

## Some methodological problems in Sociology of Religion <sup>2</sup>

### *Abstract*

*This paper deals with some questions of the methodological approaches in the research and the analysis of issues of religion and religiosity in contemporary society. The first question raised here is whether and to what extent is applicable the comparative method in sociology of religion, such as the question of the reliability of research findings in the West in their application to studies of religion in the East. The difficulties that are seen here, refer to the question of objectivity and understanding of the very concept of religion in different religious and cultural backgrounds and areas. The question is: can you observe one religion based on the other religions? Another important methodological issue that arises in this work is the use of the “in-depth interview” as the dominant instrument in the empirical research? The third issue that this work starts, is the manner and forms of typology of religiosity, especially in the modern conditions?*

**Keywords:** religion, faith, belief, belonging, comparative method, in-depth interview, the typology of religiosity.

In the research of religion, sociologist should always proceed from the fact that sociology is only interested in religion as a social phenomenon, it does not go into other fields of religion. Therefore, sociologists make an important difference between terms “religion” and “faith”. Sociologists are less interested in faith, and more in religion, and at the same time it is not so important whether they are “in” it (religion), or “out” of it, as far as there is their scientific ethics.

First, a few words on the sociology of religion at the ex. Yugoslav region. It is as if we have nationalized it too, so it is written about the “Serbian sociology

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of religion”, “Croatian and Slovenian sociology of religion”<sup>3</sup> On the other side is written about “Catholic,” “Protestant,” “Islamic,” “Orthodox”, the sociology of religion. It does not make enough difference between religiosity and piety. And these are two different concepts. There are religious and pious people (they go to the mosque / church, celebrating religious holidays, etc.). One gets the impression that many (among the religious) do not know what Christianity and Islam are, although they are posing as Christians or Muslims. “One can not help feeling that many who call themselves Christians do not understand what the word means and that some who vehemently reject Christianity are more Christians than many who observe it”.<sup>4</sup> A I. Markešić, sociologist of religion from Zagreb, added: “I am afraid that many of us Christians do not believe in the same God.”<sup>5</sup> Are there believers in the “original” sense? How many of them have religious upstart, holiday believers (Christmas, Easter, Eid ...), and the like?

If it is urged on the development of denominational sociology of religion does that mean that the responsibility for its development would be borne by sociologists who belong to, or are derived from this cultural circle. Practically, if the study of Islam can only be dealt by Muslims, Orthodox only by Orthodox, Catholic, only by Catholics, or, at the best, those that originate from these traditions. It is as if we say that the study of the social position of women can only be dealt by women sociologists (and not sociologists), exploring some of the parties can only be done by its members, and so on.

Sociology of Religion implies that the emphasis is on the sociological perspective, at the denominational sociology emphasis would be on the religious-confessional perspective. If confessional sociology of religion would be developed, there is a danger that sociology will reduce to sociology of the church religiosity (piety). Outside of its interest would be all other forms of secular religiosity (“believing without belonging”). Just as in the methodological approach we should distinguish religious and confessional self-identification (the second one is more common than the first - I am a “Catholic”, but I’m not a believer, “I am a Muslim”, but I do not practice Islam, etc.), so research should differentiate ecclesiasticity and religiosity . A man can be a secular-religious (religious, but that does not participate in church life).

<sup>3</sup> Dragana Radisavljević-Čiparizović, *Religiosity and traditions*, Belgrade: Institute of Sociology FF, 2006. pp.14.

<sup>4</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of Christian society*, Split: Verbum, 2005.pp.52.

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Markešić, *Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on the cross of life*, Zagreb-Sarajevo: Synopsis, 2012. pp.53.

## I

Getting back to the topic of our discussion today. Thanks to the comparative method at many universities in the world was introduced the scientific discipline of comparative religion, which, as the object of study has not one but several religions. It is faced to what is common and to what is different in religions. Basically this is a discipline that was introduced in the academic study of religion. Its aim is not to demonstrate the superiority of their own religion, or to show that all religions are “the same”. Sociologist must not describe any religion in a way that its member, when it reads it, says, “but it is not my religion, it is not like that.”

It is the study of comparative religion that have enabled to many young people (and not only them) to get acquainted with religions that have been, or are beyond their life experience.

Can the sociology of religion establish the instruments and indicators for the Study of Religion that will be universal to all religions, faiths and religious-cultural traditions? More specifically: can the methods and techniques, as well as the indicators that are used in sociological studies of religious life in the West, be reliable for similar studies in the Orthodox world of the eastern Europe, and even more so in a world where the dominant are Islam, Confucianism, Hinduism or...<sup>6</sup> So, to what extent in the sociology of religion can be used the comparative method?

It is evident that using these methods can encounter certain problems. First, we have seen, the objectivity, and the other, dilemmas what in every religious culture, tradition, is meant by religion? Can we apply the same criteria for the evaluation of concepts that originate from different religions and faiths. Either we adapt the criteria to religious and confessional reality? Standards and criteria of religiosity are not the same in all religions. It depends on the religious teachings (eg, women's participation in funeral processions in Jews and Muslims at the mignons). So the question is - can one religion be observed based on the criteria of the other one. It can, but there is a possibility to make mistakes. If the same theme occurs in two or more religions, does it have the same contextual meaning. That is why we emphasize that “from the Islamic”, “from the Orthodox,” “from the Catholic” perspective. For example, the role of prayer or medi-

<sup>6</sup> Collective beliefs ... They ask the sociologist difficult theoretical question: what are their causes? Are in the same way explained beliefs of the Aborigines in Australia in the efficacy of rain rituals and religions of modern humans in general methods of studying and reading? Raymond Boudon, *Sociology as a science*, Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk, 2012. pp.52.

tation, is not the same in all religious cultures. Some rituals are more important in one and others in another religious culture.<sup>7</sup>

Objections to the application of comparative method come with a question: is it possible to compare the certain appearances in religions that are associated with specific (local-regional) socio-cultural environments? There is, with the proponents of this concept of Religious Studies, fear that because of the general typology and features common to all religions, will go in reducing religious particularities into something “general”, “common”, in which the diversity will be lost.

The comparative method is, without doubt, grateful to penetrate into the differences and similarities between religions, but the dilemma is how grateful is to compare some religions (such as African, Asian religions with Semitic religions, etc.).

Of course, the comparative method helps us not only to determine the similarities and differences between religions, but also between religious phenomena and secular factors. We monitor the situation and similarities in rituals, institutions, religious leadership, moral lessons and messages, and so on. We compare and social contexts between the two religious phenomena.<sup>8</sup> With this method, we determine how much it appears, in some religions, certain religious form, ritual, etc.

We can trace the similarities and internal changes and those changes outside of religious (for example, how much the change of the position of women in a religious community occurs under the influence of the feminist movement), or how nationalism associated with religion affects religious and interreligious relations (as in Bosnia and Herzegovina).

It would be wrong if the sociologist in this method would start from the assumption that determines what is “true” and what is “lie” in one religion or another. There should not be errors to suppress or ignore the differences between religions by the comparative method (some even believe that they should affirm the differences).

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<sup>7</sup> According to the survey (November / December 2011), in the Gallup International Index of religiosity - 52,000 respondents in 57 countries), 90% of Macedonians declared religious; 89% of Romanians; 83% of Moldovans; 81% of Poles; 77% of Serbs; 73% of Italians, 68% of Croats, 47% of Irish people; 31% of Japanese; 30% of Czechs; 29% of French citizens ... the most religious are people from Ghana (96%), Nigeria (93%), Armenia and Fiji. Immediately after them are Macedonians. According to the same data, only 59% of people in the world believe in God. By continents it looks like this: Africa 89%; Latin America 84%; South Asia 83%, 77% Arab countries; Eastern Europe 66%; North America 57%; Western Europe 51%; East Asia 66%; North Asia 17%.

<sup>8</sup> Mircea Eliade advocated historical method in the study of religion. According to him, religion does not exist outside the historical context in which we can observe it.

## II

“Sociology of the nineties left a large theoretical issues of classical sociology in favor of proliferation of short-range surveys using questionnaires or participatory observation. They gradually obtained a status of Canon models.”<sup>9</sup> For the survey, it is important to adapt the indicators to what is dominant in the field of research. T. Bremer shows it on an example of Catholicism and Orthodoxy: the importance of participation in the Sunday Mass at the Catholic religion on the one hand, and the importance of the icons in the Orthodox religion, on the other hand. But that need to adapt the instruments and indicators to the religious situation does not mean that because of that we need to establish the separate confessional sociology.

Survey data on the religiosity of the population we can get through the answers to the question “Do you believe in God?” or “Are you a believer?”. However, methodologically is not unimportant whether we built the first or second question. Will there be more “religious” if we ask the first or the second question? Some research suggest that there will be less “religious” if we ask the first and not the second question. The proportion of those who define themselves as believers, do not have the idea of God (after all, the idea of God do not even have some of the world’s religions, such as Buddhism). Likewise, the greater is the number of those who self-identify themselves with religion (Catholic, Orthodox, Muslims), but with the attitude “I’m a believer.” The confessional self-identification is, I would say, cultural, and therefore the greater.

So, with the answer to these and similar questions, we get the “personal opinion” of respondents. But “the very notion of ‘personal opinion’ should be brought into question by inviting their subjects without distinction, to produce their ‘own opinion’ - the intention that the questionnaires remind everyone, ‘to you’, ‘your opinion’, ‘and what do you think about that?’ - or with their own resources, without any help, to choose from ready-made opinions, opinion polling implicitly accepts a political philosophy that political choice turns into a political judgment in the true sense, applying political principles that would address the problem covered as political and that recognizes to everyone not only the right but also the ability to produce such judgment.”<sup>10</sup>

In recent years, mainly due to the lack of funds for empirical research, sociologists are more oriented to the “depth interviews”. This is evidenced by some monographs and dissertations. It is taken 20-30 participants from two or three groups (never sufficiently explained why they were selected in the sample) and

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Boudon, *Sociology as a science*, Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk, 2012, pp.153.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The distinction-Social criticism of the judgment*, Zagreb: Antibarbarus, 2011, 366.

with them is done the “in-depth interview.” The question is, can we based on the results obtained in such a small sample make some general conclusions that might be relevant (for example for the youth’s religiosity, the position of women in religious groups, and the like)?

### III

In the sociology of religion we encounter another important methodological question of how to carry out a typology of religiosity? I would remind to the contribution of professor Roter in this area. He offered the following typology of believers (1971)<sup>11</sup>:

1. *Religious - Church consistent type* (“I am a believer and regularly, every week, I am visiting the religious rites”). Let’s spend a little time on this type of believer. How to allocate them among the true believers from those who enjoy being seen as visitors to the church (mosque), so in research (surveys, interviews ...) they declare that they visit them more often than they actually do. If we take as a criterion of religiosity visits to the church (mosque) then the believer, as said by Boltman, we degrade to the “customer of the Church and its organizations.” Let us recall the attitude of St. Paul on which reminds K. Kuschel: “So in his eyes (Pavlov - IC) Jew is not the one ‘who is outside’, but the ‘true Jew is one inwardly; and the real circumcision is that of the heart, in spirit, not in the letter’ (Rom 2:28).”<sup>12</sup> Especially with this criterion we should be careful today when “the boundaries between religious and nonreligious are becoming somewhat unclear, these last ones secularize, while the first spiritualize”.<sup>13</sup> We need to distinguish churchliness (belonging to the Church or any other religious community) and religiosity. This Roter’s type is close to the type of “Sunday worshipers”, “Sunday Christian” - those who feel faithful and Christian only on Sundays when they go to mass / service. There is also doubt whether the “best” believer is the one who every week goes to Mass (or Friday prayers)? Is dove white because it baths every day, will some ask? Fearing that the over-emphasis of criteria of visiting the church (mosque) we do not turn religious community into “service” that

<sup>11</sup> „It is unlikely that any model based on a single factor will ever be able to explain the complexities of the ‘world-life’ and embrace the totality of human experience“. Zygmunt Bauman, *The Identity*, Zagreb: Naklada Pelago, 211. str. 33.

<sup>12</sup> Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Jews - Christians - Muslims*, Sarajevo: The Light of the world, 2011. pp. 221.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Paul Willaime, *Ultramodern reconfigurations*, in *The European Gazette*, Zagreb, no. 12/07. pp.98.

will a believer use when he needs it to. In this sense, one could say that the religious community is “privatized”. Here is talked about the “institutional” / “church” religiosity which sociologically is shown by practicing the piety expressed in religious institutions, churches (mosques). But, let us go back to the following Roter’s types.

2. *Religiously-church inconsistent type* (“I am a believer and I visit often - at least once a month - religious rites”).
3. *Religiously-church indifferent type* (“I am a believer, and only sometimes, for religious holidays and special occasions I visit religious rites”).
4. *Religiously - secular type* (“I am a believer and I do not attend religious services”). Let us pause a bit with this type. When some of the younger colleagues is with delight talking about the model of “believing without belonging” which was offered by G. Davie, then I tell them that about this type wrote prof. Roter back in 1971. Man, say, spiritually “feel” Christianity, but he does not belong to any Christian church. About this testifies the wonderful writer Anna Rice: “My faith in God is very strong and I want to keep it. I broke off all relations with organized religion and I made it from moral reasons. As I was spending more time with the institutions of religion, it became increasingly clear that these teachings are immoral and contrary to my conscience. But this did not diminish my faith in God. You do not have to go to church to be a believer. For me going to church destroyed the faith, because I was shocked with the things I’ve heard there ... my Church persecutes homosexuals and is trying to deprive them of their rights.”<sup>14</sup> They are similar to the “statistical” Catholic / Orthodox / Muslim - who are so self-defined in the population census or while interviewing. Otherwise, in all other situations lives the “forgotten” Christianity / Islam. Some would call it the “nominal believer”, “nominal” Catholic / Orthodox / Muslim or Catholic / Orthodox / Muslim in the name only. “Twin brother” would then be the “seasonal believer”: from Christmas to Easter - from Easter to Christmas; from Kurban Bairam to Bairam. Do citizens leave participation in the life of religious communities as this, in a way, is limiting their individual freedom<sup>15</sup>, and it has become (individual freedom) one of the “icons” of especially Western society.
5. *Unstated- church type* (“I can not say that I am a believer or not, although I visit religious rites”). This is a person who may not believe, does not

<sup>14</sup> Novelist Anne Rice in the Interview “Jutarnji list”, Zagreb, 24.11. 2010. str.28.

<sup>15</sup> “It is not about laziness or the exemption: we do not go in the church because the Church is an institution that is historically based on deception, violence and fraud.” Massimo Introvigne, *The Illuminati and the Priory of Sion*, Split: Verbum, 2006. pp. 176.

know the contents of the Bible, but is related to the Church as an institution, as something that was the source of her moral leadership or important place in her life events (birth, marriage, death of a family member ...). In Western societies; next to the church and the unchurch religiosity, one might also speak of “distanced” religiosity: man needs the church only for three cases: baptism, marriage and burial. This is about semi-believers “who go to church only for weddings, baptisms and funerals (...) in many of them the problem of religious practice is not so much in a rational unacceptability of Christian dogma, as it is in the rejection of ethics preached by the Church.”<sup>16</sup>

6. *Unstated-secular type* (“I can not say whether I am a believer or not, and I do not attend religious services”).
7. *Irreligious - inconsistent type* (“I’m not a believer, although I visit religious rites”). Of course we could cite a number of other typologies, similar to this, that we find in today’s literature. That is how Terry Eagleton writes about the “religious believers”, which could mean that there are also “non-religious believers.”<sup>17</sup> And Hans Küng speaks of “believing Christian”<sup>18</sup> which would mean that there are also “unfaithful” Christians (some would say “cultural” Christians). Slobodan Tišma writes about the “false religion”.<sup>19</sup> Nela Rubić writes that “going to the place of worship is not a virtue if practiced out of sheer boredom or from the need of persons to externally prove themselves as a believer”<sup>20</sup>
8. *Irreligious - consistent type* (“I’m not a believer and I do not attend religious services”). Today this Roter’s typology we could complete with several new variants. With many emerged disappointment in the Church (religious community) due to confrontations among the faithful, priests, pedophilia, hypocrisy, material luxuries of the clergy, etc. As if the old French were correct in saying “he who is near the Church is often far from God.” In recent years, more and more is written about “cultural” Catholic / Muslim / Christian Orthodox ... Some will say for them that they are post-Catholic / post-Muslim / post-Orthodox unbelieving, or the “member without belief.” There is more and more “sociological believers” who leave the community as the smallest arises.

<sup>16</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Believe that you believe*, Belgrade: Fedon, 2009, pp. 63.

<sup>17</sup> Terry Eagleton, *About Evil*, Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2011. pp.152.

<sup>18</sup> Preface to the book of Alen Kristić, *Peacebuilders*, Sarajevo: TIPO, 2012. IV.

<sup>19</sup> Slobodan Tišma, *Tame religious thinking*, Novi Sad: Cultural Center of Novi Sad, 2012. pp. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Nela Rubić, “*Terror of purism in BiH under the guise of religion and nation*”, in: „Bosnia franciscana“, Sarajevo, Nr. 32(2010):194.

Statistics show that the practice of religion and belief continue to grow only in Africa and Asia. There are controversies about religion in the post-socialist countries.<sup>21</sup> Has religiosity remained still strong (or stronger) in countries with low (or no) experience of industrialization? Rich societies are becoming more secular<sup>22</sup>, and poor more sacral. The risk for the potential impact of religious diversity on the conflicts in the world politics!

Mikhail Epstein writes about the “religious unconscious” state of Russian spirituality in the Soviet times<sup>23</sup>, about repressed post-conscious religiosity that has refrained from any conscious expression of religiosity<sup>24</sup>. “Their consciousness has completely or partially adopted a secular or even atheistic orientation, and hence the religiosity of such authors was suppressed in the subconscious ...”<sup>25</sup>

In the post-Yugoslav countries there are “instant-believers”, or believers “type 1990” (“Privately I do not believe, I believe in public”). There is also a type of believers who use “services” of the religious communities only in the exceptional personal or family events, at the time of “national” celebration, and the like. Armstrong writes about “emotional devotion” and “theology of wrath”; “Theology of hate” that is especially common in times of war.<sup>26</sup> All the models on which Armstrong writes were recreated in the Balkan areas. There is a lot of traditional believers here. True, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between traditional (they are only the Catholic / Orthodox / Muslim and nothing more

<sup>21</sup> „We have, regardless of the mighty temples, in the soul remained primitive pagans, who capture with the mystification the millions of their fetishes whenever their heart beats stronger. After that we will, for the sake of, go to church, give a contribution to Sveta Petka, but this, again, just to hide from ourselves our polytheism. Nation that evokes more, mentions God, and less it hopes for Him, does not exist on Earth.“. Žarko Laušević, *Year Passes, Day Never*, Belgrade: Novosti, 2011. pp.170.

<sup>22</sup> “Italians and Americans remain more religious than the French or Germans, but religiosity with each of them from generation to generation decreases and reduces among the educated. The data, therefore, do not confirm the motto on the return of the religious. This outlined thesis stems from various factors: the brutal manifestations of Islam on the international scene after the assassination on September 11th 2001, the spread of the evangelism in Africa, Latin America and North America, or media innovation of the Pope Ivana Pavla II. The data do not favor either the disappearance of the religious claims. But they bear witness to the decline of religious and changing the nature of religiosity. They show that younger and more educated tend to reject symbolic concepts too much associated with the glory of the Holy Scriptures, such as that about the Devil, Hell or Heaven. In these data in a concise manner, is shown the tendency of secularization of religious ... Among the Europeans, Scandinavians are the least religious.”Raymond Boudon, *Sociology as a science*, Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk, 2012. pp. 88.

<sup>23</sup> Mikhail Epstein, *Ver and character*, Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1998. pp.23.

<sup>24</sup> The Same, pp.10.

<sup>25</sup> The Same, pp.23.

<sup>26</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God*, Sarajevo: Šahinpašić, 2007.

about religion, they do not know, nor do they practice) from believers who live according to their faith. Traditional believers live with customs, and believers with faith.

Can we accept the view that in the post-Yugoslav states has come to an increase in religiosity, but not in churchliness? Or there was both? Religiousness rose, but not the “churchliness”. But we do not need to forget that in some people, especially from the political scene, rose the “churchliness” without religion, or with low religiosity.

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