view, Europe is at a turning point, particularly if we look at the last 30-40 years: the tendency of religious decline that was clearly dominant, particularly among young people, is brought into question by the development of Christian renewal and autonomous spirituality' (p. 42). Whether or not this is a break in long-term trends and an indication of 'de-secularization' can be judged only on the basis of further research. For instance, analyses of data from the World Values Surveys have indicated that awareness of existential concerns seem to have increased over the previous decades (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 75), and that church-oriented religious involvement has demonstrated

rather country-specific patterns of both increases, decreases, and overall stability (Pettersson 2006).

In a discussion of possible future developments we also need to consider the impact of immigration, which is now an important factor in both Europe and North America. There is strong evidence that religious pluralism has an impact on religious participation in a society, and the lack of religious pluralism has been seen as an important explanation of the low levels of religious participation in Europe today (Stark and Iannaccone 1994). At present, the religious landscape in many European countries is changing because of immigration, and during the past few decades Islam has emerged as Europe's second largest religion. In some countries where religious pluralism used to be very low, it is now increasing, and religion is becoming more visible in society. In a long-term perspective, immigration may well be a factor that counteracts the past trend of decline in organized religion.

## Some Methodological Issues in Studies of Spirituality

Methodological questions are an important issue that requires more attention from scholars studying spirituality. As pointed out by McGuire (2000), the methods used for the study of unchurched spirituality need to be further developed. In McGuire's view, both the quantitative and the qualitative methods usually employed by scholars in this area are inadequate: not only are surveys and other quantitative methods not well suited to this purpose, but 'much qualitative research is far too unsystematic and imprecise and shallow' (p. 109).

(p. 753) Obviously, survey data are of limited use in studies of spirituality. For instance, the interpretation of survey data presents various problems. One of the most serious is that respondents may interpret questions in very diverse ways. Hence, we run the risk of drawing the wrong conclusions if we assume that the respondents interpret the questions in the way we expect them to. However, this and other problems with regard to survey data can often be solved at least partially if surveys are supplemented by interviews, in which respondents are asked about their interpretation of questions. This can diminish the risk of misinterpretations and help to improve the future formulation of questions. Thus, surveys used in combination with interviews can help to elucidate important aspects of individual religion. An example of this is a nation-wide study of world views and value systems carried out in Sweden in 1986, in which interviews including both closed and open-ended questions were combined with a questionnaire, which the

respondents were asked to fill in immediately after the interview (Hamberg 1990; 2003). This combination turned out to be fruitful in several respects: for example, by providing information about the divergent ways in which respondents interpreted the formulation of some questions. It also shed light on another important issue: namely, the great variation between individuals in the degree of personal commitment with which beliefs and values are held. Surveys that ask about religious beliefs often lack questions that might provide us with information about the salience of such beliefs. Survey questions need to be designed with this problem in mind—for example, by asking respondents to estimate how important their religious beliefs or practices are to them. In order to achieve a deeper understanding of the salience of individual religion, however, we need to combine the use of survey data with qualitative methods.

Survey data are, of course, necessary for many purposes—for example, in studies of the prevalence of religious beliefs and practices in a population. Longitudinal studies based on surveys are also needed in order to discover developments that are too subtle to be detected by other methods. For instance, new trends can be discovered by comparing data from surveys undertaken at intervals, such as the European Values Study (EVS) or the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). This is exemplified by the recent tendencies in the European religious development that are described by Yves Lambert as a ‘religious mutation in Europe’ (Lambert 2004: 42). Lambert discovered these new tendencies by analyses of data from the European Values Study in 1981, 1990, and 1999.

However, surveys alone usually do not provide the information needed to arrive at a deeper understanding of the factors underlying such changes. For instance, Lambert poses the question of whether there is a link between a return of belief in life after death and a new, more pessimistic view of modernity. He regards this as plausible, but points out that we lack the support of a thorough study of the subject. In particular, we lack interview studies that might shed light on this question. He concludes that in order to ‘understand better what is happening (p. 754) now, it would be necessary to collect new data via in-depth interviews, notably biographies ... to update survey questions and to contextualise findings—on the theoretical level—from the perspective of a long-term evolution of modernity’ (Lambert 2004: 44).

Thus, while surveys alone are of limited use in studies of spirituality, studies that combine survey data with qualitative data from personal interviews can shed light on important aspects of individual religion. A good example of this is provided in the above-mentioned study by Wade Clark Roof (1999), in which the analysis builds on a combination of survey data, in-depth interviews, and field observations. This project was built on a panel study, where the same persons were followed over a period of eight to nine years. The participants were initially contacted in a telephone survey, which was followed up by telephone and face-to-face interviews. After some years they were contacted in a new

telephone survey and in some instances also interviewed again (pp. 10–11, 315–16). The material obtained in the panel study was combined with other material, such as interviews with religious and spiritual leaders and field observations. Roof describes the aim and methodology of the study in these words:

My aim is to link people's life histories and stories with information gleaned from large-scale surveys. Personal narratives are rich in meaning and nuance, a means of exploring the many webs of cultural meaning that people spin. Surveys allow for generalizations, absolutely indispensable for describing social trends. Combining the two methods makes for a balanced approach for understanding what is happening to religion 'on the ground,' to its meaning and function in everyday life. (Roof 1999: 11)

Combinations of quantitative and qualitative methods are indeed necessary in order to improve our understanding of contemporary individual religion or spirituality.

## Some Suggestions for Future Research

Spirituality outside the churches will probably continue to be an important issue in the sociology of religion for the foreseeable future. Both the development and the prevalence of contemporary spirituality are fields where much remains to be done. Another issue where more research is needed concerns the relationship between traditional church religion and unchurched spirituality. To what extent has the secularization process that is going on in many European countries been accompanied by a growth of spirituality outside the churches?

In order to shed light on such questions, we must, of course, use empirical methods, and, as was observed above, the methodological problems involved in (p. 755) such studies require more attention than they have hitherto been given. Moreover, a crucial issue is how to define the concepts used. As pointed out above, the term 'spirituality' is very ambiguous. Although it is widely used, by the general public, by religious professionals, and by scholars, it is often used without a definition or with definitions that are not sufficiently precise. The divergent views that can be found among scholars regarding such issues as the historical development of spirituality outside the churches can at least in part be ascribed to the use of different definitions of the concept. Of course, the fact that different definitions are used is not necessarily a problem, but it is necessary for the scholarly debate that definitions are stated explicitly and that they are formulated with sufficient precision.

An issue that also merits attention, is the impact—or lack of impact—of unchurched spirituality in defining and sustaining the moral order. It has been observed that religions or spirituality without congregations cannot exert social pressure on adherents to observe the moral order. Hence, ‘the sociological “law” that “religion functions to sustain the moral order” is limited to churching religions’ (Stark, Hamberg, and Miller 2005: 19). This is an issue that needs to be explored further. Another issue that deserves more attention is the impact of unchurched spirituality on attitudes towards science. Unchurched religions, and especially those engaged in spirituality, tend to reject commitment to rationality, and often condemn the very idea that there are rules of logic and evidence (Houtman and Mascini 2002). Expressions of scepticism, and even hostility, to science are also common on Internet spirituality sites. In contrast, several studies have indicated that churching religion offers ‘a very substantial barrier to belief in magic and various forms of “pseudo”-science—it even seems to be far more supportive of conventional science than education’ (Stark, Hamberg, and Miller 2005: 20). Hence, the attitudes towards science among those who embrace unchurched spirituality deserve to be explored further in future studies. More generally, the social and cultural effects of an increase in the prevalence of unchurched spirituality would seem to be an important field for future research.

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