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Looking backwards and looking forwards

*James A. Beckford
University of Warwick, England*

Methodological considerations

One of the main advantages of the ISSP module on religion is that it provides a rare opportunity to pose direct questions about religious beliefs, attitudes, values and practices to a large sample in numerous countries. There are few comparable sources of information about these aspects of religion, and I have no reason to suggest that this practice should be discontinued. I want to argue, however, that some of the survey questions place respondents in a difficulty: they may never have thought about the questions in such stark, doctrinal or propositional form. Yet, they feel obliged to provide some sort of answer. There is a risk, then, that the answers are not necessarily the product of respondents' careful reflections but are simply attempts to avoid the appearance of being unable to answer the questions. This problem is common to many questionnaires but is particularly acute in relation to questions about religious, metaphysical or spiritual beliefs. I doubt whether many people consciously reflect on these matters with a view to arriving at a brief, categorical formulation of beliefs about them.

A partial solution to this mis-match between the vastness of religious or spiritual considerations and the requirement to deliver a concise answer on a questionnaire is to adopt a more indirect approach. That is, instead of relying heavily on direct questions about belief it might be equally productive to insert questions about religion into surveys about other phenomena. In this way, respondents might feel under less pressure to give clearly formulated statements of belief and better equipped to comment on their perception of the religious or spiritual aspects of everyday life. For example, questionnaires about employment, health or education could invite respondents to report whether and, if so, how they perceive religious or spiritual significance in these areas of life. Such an 'indirect' approach would also go some way towards addressing the claim made in Roland Campiche's paper that a compartmentalisation of morality is currently taking place between areas of life where Christian ideas still prevail and areas where science has become the main point of reference. Similarly, Danièle Hervieu-Léger's remarks about the growing preoccupation with issues concerning science and nature suggest the importance of asking questions about their perceived religious or spiritual significance.

There is an echo of my proposal for a more indirect approach to questions about religion in Janet Harkness's paper about the wisdom of taking systematic account of the free-form comments that some respondents write in answer to open-ended questions on ISSP questionnaire forms. I would go further and suggest that respondents' uninvited marginal comments can also reveal strongly felt views about the assumptions that respondents detect behind some questions. Free-form and marginal comments could be a valuable source of indirect insights into respondents' views, although it is rare for survey analysts to take them formally into account. Yet, it seems to me that this is an opportunity to collect information about respondents' attitudes, opinions and beliefs as they can be inferred from material other than direct answers to questionnaire items. In this way, questionnaires could generate qualitative as well as quantitative data about religion.

Incidentally, questionnaires are not the only source of quantitative data about religion, although relatively few sociologists of religion have exploited the value of unobtrusive measures of religious action and of such objective indicators as the sales of religious literature in bookshops, the levels of donations and bequests to religious organisations, and the types of requests for prayers posted by visitors to churches. A particularly good example of a fruitful combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to religion is Patrick Michel's analysis of written responses to exhibits in a Scottish museum of religion (Michel, 1999).

Participants in the colloquium rehearsed many of the arguments for and against the value of questionnaire surveys on religion. The first principal issue concerned the difference between

respondents' reported beliefs or attitudes and their patterns of action. Wolfgang Jagodzinski acknowledged the need to be cautious about relying entirely on the results of ISSP surveys that could be completed in twenty-five minutes but he argued that the responses could nevertheless provide a basis for making inferences about, for example, the relation between changing religious beliefs and changing patterns of moral reasoning. In other words, dispositions to act could be uncovered by questionnaire surveys. In contrast, Kristoff Talin was much more reserved about the propriety of reading more than was warranted into the findings of just a few questions about reported religious beliefs in Eastern European societies.

A second major methodological issue concerned the difficulty of ensuring that the beliefs and experiences of religious minorities were adequately captured in the kind of nation-wide samples favoured by ISSP investigators. Franz Höllinger, for example, pointed out that the findings of ISSP surveys are unlikely to reveal much about belief in New Age and esoteric ideas because their advocates and practitioners are not adequately represented in random representative samples of the general population in any country. This was also a problem for the ISSP survey and the national survey on "Religion and the social bond" in Switzerland according to Roland Campiche. Finally, the under-representation of Muslims in random samples of the Italian population was cited by Franco Garelli as an important weakness of the ISSP survey. The significance of this problem about the 'invisibility' of religious minorities in surveys was increasing over time as rates of reported belief in mainstream Christian teachings were slowly declining. Researchers need to adopt strategies that simultaneously gauge the changing levels of religious beliefs in the general population and that track the evolution of various minority beliefs. The concern is that evidence of new and vibrant expressions of religion does not tend to surface clearly enough in random representative samples.

Theoretical relevance

Although the number of sociologists of religion who make effective use of the ISSP findings on religion is relatively small, Janet Harkness and Wolfgang Jagodzinski both stressed that sociologists of religion had played a prominent role in designing the first questionnaire on religion and that they have continued to aid the refinement of subsequent questionnaires by supplying critical feed-back. Indeed, the colloquium demonstrated the usefulness of discussion between scholars who specialise in the use of questionnaire surveys and those who regard themselves as theorists or qualitative researchers. There were many suggestions for ways of making the results of ISSP surveys more interesting to a greater number of sociologists of religion; and, conversely, the specialists in survey research were able to explain the limitations and the benefits of their particular approach. The result was not only a much better appreciation of arguments on all sides but also an agreement to keep the dialogue open.

Contributors to the colloquium were clear about the positive value of the ISSP module on religion in terms of its implications for theoretical debates in the sociology of religion. Without actually settling long-running theoretical disputes and disagreements, the survey findings have nevertheless helped to cast fresh light on, for example, the burgeoning currents of thought about secularisation and religious change. The survey findings have probably not persuaded any scholars to change their general ideas, but the availability of robust evidence about changing levels of some religious beliefs has helped to refine certain concepts and to identify the need for yet more evidence about other religious beliefs. On the other hand, the pressure to adopt a standardised form of the questions administered in each country (within the constraints imposed by translation) and to ensure that the same questions are asked in each iteration of the survey places limits on the ISSP's ability to adapt to newly emerging theoretical interests.

The colloquium also recognised that the ISSP was a valuable aid to cross-national comparisons. This was particularly apparent in Pierre Bréchon's identification of the similarities and dissimilarities between Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland. His analysis of data from the 1998 module on religion showed that there was a close relationship between levels of religious belief and levels of religious practice except in Switzerland. Belief in life after death proved to be an especially powerful predictor of other beliefs and practices regardless of the

respondents' age. It would be virtually impossible to establish these patterns without the aid of the ISSP or an equivalent survey, but that is not the end of the matter. The findings should stimulate sociologists to look for plausible interpretations and to conduct further research to test them. Similarly, the patterned differences that Kristoff Talin detected between patterns of religious belief and practice in Eastern European and Baltic countries call for fresh research that might be able to uncover underlying causes. The puzzling patterns of non-response that Dominique Joye identified between countries could also set in train the search for explanatory factors that, in turn, could throw light on other cross-national responses to the very idea of questionnaire surveys.

The ability to facilitate comparison across time is a further strength of the ISSP and of similar surveys, but the colloquium recognised that the difficulty of conducting such research should not be underestimated. For example, Claude Bovay and Irene Becci clarified the many strategic and practical problems that confronted their attempt to administer the 1998 ISSP module on religion to the same Swiss respondents who had completed a questionnaire on "Religion and the social bond", containing some identical and similar questions, ten years earlier. In the light of the practical problems and the 'theoretical discontinuity' between the two surveys, it is tempting to ask oneself how well questionnaire surveys over time could even begin to collect information that would test, for example, Danièle Hervieu-Léger's hypothesis about the 'de-absolutisation of nature' that has allegedly been gathering pace in recent history. Her argument is that nature has ceased to be regarded as a separate 'order' of reality and is increasingly considered to be subject to human manipulation and control. Thus, the strength of the marriage bond appears to depend less today on biologically grounded notions of faithfulness and more on voluntaristic notions of contract between the free partners to a marriage. The question is how this putative change in relations between humans and 'de-absolutised' nature will affect religion. It would be a formidable challenge for the ISSP to devise survey questions that could elicit relevant information from respondents. Yet, this is what is required if survey research is to deal with theoretically informed questions.

Findings about the religion of the majority in many countries today are unlikely to be surprising or subject to sudden change. Indeed, ISSP findings have documented considerable stability in most dimensions of reported religious belief and opinion. Yet, another challenge to questionnaire surveys of representative surveys of national samples is to do justice to small groups of religious enthusiasts or deviants. By definition, the 'hot spots' of religious change are unlikely to be detected in surveys of the general public. In this sense, the continuity of ISSP findings about religion may be deceptive: they may conceal all kinds of turbulence on the margins of the religious majority. Let me use a nautical analogy to illustrate my point. A very large, slow moving or even stationary ship at sea gives the appearance on a radar screen of being solid and stable, but it is probably surrounded by small vortices of turbulent water. This is especially likely when the ship is stationary but when the seawater is moving past it rapidly. In other words, radar is invaluable for many navigational purposes but not very suitable for the detection of small-scale disturbances in water. Likewise, national surveys are highly suitable for monitoring large-scale religious phenomena but they are much less appropriate for studies of religious activities on a small-scale.

A closely related point that surfaced from time to time in the colloquium is the questionable capacity of massive surveys such as the ISSP to respond to trends and fashions in theoretical ideas in the sociology of religion. For example, the 1998 religion module addressed a variety of theoretical concerns but showed relatively little attention to the following concerns that are of current interest to many sociologists, regardless of whether they are primarily interested in religion.

- (a) Research on emotions is currently high on the agenda of many sociologists (Williams, 2000), but what is the probability that ISSP questions about religion could address emotion? Would it be feasible to include some questions about, for example, emotional responses to religious liturgies, music or buildings? There is a pressing need for empirical investigation of some of the more far-reaching claims that are being made about the emotional concomitants of social change in societies characterised as, for example, de-traditionalised or globalised.

- (b) 'Embodiment' or 'the lived experience of having a body' is another fashionable concern in the human and social sciences (Williams & Bendelow, 1998). Would it be possible or worthwhile to incorporate questions in the ISSP that explored respondents' sense of the corporeal medium through which religion is experienced and practised? Another closely related area where survey research could have a more direct bearing on theories about, for example, postmodernity or high modernity is attitudes towards 'complementary' or 'alternative' therapies and 'spiritual healing'. This could be part of a broader attempt to test Danièle Hervieu-Léger's claim about the changing relations between human beings and nature.

- (c) Social scientists have to take account of the fact that many people's experience of religion today is limited to, or shaped by, what they encounter in the mass media (Bréchon & Willaime, 2000). In this sense, religion is no different from many other areas of social and cultural life. Would it not be worthwhile, therefore, to devise survey questions that explored the extent and character of the uses that people make of the mass media in relation to religion? It would also be essential to ask questions about the consumption of religious books, videos, websites and other Internet materials.

- (d) A highly fashionable preoccupation among sociologists who interpret the world as postmodern (Bauman, 1992), late modern (Giddens, 1991), or as a 'network society' (Castells, 1997) is with the allegedly heightened significance of self-reflexivity and self-monitoring in response to the power of 'expert systems'. The rather weak understanding of religion that accompanies these theoretical schemes means that religion tends to be reduced to 'the return of the repressed' or 'fundamentalism'. This surely represents a challenge to better informed sociologists of religion not only to test these claims empirically but also, if necessary, to correct the misunderstanding of religion that pervades some types of sociological theories. How can the ISSP module on religion respond to this challenge?

- (e) I am concerned about the current confusion in the meanings attributed to 'religious pluralism' (Beckford, 1999), although the term usually refers to the positive value that some people accord to harmony and accommodation between different faith communities. It seems to me essential, then, that we should have reliable indicators of the extent to which the general public in different societies is really prepared to accept a greater diversity of religious faiths in public life – especially when some minority faiths are associated with particular ethnic communities. Questions about the perceived acceptability of various minority religions would be a useful addition to the ISSP.

- (f) Another contentious area of public life in some countries today concerns attitudes towards the teaching of religious education in schools. Even in countries where the law prohibits religious education in schools, it would be useful to discover how strongly it is supported in the general population – and in which sections. This would be one way of empirically testing hypotheses about the role of cultural memory in the perpetuation of religion (Hervieu-Léger, 1993; Davie, 2000).

- (g) An associated topic with theoretical significance is about the extent of mobility between religious groups. ISSP inquires into the religion of respondents' parents but it does not ask questions about the respondents' own spiritual journeys and experiments ('religious trajectory') – except the optional question about being 'born again'. Yet, large-scale questionnaire surveys such as the ISSP module on religion would be ideal for generating aggregate data about the extent and direction of individual changes in religious commitments.

Of course, there are severe limitations on the number and range of questions that could be accommodated in a single questionnaire of the ISSP type. Financial and practical considerations militate against the desire to add more and more questions to the questionnaire schedule. Moreover, pressure to maximise the continuity and the replicability of previous questionnaires

also restricts the opportunity to include new questions. In this way, the momentum generated by a well-established cross-national enterprise has the unintended effect of favouring the theoretical concerns that were dominant in the first module on religion. In the event, a compromise must be made between the needs of continuity and the needs of theoretical innovation.

Ways forward

The colloquium was, in my opinion, unusual for the positive and constructive atmosphere in which a wide range of issues concerning the ISSP and its actual or potential relevance to sociologists of religion were discussed. The combination of scholars with extensive experience of administering and analysing questionnaire surveys and those who normally conduct research on religion by other means was itself productive. Technical issues received some attention, but much of the discussion focused on the interface between theoretical ideas and the framing of adequate questions. There was also time for considering the challenges facing scholars who seek to analyse ISSP findings in a cross-national context. This type of co-operative debate is all too rare in the sociology of religion. Further work would also be useful on the relation between survey questionnaires and such other popular research methods as ethnography, biographical analysis, narrative interpretation, life histories, use of official statistics, ideological critique, and so on. Dialogue and mutual criticism would both be profitable to all sociologists of religion.

Participants in the colloquium agreed that it would also be worthwhile to put pressure on the designers of many types of questionnaires to include questions on the religious or spiritual dimensions of the phenomena that they are investigating. If this strategy were successful it would make it possible to investigate, for example, the disproportionately strong and positive interest among young people in life after death by attaching relevant questions to surveys of young people's opinions about other matters. This strategy of infiltration or 'entryism' offers two particular benefits. On the one hand it encourages respondents to express their views about religion indirectly and in a context in which they might not feel themselves under pressure to construct philosophically or theologically coherent answers. On the other hand it increases the likelihood that information about religion could be generated relatively cheaply and more frequently than is possible with the ISSP.

An incidental benefit of this strategy of infiltration would be to carry the concerns of the sociology of religion into domains of social science such as labour studies, the study of health and illness, and gender studies, where it is currently unusual to investigate the religious significance of their subject matter. By contrast, surveys on religion in isolation run the risk of aggravating the degree to which the sociology of religion is already insulated against, and isolated from, the rest of sociology (Beckford, 1985; 2000). My belief is that sociologists of religion can successfully resist marginalisation within the social and human sciences by adopting two particular strategies. The first is an individual decision to broaden the scope of their research and the choice of publications in which to publish its results so that non-specialists in the study of religion can have the opportunity to read about it in their own, specialist literature. The second is a collective determination to orient journals, scholarly associations and conferences in the sociology of religion towards topics that address, positively or negatively, the concerns of other social scientists.

The colloquium ended on an optimistic note. It supported the idea that the future for sociological studies of religion would be brighter if four conditions could be fulfilled. Mutual dialogue and criticism between 'theorists' and 'survey researchers' is the first condition. The second is finding an appropriate balance between the ISSP's need for continuity and the sociology of religion's need to have its fresh theoretical ideas tested empirically. The third condition is receptiveness towards a greater variety of research methods. The fourth is a willingness to carry questions about religion into areas of social research where such questions are not normally asked.

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