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## Europe and Invisible Religion

*This introductory article begins by sketching Luckmann's theory of invisible religion. It lays stress particularly on the recent modifications of this theory: in addition to the well-known anthropological notion of transcendence, Luckmann elaborates a detailed phenomenological notion of transcendence, distinguishing between three levels of transcendence. This innovation, it is argued, not only affects Luckmann's general theory of religion. It also sheds a new light on the religious situation in Europe. Europe is, indeed, characterized by the decrease of religion as opposed to other areas of the world where we discern a kind of "resacralization". However, three restrictions apply to this statement: the religious situation in Europe is still very diverse; the institutional role of the churches in Europe is quite specific, and, finally, if we apply Luckmann's notion of religion, we can detect a blooming alternative religiosity in Europe which parallels the global tendency.*

*Ce texte d'introduction commence par tracer les grandes lignes de la théorie de Luckmann relative à la "religion invisible". Il met particulièrement l'accent sur les modifications récentes apportées à cette théorie: outre la notion anthropologique, bien connue, de la transcendance, Luckmann développe une conception phénoménologique élaborée de cette transcendance, et distingue en elle trois niveaux différents. L'auteur soutient que cette innovation affecte non seulement la théorie générale de la religion de Luckmann, mais qu'elle jette en outre un nouvel éclairage sur la situation religieuse en Europe. L'Europe est en effet caractérisée par un recul de la religion, contrairement à d'autres régions du monde, où l'on note une sorte de "resacralisation". Ceci dit, cette observation doit être nuancée de trois façons: tout d'abord, la situation religieuse en Europe est très contrastée; ensuite, le rôle institutionnel des Eglises d'Europe est très particulier; et, enfin, si l'on applique la conception de la religion de Luckmann, on remarque le succès croissant, en Europe, d'une religiosité alternative, ce qui est conforme à la tendance mondiale.*

The issue presented here contains a number of articles dedicated to a particular view on religion in Europe.<sup>1</sup> The situation of religion in Europe seems to be an exception, compared to other areas of the world. It appears as if nowhere religion is so much in recession as here. And this is exactly why these articles refer to Luckmann's theory, since in no other area of the world has religion become more "invisible" than in Europe. In the worldwide renaissance of religion, Europe deserves attention exactly from this perspective.

Certainly, religion in Europe has been the subject of many investigations.<sup>2</sup> Despite the amount of research on the decline of religion in Europe, however, few attempts have been made to look at the other side of the equation, at what has been called the “left-over”, if one may say so.<sup>3</sup> As the articles will show, Invisible Religion is still a useful starting ground for such an attempt.

I would like to briefly outline this theory and its recent developments, in order, then, to turn to the question, what has happened to religion in Europe, and to highlight the contribution of Luckmann’s theory.

### Invisible Religion

Luckmann’s theory is well known as one of the most general functional theories of religion. In his view, substantialist attempts to define the “essence” of religion have failed in the face of the variety of what socially counts as religion—even at the level of the “world religions” (Luckmann, 1977). Functional definitions, on the other hand, avoid premature and restrictive substantial criteria and allow the inclusion of the most diverse definitions of religion without falling prey to ethnocentric prejudgements. According to Luckmann, religion is an elementary feature of the *conditio humana*. It transforms members of the natural species *homo sapiens* into actors in a historical social order. This transformation is made possible by the human capacity of transcending; thus transcendence is the basis of religion: “It is in keeping with an elementary sense of the concept of religion to call the transcendence of biological nature by the human organism a religious phenomenon” (Luckmann, 1967: 49). Luckmann identified the world-view as the most important “locus” of religion, which, however, is not identical to institutional (“official”) religion.

It appears redundant to refer to Luckmann’s book into more detail here since it has been translated into many languages, is widely known and is part of basic introductions in the Sociology of Religion. What, however, are less known, particularly in the English-speaking world, are some modifications of his theory which he undertook after labouring over the manuscripts of Alfred Schutz’s *Structures of the Life-World* (Schutz and Luckmann, 1989). These manuscripts have had an influence on his theory of religion which became apparent in his recent publications on religion, particularly in the enlarged German version of *The Invisible Religion* and their subsequent translations.<sup>4</sup>

The major modification concerns the notion of transcendence, i.e. the notion which lies at the very heart of his theory. In addition to the *anthropological meaning of the term* indicated above, he adds a further meaning of this notion. One should call this meaning “*phenomenological*” since it is based on Schutz and his own phenomenological investigation. To describe it briefly: experiences of transcendence are based on the intentionality of consciousness, i.e. the fact that every experience is an experience *of* something. By

virtue of its intentionality, in experiencing we are automatically referring to something which is assumed by but not given in the experiencing act itself. This way, every experience may be said to transcend itself, or, to use the words of Husserl, transcendence lies at the very heart of every experience.

Building on Schutz, Luckmann distinguishes three levels of the experience of transcendence. First, whenever anything transcends the actual, direct experiences, we may speak of the *small transcendences* of space and time. Our automatic assumptions that we can anticipate a future experience, that we assume that there will be things as soon as we turn around, that things out of reach can come into reach again are based on our routine to cope with these transcendences. Little transcendences are characterized by the fact that we can, in principle, experience them directly—in the future, by moving our body. *Intermediate transcendences*, however, differ with respect to exactly this feature; when that which is actually experienced (the body or expressions of another self) is taken to refer to something that cannot be experienced directly (the consciousness, the inner life, the experiences of the other self), provided that what cannot be experienced directly is still taken to belong to the same everyday reality as the self and its experiences. Finally, we may speak of the *great transcendences* when an experience presents itself as pointing to something that not only cannot be experienced directly but in addition is definitely not part of the ordinary reality of everyday life (in which things can be touched, handled, communicated). Great transcendences refer to the experiences by which we leave ordinary reality on different paths, such as dreams, ecstasy, meditation. These paths have one element in common: they suspend the practical theory of everyday life, i.e. its common sense. In dreams, ecstasies and meditation, everyday life loses its status as the pre-eminent reality for the human being, at least for the duration of these experiences. After one returns to everyday life, only recollections of such experiences remain.

The phenomenological theory of transcendence affects Luckmann's theory of religion in various ways. On the basic level of theory, it may be considered a slight "substantialization" of his theory at least in the sense that the notion of experience is being qualified with respect if not to the content, then to the form of experience. In addition, the theory of transcendence also affects the diagnosis as to the fate of religion in modern society. On the basis of this distinction we can differentiate between different degrees of the "invisibilization" of religion. Whereas some may still stick to the great transcendences of other other-worldly realities, in the West we may discern the "shrinking of transcendence":

... important aspects of modern consciousness have been successfully shaped by collective representations that originate in social constructions of intermediate transcendences of nation, race, classlessness, and the like. In recent decades, the concern with minimal transcendences symbolized by notions such as self-fulfillment and the like, has become widespread if not dominant. (Luckmann, 1991: 176)

We shall see that it is exactly this thesis which is of particular importance to the analysis of religion in Europe.

## The Secularized Continent?

In fact, Europe seems to be in a peculiar situation with respect to the recent religious developments. Currently, we are witnessing a dramatic increase in religions not only in large parts of the Second and Third Worlds (in Asia as well as in Africa, in South America as well as in parts of the former Socialist countries). Religion is also a most important feature, particularly in the United States, a society often considered the paradigm of modernity. In all these areas of the world, religion has gained followers and become more important. In Europe, however, the situation appears rather different. Here religion seems not to grow—on the contrary: the decrease of religion has continued to such an extent that one may speak of an erosion of religion:

In Western Europe, if nowhere else, the old secularisation theory would seem to hold. With increasing modernisation there has been an increase in key indicators of secularisation, both on the level of expressed beliefs (especially those that could be called orthodox in Protestant or Catholic terms) and, dramatically, on the level of church-related behaviour – attendance at services of worship, adherence to church-dictated codes of personal behaviour (especially with regard to sexuality, reproduction, and marriage), recruitment to the clergy. (Berger, 1999: 9f.).

As a matter of fact, Europe is characterized by the gradual decrease of religion in various areas. Whereas religious institutions play a minor role as an institutional player, the churches are massively losing members. Moreover, Christianity is slowly being replaced as the dominant cultural tradition. Evident as this “erosion” of religion may appear, at least three restrictions apply to the thesis of the decrease of religion in Europe.

First, despite the ongoing process of European unification, Europe is still an amazingly diverse continent with respect to its religious situation (Rémond, 1998). Aside from the different religious traditions (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Muslim) which have been established officially in the various European nation-states, the societal role religion plays is still quite diverse. In some, particularly Catholic societies, such as Ireland or Poland, religion is of similar importance to the individuals as e.g. in the USA, and its influence in the public and political sphere is even more decisive. In other societies, on the other hand, religion seems to have lost most of its influence on the conduct of the individuals, yet is still present as a political player, as in the societies of the Nordic national churches.

The second restriction is related to the role official institutional religion plays in European civil societies. In the majority of European societies one or few religious organizations have the power to define (if not politically, then socially) what is considered to be a religion. Having this power, these organisations are able to exclude a range of phenomena from sometimes even being labelled as religious which in other societies (such as the USA) are classified as religious. It is for this reason that the “shrinking” of organizational religion may not be identified at all with secularization.

The third restriction on the thesis of the religious decline in Europe is very closely connected to Luckmann’s newly refined theory of religion. It is particularly his stress on the “experience of transcendences” as the core of

religion that allows him to detect a proliferation of religiosity in Europe paralleling the "resacralizing" tendencies in other parts of the world. One has to be aware that the most obvious "growth sector" of non-European Christianity is accounted for by charismatic, pentecostal, evangelical movements. The majority of those Christian movements which grow rapidly<sup>5</sup> can be said to "cultivate" one or another form of subjective religious experience ("conversion", "glossolalia", "prophecy", "miraculous healing", etc.).

In Europe, we have a strong emphasis on experience and emotion in religion too, yet often outside of church religion. The European movements referred to have often been (and not very accurately) classified under the label of New Age (cf. Heelas, 1996). Since it refers to a broad range of most diverse religious phenomena, only few of which are directly linked to the belief in a New Age, and since their main feature is the historical distinction to the dominant form of religion, one should rather talk about *alternative forms of religion*. (One reason for the success of Luckmann's "etic" notion of religion is that in many European societies the "emic" notion of religion is so heavily dominated by a few religious organizations, that even the label "religious" for these phenomena is contested.) The societal importance of alternative religion is not based on the number of professional practitioners and "members" which amounts to, at best, a few percent of the population of e.g. Germany, Switzerland or Austria (Knoblauch, 1989; Mayer, 1993; Mörth, 1989). Nevertheless, beliefs in and practices of alternative religion have been proven to be widely distributed among the members of European societies. About 12 percent of the Swiss population believe in this kind of "new religiosity"; a similar high proportion is to be found in Austria, where large parts of the population have adopted "New Age" ideas without knowing about their origins, and in Germany numbers range between 6 percent and almost 30 percent of the population.

One of the most striking features of the broad range of alternative religiosity is the emphasis on extraordinary subjective experiences; whether they are derived from the "esoteric" tradition, from transpersonal psychology and the human potential movement and the lore of peak experiences or altered states of consciousness; whether they are borrowed from (Westernized) Hinduism and Buddhism (as in various forms of meditation, yoga), or whether they are rather based on spiritism and parapsychology, magic, modern divination, sorcery. To give just a few statistics: more than 60 percent of the population in European societies report having had extraordinary experiences, such as out-of-body experiences, contact with spirits, visions (and this number has been steadily increasing from 20 percent in 1970). In Germany, for example, we found 4 percent of the population have had "near-death experiences", and more than 70 percent claim to have had a personal "paranormal experience".<sup>6</sup> It is typical of the European situation that only a tiny minority interpret these experiences as religious (within the frame of reference of the official religious organizations).

The comparison between the "experience-near" alternative religion and Christian religious movements may sound at first sight daring since it is only the latter that definitely interpret their experiences as religious.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, given the obvious differences between these phenomena, one should

not overlook their common emphasis on the necessity of self-transformation as the basis of an immediate extraordinary experience. And if one attempts to describe the common features of this experience, Luckmann's notion of "experience of great transcendence" is not only helpful, it is the very basis on which to compare these phenomena and then acknowledge the similarities between the religious resurgence outside and the somewhat different, alternative resacralization in Europe.<sup>8</sup>

I cannot dwell on the specifics of this European development at this point. In fact, a number of articles will elucidate aspects of this European development in further detail. Some of the articles will also address the much more theoretical question as to the degree to which the theory of "Invisible Religion" may still be an apt description of these current developments. However, all the articles demonstrate the usefulness and fruitfulness of this theory in order to grasp the current state of religion—not only of Europe.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>. The articles in this volume are based on a conference on "Europe and the Invisible Religion", held at the University of Zurich on 18 and 19 January 2001. The conference was dedicated to Thomas Luckmann who in 2002 celebrated his 75th birthday.

<sup>2</sup>. Comparative studies have been ventured with respect to religion and values, the historical development of religion in various European societies and the degree of "secularization", particularly in East European societies. Cf. Ashford and Timms (1992); Baubérot (1994); Kallscheuer (1996); McLeod (1993); Pollack et al. (1998).

<sup>3</sup>. Among these exceptions are definitely: Campiche (1997); Davie and Hervieu-Léger (1996); and Davie (2000).

<sup>4</sup>. In fact, I have been translating the text of the American version of *The Invisible Religion* (1967) into German (which itself had been based on a German publication of 1963). In this version, a new chapter was inserted which exactly addresses the issues mentioned here. In the meantime a number of translations are under way which are based on the new German translation from 1991 (and no longer on the American version): into Polish, Korean, Slovenian; other publications are in preparation.

<sup>5</sup>. On the world level, one reckons with some 200 to 300 million pentecostals, and about 250 to 500 million charismatics.

<sup>6</sup>. For more details, cf. Knoblauch (1997); for the information on paranormal experiences in Germany I am indebted to Ina Schmied from the IGPP in Freiburg, Germany.

<sup>7</sup>. The parallel has been stressed by some authors, such as Albanese (1988); the problems of such a comparison are discussed by Lucas (1996).

<sup>8</sup>. One should be aware of the corresponding weakness of the Christian movements in Europe. In Germany, for example, only about 150 000 to 250 000 charismatics and about 150 000 pentecostals are to be found—out of 82 million inhabitants. Cf. Kern (1998: 10ff.).

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