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## I'm a Believer – But I'll Be Damned if I'm Religious : Belief and Religion in the Greater Copenhagen Area : A Focus Group Study

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INA ROSEN

# I'm a believer

*- but I'll be damned  
if I'm religious*

Belief and religion in the Greater Copenhagen Area  
- A focus group study



LUNDS  
UNIVERSITET

LUND STUDIES IN SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION - VOLUME 8

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# Summary

This book is a contribution to the discussion about religion in contemporary Western society, characterized by the privatization of religion. In this respect Denmark is a good case in point. This small, wealthy and peaceful country in Scandinavia is often seen as a clear example of secularization. It is perceived as a country where religion plays a very limited, peripheral role in society as well as in the lives of ordinary citizens. For these reasons it is quite surprising to find in social surveys that so many Danes believe or are willing to identify as religious to a smaller or greater extent. Especially since they often do not answer affirmatively about the kinds of belief, they are asked about, such as heaven, hell, telepathy, etc. While many believe in god, this god often does not appear to play any significant role in these people's lives, as far as we can determine from their answers to the survey questions.<sup>1</sup> The answers appear inconsistent, and incongruous. *What do they actually mean?*

As sociologists of religion we are by nature interested in religion. This frequently leads us to study religion where it is observable, in spaces where religion obviously takes place. Or in spaces where something happens, which is reminiscent of religion as we understand religion to be. While these spaces can contribute to our knowledge about certain expressions of religion, it is often evident from such studies that not very many people are present to participate in these activities and organizations. This is certainly the case in Denmark, where the clear majority stay away from organized religious events and spaces. There must be a considerable overlap between those people, who will call themselves believers and those people, who do not regularly participate in religion. This should lead us to conceptualize research that explores this large group of people.

In fact, the concept religion is not easily operational and does not carry meaning or implications that remain valid or consistent over time. Just like other meta-concepts such as culture, work, the family or gender, religion must be re-substantiated in order to remain descriptive and operational. If we were

<sup>1</sup> European Value Surveys 1981-1999.



to understand work as one did a century ago, not many of us would work. The conclusion would have to be that work is in decline. Similarly, we should not presume that religion is in decline simply because we are not able to find much of it in society. There is the contrary possibility that the concept is in need of re-substantiation in order to be descriptive of what contemporary society and the people who live in it understand by religion. This book's ambition is to explore means of re-substantiating the concept of religion.

Conceptualizing such research requires an open mind to what people believe in, especially because the knowledge we have from quantitative surveys tells us that many do not believe in the message of the church, nor do they apparently believe in the forms of new age beliefs addressed in social surveys. There are several examples of studies that seek to explore beliefs without cuing in the direction of traditional belief systems. The most important lessons to be learned from such studies are that people lack a language with which to express their beliefs. Furthermore, it is important to allow people the time to develop their thoughts. Such beliefs are difficult to express not only due to lack of language, but also for the reason that they are usually tacit, seldom systematized and usually actualized ad-hoc in respect to context. For these reasons, I have conducted my research in focus groups of ordinary people in their everyday environment with the purpose of allowing people the time and mutual help in exploring two main topics. These topics are 1) *What does it mean to be a believer today*, and 2) *Can one be more or less religious*.

The focus groups have been fruitful in gaining insight into how the concepts religion and belief can be understood by ordinary people, who are not selected on the basis of any affiliation with religion. They are invited to participate in the focus groups for the simple reason that they are members of the population and can help to clarify for me as researcher the discrepancies that appear through analysis of social survey data on religion. The data created in the focus groups shows that religion as a concept pertains to five distinct aspects. I call these belief, routinized religion, religion-as-heritage, practice and tradition. While these aspects are in themselves not novel, it is interesting that these aspects do not pertain directly to a common core. In fact beliefs emerge as highly personal emotions and reflections that reside in the inner life of each individual and are developed cognitively through life experiences. They are actualized ad-hoc in respect to context. Routinized religion pertains to the religious system and institution, the organization to which

one can belong. Certain practices also belong in this domain, such as sermons, the Eucharist, etc. These practices are perceived as alien by most of the focus group participants, and are not part of their daily lives. It is important to underline that such practices do not necessarily pertain to a person's beliefs either. There are however practices that are embraced by all participants. Such practices are traditions. They are acknowledged to have originated in a routinized religious context, but they have become devoid of religious content to most of the people, who participate in them. They are upheld for social reasons, for the affirmation of social life and shared heritage. This is where the wider religion-as-heritage comes in. Religion-as-heritage has no religious content as such. It signifies the cultural history, the shared norms, values, perceptions, etc. that are shared by people, whose heritage lies in that given church or religious organization. For this reason, there is no true inconsistency in saying, as one of the focus group participants insisted, that he is not willing to say that he is religious, but he is happy to call himself a Christian.

The five different aspects signify different things, rather than a common core in terms of a belief system or religion.

This indicates that the ways in which people believe and use religion are at odds with how we conceptualize religion in academia. Where most conceptualizations of religion assume that religion includes a number of indicators and relations with a common core and a shared belief system, shared values, etc., my findings indicate that this expectation is not descriptive of religion, as it is used by ordinary people.

Conventionally we would conclude on the basis of such findings that people are not very religious, or that they are increasingly secular. Or as Zuckerman (2008) concludes, Danes are generally culturally religious, a mild form of agnosticism. However, this assumption could be turned on its head. It might be in fact that the assumption of system, inherent in most conceptions of religion, is invalid in a modern society characterized by privatization of religion.

Indeed the processes in contemporary society known as privatization are conducive to segregating belief from religion. Belief is relegated into the inner minds of individuals, whereas the processes of privatization ensure that religion is entrenched in institutions and denominations in a pluralized market. The increasing gap between these two spheres gives rise to a social domain in which

traditions and heritage become shared ways of establishing bonds and affinities and staging belonging in respect to other kinds of traditions and heritages.

For this reason it is assuredly the case that religion in the conventional mode, what I call packaged religion, is bound to decline, whereas unpacked religion, where several aspects perform different functions in respect to the individual and society is more descriptive of the norm in Danish society.

My point is that the term religion as it is conceptualized in its packaged form is not overly apt at describing the relationships of ordinary people with the phenomena, we as sociologists of religion like to put under the heading of religion. In so far as we persist in using religion as a meta-concept, which includes a number of different, overlapping dimensions and expectations – an idealized representation – we shall see lack of, or diffuse religion rather than different relations to different aspects of religion.

My claim is that religion as a packaged concept belongs to a vision of society, where various aspects of human life have been packaged together into a relatively close-knit idea, with a bureaucracy and institutional structure, which due to certain social and historical contingencies have fused and attained considerable impact on larger society. However, if we cling to this conception of religion, the expressions of which are loosing significance in contemporary Danish society, all we will be able to see is decline. The unpacked conception of religion is a consequence of larger societal developments, which ensure the demise of that previous emanation of religion. But out of this change arises a new perspective on believing, belonging, and sharing, which we should not dismiss as decline.

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# Prologue

Research is often analogized as a movement or journey (Tweed 2006:54). My preferred analogy is art. Art is a personal reflection on the world, as the artist perceives it. Art acknowledges the workings of the subconscious mind; it is personal but willing to attest to its intertextuality. Originality lies in the interplay of references and the idiosyncrasy of the artwork. Art has a message from the artist to the world, which recalls past, present and future. Just like chiaroscuro, it illuminates a detail and obscures the rest. It tacitly acknowledges the realms beyond the light, the unending depth that recedes from the object in focus. It does not even attempt to figuratively present totality or universality. The chiaro reveals layers of meaning and intertextuality, whereas the oscuro represents “the rest”. For the work of art – or research - to make sense, its intertextuality must be coherent, and it must perceptively illuminate its topic. Art however, does not claim to be Truth. It is perspective and it is open to perspectivation. The beholder understands and consumes art in respect to her own experiences and choices.

Building a perspective or framework is an iterative process between experience in the world and experience in the text. In that sense, the analogy of travel holds true. It is a movement between being in the world and reflecting on the world. Each new experience, be it in the company of books or in the company of people, has the potential to transform the framework. Thus a framework is not the path to Truth – it is a vantage point, resulting from personal experiences and choices. A framework is like tiny specks of coloured glass in the fascinating diversity of combinations we see through the gigantic kaleidoscope we call academia. Those tiny specks form a constellation and reflect light. The light diffracts and illuminates the object for the researcher, who decides, just for that moment to look at the single motif and not them all. And then a slight alteration reveals a new pattern.



# Introduction

I have talked to people about religion for as long as I can remember. It appears to me that everyone is a scholar of religion in some sense of the word. Everyone has an opinion. People are capable of talking about their religiosity, although they do not do so every day. This implies that religion – and beliefs – are not going out of vogue. But beliefs cannot be said to conform with or develop into belief systems. These beliefs may be bricolage and personal but when people discuss these matters, they draw upon both traditional belief systems (i.a. Christianity) and other discourses and meaning systems, which are out there in the social arena. This much is evident from my focus group research on how people talk about religion and belief.

Take the following example of how during a focus group, a young male marketing professional tries to make sense of his faith: “... and it’s hard to explain it, really, just like you can’t explain why you love another person, that’s unbelievably hard. You’d have to make something flimsy concrete, and that’s when it starts to fall apart, really, if you’re to explain why you love someone, well your eyes are so stunning, that just doesn’t sound as phat as you feel, somehow, because it is more about, you know, what you can’t put into words, why you love another person. And this goes for my faith, it’s in my mind, in my body, I don’t know, it’s difficult to express.”<sup>2</sup>

As I have talked with people about beliefs and religion in my focus group research, I have increasingly come to see that people interact in idiosyncratic ways with what we call religion. This idiosyncrasy could be understood as individual inconsistency and lack of belief or compliance with pre-established religious doctrine. It could also be understood to indicate that our assumptions that religion somehow connotes system should be revised (Ahlin 2005:14; McGuire 2008:5ff).

Traditionally in the study of religion, we understand religion as a complex of (more or less tightly woven) ideas, ways of being in the world, values, attitudes, actions and relations that all somehow are signifiers of the same signified, say

2 Focus group dated 080326, please consult Appendix 5 for list of focus groups. Henceforth, all focus groups references will be numbered in terms of a date reference according to Appendix 5.



Christianity. These are what we term belief systems. When we observe a lack of, or decrease in, one or more of these areas in respect to the signified, we assume that religion is in decline (Davie 1998). We tend to suppose that when people do not report belief in Jesus and do not go to church, they are becoming secular. That is because by secular, we really very often mean that they are not conforming to the complex or system that we have pre-defined as religion.

In a short review of new approaches in the field, Voyé shows how sociology of religion is coming to terms with religion as a complicated phenomenon. Where the discipline used to be predominantly concerned with Western, institutionalized belief systems (church-model), it is now aware of other kinds of beliefs. Studies of other forms of belief are helpful in bringing about re-evaluations of earlier assumptions and thereby also re-assessment of the religious situation in the Western world as such. These developments have rekindled the debate about what religion means (Voyé 2004:195-223). Voyé expresses it like this:

*... religion, which was for so long taken for granted, appears now problematic and uncertain; it shows also that, like many sociological objects – the family, the city, work, etc. – become more or less de-substantiated, which creates a need for renewed approaches.*

*Both these circumstances – religious pluralism and the fact that attention focuses on the individual actors – induce sociologists to innovate and to create new concepts, seeking more adequately to describe the actual situation. (Voyé 2004:202)*

This book has affinity with the insights summed up by Voyé in the quotation above. From the very outset of the process of writing this book one of my chief concerns has been a certain discomfort with the concept; religion.<sup>3</sup>

In actual fact, people may not feel themselves remotely secular even as they disavow organized religious beliefs. They may even report to be highly religious, but the religiosity they have in mind is not really the system we call Christianity (or some other belief system). And thus, the way in which we research religion limits our understanding of the object we are trying to study. We are tripped up by our

3 Notably my intention is not to replace religion as a concept with something else. Rather, religion as a concept must continuously not only be de-substantiated but also re-substantiated in order to remain useful as a category.

often quite implicit assumption that religion is or perhaps should be a complex of ideas, values, behaviour etc., that all have a single tradition in common (McGuire 2008:11).

My research shows, that it is quite possible to have Christian traditions and believe firmly that they are important, while not in the least believing in the Christian message, believing instead in something entirely different. Such people understand themselves as believers, and by this they quite unmistakably mean that they are not secular, irreligious or non-believers. It is also not that such people do not acknowledge their Christian heritage, they most certainly do. It just performs a different function in their lives. It is a common history and sociality, but has nothing to do with their faith as such. People actively distinguish between various expressions of religion, which do not all point to the same belief system. This indicates that as sociologists of religion, we should be careful in diagnosing religion in our society on the assumption that religion is a system. We see decline, where we could be seeing difference.<sup>4</sup>

## Definitions

---

When I set out on this project, I felt confident that I was a proponent of an inclusive conception of religion. I felt that what performs as religion to the individual should be accepted as religion by the scholar of religion. But I also accepted the counterargument that there must be some form of distinction between what can and cannot constitute religion. Not everything can after all be religion, or it should be a non-concept. For that reason, I was happy to agree that certain religions perform certain functions for certain groups of people; some might for example be religions of difference, others religions of humanity or spiritualities of life (Woodhead & Heelas 2000). I accepted that there could be many sorts of religion within my inclusive conceptualization of religion. I did not ask myself at this point

4 Dobbelaere argues that sociological analysis always should start at the macro-sociological level, and for that reason he asserts that micro-sociological behaviour is “not a valid indicator with which to evaluate the process of secularization” (Dobbelaere 2004:239). One might raise the question where does macro-sociology come from, if not in a complex interchange between other levels of sociology, which together feeds back into improved analysis of society. However, if one accepts Dobbelaere’s claim, reflection on micro-sociological data should still be helpful in re-examining macro-sociological theories, assumptions, descriptions and predictions, which Dobbelaere also acknowledges (Dobbelaere 2004:243).

whether the term religion as it is frequently used really did help me to understand the phenomena that I included within my understanding of religion.

As I set out to study religion among the broader population, the distinctions mentioned above were set against my experiences of talking to people. I asked myself again and again: “But is this really religion?” I had read literature raising the same question; how can one come to terms with religion in contemporary life? I did not feel confident that religion in contemporary North European contexts is in decline into secularity (Bruce 2002) or that what we increasingly find today is a thin, essentially cultural variant of religion (Zuckerman 2008). Demerath offered a distinction that worked for me for a while:

*our primary focus should be on the sacred, and [that] religion is just one among many possible sources of the sacred. Defining religion “substantively” but the sacred “functionally” helps to resolve a long-standing tension in the field.*  
(Demerath 1999:1)

There are problems with Demerath’s definition. However, his conceptualization comprehends that there is a difference between religion (as a system whichever way it is defined) and the sources of whatever people believe in, which he argues we should then call the sacred. What Demerath argues is that there are many sources of the sacred, some of which become routinized as religions. However, while a religion defined substantively is bound to have functions, the sacred defined functionally is bound to have substance. For that reason, what Demerath is mostly successful in pointing out by aid of his distinction is that there are many more expressions of the sacred for us to study, than merely what becomes routinized as religion.

I realized that Demerath’s perception only lowers the bar on what can be included as religious. It did not solve my basic problem. I still could not establish to my satisfaction what might be an adequate distinction between what I could count as religious when I talked to people, and what would be secular.

This problem lies at the heart of our field (Voyé 2004:195), and there is no solution that will fit all studies. My solution has been to put the problem to one side. A scholar of religion who shares my interest in the beliefs of the general population, Abby Day incidentally handed me my answer in a mail correspondence. All of

these concepts draw a line somewhere, and by that they predetermine what will be accepted as religious, and the what will not. In terms of studying what people themselves believe or consider religious this is perhaps not ultimately the most profitable way to go about researching religion in the broad population.

I shall return to these matters later on. At this stage, however, I want to explain how I use a number of concepts in this book.

*Belief and faith* are used synonymously.<sup>5</sup> I use these words to signify what people themselves believe in. I must stress that my focus group data shows that people actively distinguish between religious beliefs and beliefs. Quite often, but not in all cases, my participants explain that they have no religious beliefs, but they have plenty of beliefs. By not having religious beliefs they generally mean, that they do not believe in what they think the church wants them to believe. Nor do they believe in Christianity as a belief system. They also do not believe in Church as a religious institution. When they say that they have beliefs, most people mean that they have personal beliefs about the existence of “something else”, outside of rationality, which they express in a variety of ways. There are also a few people, who clearly stated that they are atheist. Some of these atheists did however say that they have beliefs, but such beliefs have to do with belief in nature, science, friendship, coincidence etc. All understand belief to be something that you have faith in, even though it cannot be fully comprehended by the individual. Friendship for example is the intangible meeting of minds and emotions, the space that grows inexplicably between individuals that puts demands on them, which they gladly submit to for the sake of friendship.

I do not seek to determine in this book what might be labelled a religious belief as distinct from other forms of belief. I let people develop their distinctions themselves. For that reason, when I use the terms belief or faith, I am loyal to the way people have understood their beliefs.

*Religion* is used in three ways.

5 According to The Oxford American Dictionary belief can mean an acceptance that a statement is true or that something exists. However, the term believe also has a broader meaning, holding an opinion, which accords well with how people often feel about their beliefs. Beliefs are often assumptions that are not usually reflected on, but are emotionally laden when actualized in discourse. The theologian and anthropologist, Douglas Davies in a similar vein suggests that if we approach “beliefs by this route of values as ideas vested with emotional significance there is no need to argue for beliefs as pertaining essentially to what is often called religion. Religious beliefs can simply take their place alongside other forms of belief for these are simply ideas relating to what a particular society may define as religion, politics, the natural environment or whatever.” (Davies: “Cultural Intensification: A Theory for Religion” (Unpublished paper)).

1. The people who have taken part in my study often use religion to refer to church or other religious institution and the kinds of belief that are associated with these institutions. Expressed in this way, religion points to a routinized and organized institution with a corpus of beliefs. I use the term routinized religion to refer to this meaning.<sup>6</sup>
2. Religion is also used as a shorthand. It describes all or some of those beliefs, practices, emotions, organizations etc, which the study of religion traditionally groups together in a complex, which we call religion. We expect each of these elements in the complex to point back to some extent to the routinized religion in question. Religion in this sense is one of the central concerns of this book. I would venture the claim that as long as we understand religion as something with an organizing core or logic, we will not be able to study religion as it inhabits people's lives in our society. We must listen to how people narrate their beliefs. We must study how they organize these beliefs, how they use the routinized religious institutions, the routinized religious messages, how they appropriate traditions and develop new ones that support their beliefs etc. Are there, one might for example ask, non-routinized religious messages and shared meanings? Religion is a construction, a theoretical concept that covers the theological ideal of society and individuals coming together in religious union. It does not exist in reality, nor has it ever, I would claim. If we persist in mirroring the observed world with such an ideal, the observed world will always be short changed. If we think that previous eras lived up to the ideal image, we will come up not only with skewed images of the past, we will also mis-diagnose contemporary religiosity (McGuire 2008).
3. Religion is finally used to describe our subject. I am a scholar of the sociology of religion, even as I claim that religion is not a helpful concept for studying it at the individual level.

It is unfortunate to have to use the same word with three different meanings. It attests to the paucity of language to describe variation in this area. The Inuit supposedly have a range of words for snow. Unfortunately we only have one word

6 This book uses the term routinization to signify beliefs that are systematized and organized to a large extent. The term originates in Weber (1922, 1993), who states that all legitimate social authority is rooted in charisma. As charisma is a personal property, it is volatile. In order for a movement to survive, it must develop structures of leadership, dogma etc. This development leads to organization, role divisions, systematized corpus of authorized beliefs etc. Routinized religion is organized and systematized, for example in church religion.

that sums up what we are trying to embrace. The context and distinctions I have just mentioned should hopefully help to clarify what is meant.

My research explores how people relate to belief and religion regardless of eventual religious beliefs or affiliations that they may have. For lack of a better term I use the shorthand *ordinary people* to describe this basis for selection.

The processes of *differentiation and privatization* lie in the background of my thinking.

Danish society in which I have done my research is characterized by certain traits and has followed certain historical and religious trajectories that are not necessarily universal.

Danish society has a high degree of institutional differentiation. By this I mean that a rationalization has occurred in society, which has led to each domain developing its own institutional autonomy and functional dynamics. In terms of religion the consequences for religious institutions is that all religions and religious groups become a denomination among others (Casanova 1994:213).

At the same time Danish society has undergone a significant degree of privatization of religion, which is a concomitant and iterative process to differentiation in Denmark. By this I mean that religious beliefs have become subjective and can in principle no longer be integrated into a religious world view (Casanova 1994:35). For this reason religion is private in the sense that religious normative proscriptions no longer regulate individual choices in respect to belief and religion, and herein lies the emergence of a private sphere. The private sphere is where personal beliefs are held, whereas most public institutions with the exception of the State church exists without reference to god. The State church has however relinquished its influence on other institutions and has become one among many institutions vis-à-vis the individual's private sphere.<sup>7</sup>

The perspective I present here has necessitated a few new terms. I will only briefly explain their content here, and return to them during the course of this book.

The processes of differentiation and privatization draw attention to a space between the public and private spheres. I use the term *social sphere* to describe this

7 See Casanova 1994 for general discussion of these societal processes. Casanova does not discuss Denmark. I apply elements of his thinking to my discussion of Danish society. In cases where I refer to Casanova throughout this book, references only pertain to his general line of argument, and any application of his thinking in a Danish context are mine.

space, which includes civic society as well as more or less structured communities. However it is significant to point out that the social sphere is also tacit and unstructured. Such elements of the social sphere arise in brief meetings between social actors as well as in shared values, norms, traditions, etc.<sup>8</sup>

I have coined the concepts *packaged religion* and *unpacked religion*. Packaged religion refers to how religion is usually conceptualized in sociology of religion as a system of ideas, practices and institutions with an overlapping core. Unpacked religion refers to how religion can be approached, based on the kinds of distinctions I find in my material.

I also suggest the term *religion-as-heritage* in the context of unpacked religion, which describes the socially shared norms, values and general culture that have grown out of routinized religion, but no longer evoke religious content.

## Remarks and qualifications on the way

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This book takes its starting point in how people talk about the concepts religion and belief. How are such concepts understood by people in the broad public? What can insight into how such concepts are understood teach those of us who are interested in sociology of religion at the individual level? But religion touches on many other disciplines including cognition, biology, neurology, and psychology, which are not the topic of this book. It is expressed in numerous ways including emotionally, aesthetically, in art, music and dance and other bodily ways. It is certainly not the intention here to reduce religion to cerebral or verbal reflections, for it is clear that it has many different origins, functions and expressions, some of which are dependent on contextualization, but others of which might be elements of the human make-up as such.<sup>9</sup>

This book is not about people, who live by routinized religious doctrine. It is about researching religion in the broad population. This book does not discuss how it has come to be that most of the Danish population do not live by routinized religious doctrine. In contrast it explores the potential inherent in calibrating

8 See Weintraub & Kumar 1997:1-43 concerning related conceptualization of this sphere. See also Besecke 2005.

9 "What is this thing called religion?" New Scientist, Apr 5-Apr 11, 2008; Vol.198, Iss.2650 p. 50.

research to the attitudes of the broad population. What we learn from them might quite possibly lead to re-adjustment of our perceptions of contemporary religion.

Although this book is about contemporary religion, it will not discuss specific modalities of the modern era. Whether this era should be labelled post or late modern will be left to others to debate. However, awareness of difference and change has altered how society and culture are understood in research. Post-modern social studies claims no privileged point of view. Society and culture can be seen from any number of perspectives, and are expressed as any number of perspectives. While this book does not defend any one perspective, it is indebted to post-modern social studies. The freedom to privilege a chosen perspective highlights the point that beliefs and religion can – and should *also* - be researched “from below”. Religion when studied at the individual level comes across as a plurality of voices that are interwoven rather than univocal, expressing beliefs that are not systems but bricolage, not individual but socially constructed.

This book is an example of how the researcher is a co-creator of meaning and interpretation in qualitative research. This is a research project and yet it is also a personal project. This project is personal in the sense that I have made choices in respect to research question. I have also decided how to research my question. I have determined who could participate, and I have also been an active member of each focus group. I have guided conversation, and thereby also established to a certain extent what could emerge from the conversations and what could not. I have then interpreted the data in respect to my research agenda. In every respect this research project could have turned out differently if I had made other choices along the way. For these reasons I have opted for a personal style of presentation. I am present in the text as a person, making choices, being surprised and confounded, growing as I learn more, and concluding based on my experiences in focus groups as well as in academic literature. When I started this project, I did not think that I would be able to write a personal account of my research, but as I sat down to do the final write up it seemed the most genuine way to proceed. This mode of presentation owes much to anthropology in its understanding of researcher as co-constitutive of the field. While it is a mode of narration, it also evinces a perception of knowledge and reality as socially constructed rather than “out there” waiting to be harvested. However, I do not mean to argue that all is construction. Social constructions have effects on reality in society, to real people in real life.



# Topics

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The main body of this book builds on data created in focus groups dedicated to discussing what one can believe in today, in contemporary Denmark. It also builds on other quantitative and qualitative studies conducted in Denmark, aimed at understanding the religious state of affairs in this country.<sup>10</sup> The focus group study, which I have conducted, adds to our knowledge of what one might be able to express in terms of thoughts and feelings about one's own religiosity as a person living in the Greater Copenhagen area. It also contributes insights into how one can talk about these matters, which words are available, how do we come to terms with our religion, beliefs and actions, how much does it matter to us etc. However, this focus group study is a small-scale research project conducted in the Greater Copenhagen Area. Although it does to a certain extent reveal the potential to talk about beliefs and religion, and I have sought to speak with people from many different walks of life, this study cannot claim to be representative of the entire population. It is a case study and as such not directly generalizable to the entire population as data on how people are religious and have beliefs today. In terms of data, this study must be amalgamated with other studies that together should improve our knowledge about religion in contemporary life. However, at the methodological and theoretical levels, this study is a generalizable contribution. It points out how certain of our theoretical assumptions and methodological practices insulate us from other perspectives. It tests the profitability of an alternative perspective and method, in terms of generating different kinds of data and in terms of delivering inputs to improved theory building and research questions. It argues that such alternative perspectives, of which mine is merely one, might add an angle to how we perceive contemporary religiosity.

This book develops a number of topics, all of which seek to explore established methodological and theoretical assumptions. In discussing each of these topics in chapters 3 through 6, the data mentioned above will be brought into play with such established assumptions.

The selected topics are not exhaustive. Neither are the conclusions. The

<sup>10</sup> These studies will be introduced during the course of the book. The most comprehensive is the European Value Studies survey 1999.

ambition of this book is to call attention to a different method and perspective, which are often neglected, but which are nevertheless slowly being developed here and there among students of religion (Day 2006; McGuire 2008; Schlehofer et al. 2008).

Let me enumerate the topics and explain in brief why these have been selected.

## Method (chapter 3)

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As sociologists of religion, we tend to be interested in religion, belief, practices, traditions, worldviews, material culture etc. When we want to study such things, we tend to go where they are available. We go to church, religious community or wherever else we expect to find religion. By doing so, we implicitly accept the modernization thesis, that institutional differentiation has resulted in a form of compartmentalization of meaning. We assume that religion takes place in certain compartments in society and in life. Whether these compartments refer strictly to routinized religion or whether the barrier is lowered to include what is often described as spirituality or other religious phenomena, the logic remains the same. Go where religion is.<sup>11</sup>

Large-scale quantitative studies have the advantage of being able to approach people regardless of religious affiliation. In best cases, respondents are approximately proportional to their general socio-demographic representation in society, and we might be able to get a better idea of religiosity in society as perceived by a broad section of the population. Qualitative studies might learn from this approach. As it stands, quantitative research informs us that many more people report that they believe than turn up at church-religious events. This is a strong indication that we should begin to re-locate our studies to the context of ordinary people's daily lives.

Another concern of mine, discussed during the course of this topic, has been how to research what we do not have the words to express adequately. How do we let people develop their ideas on religion without too severe limitations, given that they will have to be cued to some extent about the study's objective? There are other studies that seek to explore contemporary religiosity in open-ended ways.

11 The mall for example has served as an analogy of church, and has been studied by sociologists of religion both as if it were a religious institution, as if it were a microcosm of society and in view of consumption as a new expression of religion (Laderman & León 2003:580).

Each step in this direction brings new insights and new problems. I therefore also discuss such other researches and how these have informed and helped develop the methods used in this book.

## Contemporary belief (chapter 4)

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The term belief – “tro” - in Danish has several meanings. It means to think, to believe and to be faithful to. In many English surveys, the word religious is used to express religiosity. Religious in Danish can be translated into “religiøs” (religious) or “troende” (to have beliefs or to be a believer). These words also have different implications in the Danish language. Allowing my focus group participants to unfold various concepts and to give voice to the distinctions they perceive to be inherent in such concepts not only provides perspectives on the concept of religion. It also supplies insight into how people perceive their beliefs. Beliefs do not take form as systems. This topic deals with how people understand religion and the distinctions they draw. The distinctions and implications of these concepts, as they arise during the focus group, are valuable information for sociologists of religion interested in understanding contemporary religion.

## Conceptions of religion (chapter 5)

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How religion should be conceptualized has been a central topic of discussion and sometimes struggle in our field. Our field has grown out of theology and remains informed in its essence by Christianity (Smart 1999:xiii; Voyé 2004:199). While we recognize that there are other forms of religion and many other ways of social organization, the model found in Christianity remains an implicit blue print of what religion should be; a belief system attached to an institution and system. Our field struggles to incorporate other models of religion, but the fit always seems a bit uncomfortable and awkward. Worse, the model does not fit contemporary religious life very well either (Voyé 2004:199). This is not because the model's Christian heritage per se, but because the model is a rational ideal (Furseth & Repstad 2007:42). It does neither explain human inconsistency very well, nor the

meanderings of the human brain in its efforts to create meaning out of chaos.<sup>12</sup> It is inconceivable for a human to express or believe in a system, for the simple reason that the system itself cannot be expressed. But people might actualize beliefs in relation to their context, and give them meaning through verbal expression (Voyé 2004:200).

Defining religion first (be it a particular routinized religion or some or other substantive or functionalist conception) and then researching it from that perspective results in particular windows of insight.<sup>13</sup> Allowing ordinary people to develop understandings, and using these interpretations to advance theory and methodology opens different windows of insight. I have, of course, used the latter method in this book. The results are able to feed back into the discussion about what religion signifies. They can also serve to tune quantitative measuring devices.

## Communality (chapter 6)

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Religion in contemporary society is often perceived as privatized or individualized, and diffuse. Privatized is often understood as a consequence of institutional differentiation. The notion implies that routinized religion has assumed a diminishing role in society, it becomes denominational. This suggests that routinized religions withdraw from their association with state and influence in most of life's circumstances. They develop into associations, which people may become members of if they wish. The narrative also goes that there is a greater market of denominations and other kinds of ideal meaning making choices in the market, and that people increasingly find that they can pick and choose in order to develop a personal worldview. This leads to diffuse, or thin religion, in that each individual has her or his own religion that they cannot share with others and with no surrounding support system in terms of community, ideas, and practice to back up the belief system as such. (Bellah (1985) 2008; Bruce 2002:91)

This narrative implies that belief must be systematized and supported in order

12 A model informed by cognitive psychology might better explain such inconsistency (e.g. Boyer 2008).

13 Indeed I have no problems with this approach as such. Most of what we know about our field is thanks to these kinds of study. As social scientists, we should be less concerned with the validity of religious claims than with the utility of the theories and methods we develop and apply in respect to our intended object (Furseth & Repstad 2007:33). My points throughout this book are that too often we neglect the broad population in our studies, and likewise we tend not to take into account that people may conceptualize their beliefs and religion differently than scholars of religion do, which should not be taken as indication that they are less religious, have thin beliefs or are simply culturally religious.

to be viable in the long run. It assumes that beliefs previously were alive as systems that people believed in and that these systems not only supported the individual in his or her faith, but also ensured moral and ethical likemindedness. This analysis leads to questions about moral and ethical accord in societies where there is no longer a shared belief system. Again, allowing people to develop their ideas about these matters feeds back into how we theorize these questions.

The topics mentioned above make out the central part of this book as we return to them in more detail in chapters 3 through 6.

## The focus group study

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During spring 2008, I met up with 12 groups of people to talk about religion. Only they did not know that this was what we were going to talk about. We usually met where these people worked or spent much of their time. The groups were not selected on the basis of any kind of religious affiliation. Rather, they were there simply because they were ordinary people in an everyday context, where religion has essentially no acknowledged part to play.

The atmosphere was informal, as they gathered and chatted about other things. But they were noticeably aware that I was there, getting ready to talk to them. I went along with the small talk, joking with them or asking them about their work. There were usually some refreshments and as we settled down around a table with our cups of coffee or tea, I would gradually ease into the focus group session. I would present myself and thank them for letting me have an hour of their time. I would introduce myself as a sociologist, tell them what a focus group is all about and then explain that I had some particular values that I would like them to talk about. At this point I would have their attention and I would say something along these lines: "What we are going to talk about here is what it might mean to be a believer today". An uncomfortable silence would greet me, then a heavy breathing out of air, and a few shy giggles. This was not what they had expected, and they were not prepared. In order to give them a bit of time and in order to signal that whatever they felt about belief etc., they are not alone, I would explain the background behind my interest. According to social surveys, most Danes belong to a denomination, most would call themselves believers and a clear majority also

believes in god. However, hardly anyone participates in organized religion, and people do not feel that their beliefs play a significant role in everyday life. So, I would explain, I had to wonder what makes people tick the affirmative boxes in social surveys inquiring about religion and belief. This usually took a bit of the suspense out of the room. The spotlight was no longer on individual beliefs and what others might think if someone were to admit to having them. Being part of a norm is comforting. Almost inevitably, someone would start talking about his or her own personal beliefs.

In this book I present my findings during the course of the topics discussed earlier on. The findings call on us to think in different ways about religion, as it is played out at the individual level; among human beings as they go about and deal with the routines, conundrums and successes of their daily lives.

Although this book is predominantly concerned with testing the potential of a particular methodological stance and its implications for theory, its empirical base is in Denmark. Denmark is often perceived to be a highly secular society, or a society without god with mere traces of cultural religion (Bondeson 2003; Zuckerman 2008). It is clear that had the same study been conducted elsewhere, it might have produced different results, *inter alia* due to cultural and societal differences. In order to situate this study, the next chapter will present a short introduction to religion in Denmark.



## Chapter 1:

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# Religion in Denmark<sup>14</sup>

## Non-separation

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The Danish constitution states that the “Evangelical Lutheran Church shall be the Established Church of Denmark, and as such shall be supported by the State”.<sup>15</sup>

However the fact that Denmark has a State Church has not curtailed religious pluralism in the country. A study conducted in 2002-3 in the second largest urban area in Denmark, Århus, identified 71 denominations including the State Church, which in itself comprised approximately 60 parishes (Kühle 2007).<sup>16</sup> There appears to be plenty of variety even in a relatively small urban environment such as Århus with a total population at the time of the study of approximately 300 000 people.

Membership of the Danish State Church is most frequently acquired through baptism in infancy and there are no formal obligations that bring Danes into direct contact with the church, other than when a registrar is needed to formalize official documents. As an arm of state, the church acts as registrar of births, naming and death, regardless of individual faith and denomination.<sup>17</sup> The role

14 This chapter does not discuss what religion is, but rather brings together evidence from other sources, augmented with information from my own focus group study.

15 [www.folketinget.dk/pdf/constitution.pdf](http://www.folketinget.dk/pdf/constitution.pdf) (080915).

16 The survey shows that affiliation or membership with one denomination does not preclude affiliation or membership of one or more other denominations. The survey also indicates that participation is not directly correlated to membership or affiliation. The perimetres of the survey and problems related to delimitation are discussed at length in the survey report itself (Fibiger 2004) and summarized in Kühle 2007.

17 <http://www.km.dk/borgerportal.html> (080915).



of registrar is of course a minor one, and not in any significant way a position of power. Nevertheless it brings all citizens, regardless of faith, into contact with the church at various times of their lives.

Although state and church have not been formally separated, most power in terms of values, norms and ethics has been seceded to state and other non-church organizations and institutions. But as an indication of the legacy of church power 3 members of the 17-person Danish Council of Ethics, which advises Parliament are currently protestant priests, the remaining 14 represent science, education, law, and media.<sup>18</sup> No other faiths are represented.

## Religion in public and education

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Public deliberation on separation of state and church has been negligible even though neighbouring Sweden went through a transition from state church to independent denomination as recently as 2000, which might have spurred any latent debate in Denmark. In a 2007 lawsuit filed against the state by a number of Catholic individuals claiming that the church's role as registrar of births is discriminatory, the Supreme Court found that this was not the case. The court found that the church simply performs an administrative function devoid of religious content or significance.<sup>19</sup> This lawsuit did not provoke significant public debate. Nevertheless there is a high degree of popular consensus that Church should not be involved in state policy or public morality. Similarly there is little support for the assertion that the state church has answers to people's moral or personal problems, nor to social problems.<sup>20</sup> Although there is no formal separation of church and state, the popular attitude to religion in politics and public office shows an expectation that the church should behave as if it were separated from state. Respondents for example overwhelmingly would not agree that religious leaders should influence government decisions.<sup>21</sup>

Religion in public debate is often focused on integration of immigrants. Outwardly visible expressions of culture and practice form the crux of the debate,

18 <http://www.etiskraad.dk/sw155.asp> (080915).

19 <http://politiken.dk/debat/kroniker/article435124.ece> (080917).

20 EVS Q74 & Q64. (European Value Studies Questions 79 and 64)

21 EVS Q74.

as well as denominational schooling and potential for radicalization of young people of immigrant origin (Rosenfeldt 2007).

Religious education at the primary and lower secondary school levels is explicitly mentioned in the Folkeskole Act, which states “The central knowledge area of the subject of Christian studies shall be the Evangelical Lutheran Christianity of the Danish National Church. At the oldest form levels, the instruction shall furthermore comprise foreign religions and other philosophies of life.”<sup>22</sup> A connection between aims of schooling and church remains. About  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a cohort<sup>23</sup> are confirmed and during this process the pupils attend church religious classes during school hours.

The effect of nine years of compulsory religious education is difficult to gauge at a general level. The low levels of knowledge among the participants in the study, which forms the empirical base of this book, indicate that the effect might be limited. Almost no one had read the Bible, for example. A few mentioned that they might be able to recite the Lords Prayer but did not do so. Many made reference to the golden rule “And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise” (Luke 6:31), but attributed it to the 10 commandments. Interestingly the 10 commandments were associated with fundamental Danish social rules and values, which were then often directly associated with the Danish constitution. This might after all indicate that the intentions of the constitution and School Act have been reached at a very general level. Danishness in the forms of decency and social righteousness has apparently been instilled in my sample population as being of biblical origin. Most often among my population, Christianity was connected with church, god in heaven, an old bearded man, heaven and hell, as well as divine creation, none of which the majority believed in. Only a very few made reference to Jesus. Knowledge of other formal religions appeared to be equally sparse. Questions were raised for example as to whether any religion accepts plural deities. Islam was predominantly linked to prayer and veil and similar outwardly visible signs of culture and practice. Gundelach et al. likewise note that Danes appear to have limited knowledge about religion (Gundelach et al. 2008:240).

22 <http://eng.uvm.dk/publications/laws/folkeskole.htm?menuid=2010> (080912). This article has been extant in the Act since 1975.

23 (2007) in the mid-1990's the figure was approx. 80% <http://www.km.dk/folkekirken/statistik-og-oekonomi/kirkestatistik/konfirmerede.html> (080912).

# Membership and its significance

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A declining number of Danes are members of the state church, but numbers remain high. 82% of the population were members as of January 1, 2008. 10 years earlier, the figure was 88%.<sup>24</sup> The decline has occurred as older cohorts die and younger cohorts are not baptized and therefore do not become members of the church. Baptism has declined to 75% of a cohort in 2006, as opposed to 79% in 1998. However, counts show that more people actively leave the church than join it, especially people in the age groups 24-44.<sup>25</sup> Only in the age group 10-14 do we find the reverse trends, presumably due to confirmations that take place within that age slot. While a certain percentual decrease may stem from an increased immigrant population,<sup>26</sup> what we can see in terms of actual figures is that the number of leavers surpasses the number of new members (other than those who become members through baptism in infancy).

Unfortunately Denmark does not register membership of other denominations. We do not know whether church leavers are, or go on to become members of other denominations. Whatever knowledge we have of other denominations and their members comes from these organizations' own calculations. Some of these organizations count members as those who pay a membership fee. Others use different criteria (Kühle 2007). Whatever data we have is not directly comparable, and much of it is not readily available. For these reasons we have insufficient knowledge about the religious memberships of Danes. Furthermore, membership of the state church does not preclude membership of other religious organizations. We have no knowledge about the alternative religious memberships held by members of the state church.

Some individual parish churches draw crowds, often due to experiential forms or charismatic preachers, but the overall picture as indicated by participation counts<sup>27</sup> as well as self-reported<sup>28</sup> behaviour show that although membership rates remain relatively high, participation is generally low. The church remains popular

24 The population has increased by less than 200 000 individuals during the 10 year period.

25 <http://www.km.dk/folkekirken/statistik-og-oekonomi/kirkestatistik.html> (080915).

26 According to figures from 2008, there are approximately 300 000 immigrants residing in Denmark. Of those, approximately 200 000 come from Western countries, mostly Europe. (Statbank Denmark table KRBEF2A).

27 <http://www.km.dk/ministeriet/udvalg-og-saerlige-aktiviteter/oekonomiudvalg.html> (080912).

28 EVS Q60.

for transition events such as weddings and burials (Bondeson 2003:19). Slightly less than half of all weddings are church weddings, and the church conducts approximately 90% of all burials.<sup>29</sup>

Inferred from membership numbers, the church appears to remain an important institution for Danes generally. It also remains a significant venue for particular transition rituals. However, it is certainly possible to draw a less optimistic conclusion. It is conceivable that the church is so insignificant religiously that people do not even consider their membership as a religious membership. Church membership is acquired when an individual is baptized, and must be actively relinquished. The single reminder of membership after baptism comes in the form of annual taxation, which is automatically claimed along with other taxes. The church tax usually amounts to less than 1% of annual income. It could be suggested that Danes remain members of the church simply in order to gain access to it for special events or pay their church taxes in order to maintain that institution as a cultural heritage.

This argument is supported by a recent interview based study of religiosity in Denmark (Zuckerman 2008). Zuckerman finds that Danes maintain a Christian identity while distancing themselves from literal faith in Christian dogma. He notes that while Danes prefer religious rituals for events such as weddings, funerals etc, they motivate this preference by reference to tradition or simply because this is how it is done. Literal religious belief, Zuckerman finds, is often an object of ridicule or is perceived as a sign of personal weakness (Zuckerman 2008:13ff.).

However, surveys that ask Danes whether they believe or not show that a majority of Danes do believe.<sup>30</sup> Zuckerman indeed finds that Danes avoid using the term atheist to describe themselves. Many emphasize that they believe in something, without being able to specify what. He interprets this kind of belief as a mild form of agnosticism and associates this attitude with one of three aspects of his concept, cultural religion<sup>31</sup> (Zuckerman 2008:182).

Andersen & Riis offer a slightly different angle in their analysis of the Danish sample of the European Value Surveys from 1981-1990 with added evidence from

29 <http://www.km.dk/folkekirken/statistik-og-oekonomi/kirkestatistik/kirkelige-vielser-og-kirkelige-velsignelser.html> (080912).

30 European Value Surveys, European Social Surveys, Bondeson 2003:153.

31 Cultural religion as it materializes in a Scandinavian Christian form according to Zuckerman implies 1. Identification with a religion. 2. Participation in religious rituals without believing in them. 3. Clear resistance to being an atheist (2008:174-183).

other value surveys. They find indices that Danes believe that there are many spiritual routes, none of which are more correct (Andersen & Riis 2002:90-91). Andersen & Riis' take on the matter might suggest that when Danes say they believe, they may actually believe in other things than Christian dogma. Furthermore, according to Andersen & Riis, Danes find that such beliefs are equally valid.

In an early study of ordinary religiosity<sup>32</sup> in Denmark, Per Salomonsen remarks that there is no direct correlation between decreased church participation and decreasing religiosity (Salomonsen 1971:9). Based on a comprehensive interview study aimed at understanding what Danes believe in, Salomonsen found that typical beliefs were expressed as non-positive attitudes to theology. People did not express positive attitudes to Heaven, Hell, God in heaven, etc., by which one must understand that people had very little faith in such things (Salomonsen 1971:283, 300).

The implication is that people are unable to express their beliefs in positive or descriptive terms. They tend to explain their beliefs negatively, as in non-belief in god, paradise etc. although many also maintain certain belief in "something". This does not necessarily suggest that Danes are agnostic, because they are unable to express their beliefs in positive ways. It raises the alternative possibility that there is a dearth of language, with which to express beliefs that are not dogmatically Christian. This is certainly evident from my focus group study. Chapter 4 of this book shows how the focus group participants help each other to find the words to express what they believe.

The most recent cycle of European Value Surveys under way in Denmark in 2008 seeks to test the population's attitudes to other, spiritual tenets of belief. Unfortunately the data was not available at the time when this book was written. However, the addition of new questions is an interesting new step in the direction of teasing out what people do believe in. What we do know from previous rounds of the European Value Surveys<sup>33</sup> is that although  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the population say that they are believers, and  $\frac{2}{3}$  believe in god, overall people do not believe in heaven, hell, sin, reincarnation or telepathy, and they do not generally find god to play a significant role in life.

The knowledge we have about how Danes seem to relate to religion raises new

32 Almen religiositet.

33 Please consult Appendix 2 for more detailed selection and analysis of European Value Survey data.

questions. Why do they generally not find god to play a significant role in their lives, when they state that they believe in god? What does that say about their beliefs? When they say they believe, what do they believe in? Does their assertion of belief bear any reference to their membership of church?

There are many inconsistencies in how people choose to answer questions about religion. Such inconsistencies must be explored in an open-minded fashion in order to contribute to theory building. The following chapter discusses how I have worked with focus groups as means of open-minded exploration of how people understand such concepts that we group together under the term religion.

## Chapter resume

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This chapter has discussed quantitative and qualitative indications of the status of religion in contemporary Danish society. Denmark has a Lutheran State Church as well as a plurality of alternative religious organizations. While a clear majority belong to the State Church a similarly clear majority do not participate in services. The church is popular for transition rites, however. Although Danes do not participate much, an overwhelming number report to believe, and based on statistical evidence a large portion of the population also appear to believe in god. In this chapter I find, that there are significant knowledge gaps, particularly in respect to how Danes understand religion as a concept and how they relate to religion in their lives.



# The focus group study

In the previous chapter, I suggested that we lack insight into how Danes broadly understand what we call religion. It would for example appear that a majority of people does believe in god and / or does believe. They also report that their beliefs have little impact on their personal lives. This would seem to imply that the options made available to the informants in the quantitative surveys do not quite describe the actual perceptions and beliefs held by the informants. We do not know how people reflect on the questions. How do people understand concepts such as religiosity and god? What would people reply, if they were faced with the same questions, only open ended? What kind of meaning would emerge from a social conversation on these topics?

I also suggested previously in this book that we might build better theories on the basis of inputs from the people, whose religion or religiosity we like to study. I have conducted 12 focus group conversations with the aim of examining how people understand concepts, which as scholars of religion we also struggle to define. This chapter introduces my study.

## The focus group as a social conversation

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One aim of this study is to improve our knowledge of how people understand the concept we call religion, which is unfolded in different ways by different



researchers.<sup>34</sup> My aim requires some kind of awareness of how people *talk* about religion. Insight into such conversation can be obtained in three main ways: Either by observation, one-to-one interviews, or by group interviews, all of which can be more or less structured.

Observation is not a bad idea. Courtney Bender has authored an insightful monograph describing how religion is played out socially in a charity kitchen in New York (Bender 2003). She listens to and for conversations about religion as well as belief among other volunteers. Bender finds that these people do talk religion in tacit and non-tacit ways, often as identity markers in a pluralistic context. They also frequently talk religion as ways of understanding their shared project of serving delicious meals to the terminally ill. She documents how religion functions on many levels to create and maintain social cohesion and boundaries in a social context where strangers come together and negotiate a work environment.

Kelly Besecke also uses participant observation (Besecke 2005). She observes how the Andersons open their living room to the public for an event they have arranged on mysticism. They have invited two speakers, a monk and a professor of religious studies. The participants come from different walks of life. They have no common religion, and many do not even know each other. But they nevertheless come together and have an informed and broad discussion about conceptions of god. From this conversation, Besecke argues for the existence of religion in public, a religion which is neither privatized nor institutionalized, but instead mediated among the public in conversations and other forms of mediation.<sup>35</sup>

I dismissed the idea of using observation for my study very early on, however, for reasons of time restriction. Furthermore, I was at a loss as to where I would find incidental conversations exploring the concept religion. Although I have myself participated in many such conversations during the course of my life, they have occurred when I least expected them to, and I found it highly unlikely that I would be able to stumble across such conversations in time to reach my deadline.

One-to-one interviews are frequently used to research religion. Abby Day used this approach to explore a question very similar to mine. The questions directing Day's interview-based research was: What do ordinary people believe, and how

34 I shall return to ways in which the concept is unfolded in research several times later in this book.

35 One might of course raise the question whether discussion about religion is tantamount to having religion. The central point here though is to show how observations can lead to insights about religion even outside of traditionally religious spaces and places.

do we know. By asking people purely and simply: “What do you believe in?” and following that exploration with a number of probes to find out how people develop their beliefs and live them (Day 2006:33), Day concludes that whether people believe in god or not, what they actually believe in is relationships (Day 2006:157-8).

My research is aimed at exploring concepts of religion, as much as exploring what people believe in. Or more precisely, by discussing what one can believe in, I seek to get behind the broad concept religion and to see how it is understood by the people, I talk with. For this reason, focus groups are a more appropriate means of creating data.

Focus groups are approximations of social conversations, where negotiations of meaning take place. They can be perceived as spaces, where a researcher can create meaning in co-operation with other people. The method is acclaimed to be useful in terms of understanding how meaning and worldviews are constructed and negotiated by groups of individuals (Flick 1998:121, 124). Focus groups are in fact regularly used in order to gain insight into the breadth of social meaning in other lines of research than religious studies. However, I find that they are well suited to explore issues such as faith, religiosity, god, what it means to believe today etc.<sup>36</sup> The utility of this method becomes evident in the following extract 1 from a group, where the breadth of the concept “a believer” is developed:

#### EXTRACT 1

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**Ina:** *So, I am trying to find out how one can understand such questions. How could one understand, if you were asked ... regardless of whether you go to church or not, would you regard yourself as a believing person? What might it mean to be a believer?*

**Woman 1:** *I guess it means that you go to church, that you believe in ... the lessons of the Church ... I guess ...*

**Man 1:** *... If I were asked, I would say, sure, I am a believer, but I don't believe in the God that is found in precisely that church or ... but one can believe in*

<sup>36</sup> Hay & Hunt's research (2000) is another example of this method's profitability. I shall return to their study in chapter 3. Briefly, they conduct focus groups on spirituality with people, who do not go to church or are otherwise spiritually or religiously affiliated but who have not dismissed spirituality altogether.

*something larger than oneself, and then one is a believer, but it isn't necessarily a faith that is defined in a book.*

**Woman 2:** *Yes, a bible...*

**Man 1:** *Yes, exactly. But one can believe in destiny, one can ...*

**Woman 2:** *... there is something else between heaven and earth than meets the eye.*

**Man 1:** *... more than just oneself, yes, there is something, but one can't define it, or some people say, well I have my own god, you know? And that makes you a believer nevertheless. But it doesn't fit into a box.*

**Man 2:** *Yes, I agree completely because ... because everyone believes in something...*

**Woman 1:** *No. I don't. I don't believe, no I don't, I don't believe in anything.*

**Man 2:** *But don't you believe that there is some purpose ...*

**Woman 1:** *No. I believe in coincidences.*

**Woman 2:** *I believe in everything ... I see myself as very much a believer.*

**Man 2:** *I do think that most people have some kind or other ... they believe in something, or that there is a purpose to it all, they are not all by themselves.*

**Man 1:** *I think this is what people think of, when they answer. When they ask, whether they are a believer.*

**Woman 2:** *It is very, I think it is extremely individual, you know, it is completely, how you see the world, and some people think, as you say, that ... there is more between heaven and earth than meets the eye, and some people believe ... that there is a meaning to it all. Really, it is a huge question, somehow. I just happen to believe in all of it.*

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*080326 Marketing & financial staff.*

In this sequence, 4 participants explore the breadth of the concept “a believer”,<sup>37</sup> what it might mean to be a believer. They explore and reject the assumption that everyone has beliefs, and reach a compromise that most people have beliefs. They

<sup>37</sup> The question is inspired by EVS Q63 “Uanset om De går i kirke eller ej, vil De da mene, at De er: “Et troende menneske, et ikke troende menneske, Overbevist ateist, Ved ikke). (Regardless of whether you go to church, would you consider yourself to be: A believer, A non-believer, Convinced atheist, Do not know. My translation.) The Danish version used the concept “troende” which literally means to be a believer or to have belief, whereas the English version uses the word religious. Religious would be “religiøs” in Danish, a word that has different connotations, which became evident in several focus groups, which themselves distinguished religious beliefs from beliefs, where the latter was associated with “tro” (belief).

conclude that when people think about the concept of having beliefs, they can have one or more of the various meanings in mind. They move between personal expressions and generalization in the process of this conversation to reach an understanding on the issue. Interestingly, there appears to be no conflict between various representations of the concept. All representations are in fact perceived as complementary. By bringing several opinions to the table, we in the group were able to address a plurality of conceptions in a joint effort to come to terms with something, which most people do not spend much time thinking about. All participants become interpreters of the concept and each other's ideas in very helpful and considerate conversations.

The output of focus groups is socially constructed in the sense that each participant draws on his or her own life experiences, knowledge and beliefs, but together the groups explore a larger sample of meaning that can be associated with the issues, we explore together in the group. The product is not only the shared meaning, where everyone agrees, but also the personal expressions and the tensions that appear among the participants. The tensions that become apparent in the meaning making attempts of single individuals are similarly interesting and powerful products of a focus group conversation.

## Critique and defence of the focus group method

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The focus group method is advocated primarily for orientation in a new field, for hypotheses generation, evaluation, obtaining participant interpretations of previous studies (Flick 1998:120-23; Knight 2002:70). All of these are indeed the purpose of this study.

Although the focus group might be simply seen as an open-ended interview with several people, the approach is often treated summarily in social studies. Some claim that the method proves nothing. It is also said that the population in focus group based research is too limited. Furthermore in terms of the internal dynamics of a group, overly vocal individuals who dominate the group's negotiation of meaning might easily skew the data. The group discussion might additionally select

certain issues and neglect others (Knight 2002:70). Flick raises further problems: Generalization from interviews to broad population is problematic. Comparing data from different groups is problematic as the discussions are singular to each group and for that reason cannot be understood as evolving from an identical baseline, even though the topics are raised in identical language.

However, these points of criticism are not unique to focus groups. They pertain to a significant range of qualitative research methods. Issues of validity, reliability, representativeness, and generalization cannot be directly translated from quantitative to qualitative research. These issues are discussed routinely in textbooks on qualitative research. Kvale for example details (and gives perfectly good responses to) 10 frequent objections to interviews in general (Kvale 1996:281-91). Qualitative data can be highly illuminating by itself or in combination with other methods in small-scale research, or form the basis for larger scale research by indicating possible connections between hypothesis and findings. We have seen that quantitative survey methods can lead to incongruent findings, where a qualitative survey can lead us to a greater understanding of what might be behind people's answers to the survey. The in depth knowledge we can gain by applying ourselves to qualitative studies is fundamental for building better theories and for improving the questions we use in large scale quantitative surveys.<sup>38</sup>

## Considerations when using focus groups in this study

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While the decision to use focus groups to collect data was easy in itself, it did raise many questions concerning the concept of group: What is a group; how should a group be constituted; does it in fact bear any resemblance to real life. Furthermore, what is the nature of the interaction in the group: Is it a conversation, an interview, or a negotiation? It also raises practical questions: Recruitment; venue; moderation of conversation; how to document proceedings. It additionally presents questions about the kind of data it produces: Can conversations in the group be considered

38 There are potentially any number of ways in which one could add to our knowledge of what ordinary people understand by religion as a means to re-substantiating the concept. I make no universal claims about the choices I have made in this book.

contextual to the informants actual life, or are they purely constructed at my bidding; do they divulge already held perceptions or “truths” or is the meaning made to order; if the latter is the case, does it mean that similar meaning would be made under other circumstances; does it mean that meaning lies as a potential cultural reservoir from which culturally appropriate constellations are elicited at the bidding of self or others. These issues will be discussed in the following sections of this book.

## Thoughts on bringing focus groups together

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The idea was to talk to “ordinary people” in “ordinary contexts” in order to explore how they understand some of all those matters, which we group together in the term religion.

By ordinary people I mean people who are not selected on the basis of any kind of affiliation with religion, spirituality or anything similar. They might be affiliated, but that would be incidental to their selection. The reasoning behind this requirement is that it is evident from the available quantitative survey data that many more people believe than participate. The incongruences beg many questions, including: What do all those people believe, who do not participate? And what are the correlations between belief and religious membership?

The participants had to be recruited in environments, which were in no obvious way connected to anything, which might fall under the heading of routinized religion. This meant that just about any group of people would qualify, as long as they were not selected in relation to any concrete religious activity or context. So the issue was how to narrow down the area of recruitment and how to determine how the groups should be composed?<sup>39</sup>

Fern recommends homogeneity within groups, when the purpose is to elicit

39 Indeed the concept of group might be brought into question. Although people form a group by their mere presence at the same time in the same space for a joint purpose, they come there for personal reasons with personal motivations, with their personal cognitive maps. They leave the group with personal outputs. And while together, although they may be engaged in a joint activity, they will be engaged in it in personal ways. So even though they form a group in the time and space frame given, they embody a plurality of other experiences. Their sameness can be doubted.

knowledge about attitudes and experiences.<sup>40</sup> This would not exclude the option to construct different kinds of groups, each of which is homogenous internally (Fern 2001:8,11,180).

Bringing together individuals in a group for something as abstract as discussing beliefs problematizes the issue about group homogeneity; homogenous along which lines? Indeed Hay & Hunt (2000) who researched conceptions of spirituality in focus groups, were cautious concerning whom they invited to participate in their focus groups. They required all participants to have left the church but to still consider themselves spiritual. At the end of their research, they conclude that they had not needed to be that cautious. Anyone, they say, could have contributed to the conversation in important and productive ways.

*We now feel that we were much too conservative in insisting that those we selected ought at least to claim to be either spiritual or religious. Almost anybody would have done. All those with whom we conversed, without exception, had an easily recognizable concern with spirituality... (Hay & Hunt 2000:20).*

Appendix 1 discusses in detail the considerations that contributed to the final determination of how my focus groups would be constituted. In the end my requirements were rather few.

Firstly, participants in a group had to be already familiar with each other from some other context. I wanted them to have a degree of common ground to refer to, a shared context which might set off reflection. I also wanted to bypass initial introductions and in-group negotiations. As I discuss in appendix 1 there are pros and cons to this decision. I had however determined that I would seek out the groups in their day-to-day environment, most often their work places. For this reason, I was aware that a focus group could not conveniently take up more time than the average business meeting, a maximum of an hour. For this reason also it was preferable to short cut basic introductions and negotiations about roles in the group etc.

Secondly, the group size would ideally be 3-4 persons. No group has been

40 So-called experiential or phenomenological focus groups. Experiential focus groups are applicable i.a. to theory confirmation, i.e. "comparing the information gathered from focus groups with the researcher's prior beliefs" (Fern 2001:8). Experiential tasks include "extracting or evoking the respondents' shared attitudes or feelings, preferences, and behaviors or intentions" and understanding "how people talk... how they experience things" (Fern 2001:175).

allowed to exceed 4 persons for reasons of intimacy of conversation. But there have been instances where the group has been reduced to less than 4. Although it could be argued that more people per group would have widened the breadth of discussion, the relative intimacy of the focus topic lead me to determine that a small group would be a safer place for the participants to talk. I thought that they would divulge more, if they were in a smaller group. Again the time frame of an hour was a contributing factor to this choice. More people means less time per person.

Finally, I preferred to have mixed-gendered groups. However, this was not always possible. The primary reason for preferring mixed gender groups was that Fern (2001) indicates that men divulge more when there are women in the group. This proved in practice to be a non-issue.<sup>41</sup> I found that men had no problem whatsoever discussing these issues, and as a matter of fact the only all-male group I conducted was also the longest, lasting almost an hour and a half. I decided as I went along to include single sex groups rather than say no-thank-you to a focus group.

## Focus group recruitment

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12 focus groups<sup>42</sup> form the basis of the empirical data for this thesis. Each group was recruited by snowball effect in the sense that one person was contacted in work places or institutions. The person helped recruit others to the focus group. The only requirement for recruitment was that the participants should be acquainted with one another in order to short cut initial introduction and inter-group trust establishment and role negotiations.<sup>43</sup>

In order to prevent significant prior cueing about religion, the entry person was aware of the actual topic of the focus group only if that person was not going to participate in the focus group session. This person was responsible for recruiting 3-4 individuals to the focus group. Participants were simply informed that they were participating in a survey concerning values and perceptions of life. I was

41 It might also be assumed that my presense as a woman would be sufficient. The moderator after all is also a part of the group.

42 See appendix 5 for list of groups and appendix 4 for distribution across gender, age and level of education.

43 Please turn to Appendix 1 for detailed discussion of group composition in this research project.



introduced as a sociologist interested in value surveys, rather than a sociologist of religion.

Focus group members received a letter informing them of the basic drift of the focus group.<sup>44</sup> The lead-in was told orally that I could not be precise about which values I wanted to discuss, because I did not want to skew my findings.

Participants were asked to fill in a form with 5 background questions on gender, age and education. This data is simply used as a count.<sup>45</sup>

## The participants

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Although my research was conducted in the Greater Copenhagen area, I could tell from the dialects that some of the participants originated in other parts of the country. Most of the participants would count as ethnic Danes and most did not have any regular, active attachment to the State Church. The limited indications they gave about their upbringing – and I did not ask them to relate such information for reasons of time efficiency – suggests that they came from much the same type of background in terms of religious belief and participation. They were brought up to use the church for special events, but other than that religion appeared not to have had any prominent role in their upbringing.

A handful had different religious backgrounds than the average participant. There was an Italian, Catholic man who could no longer believe in the message of the Catholic church. A woman of Hindu heritage, who expressed an emotional attachment to her cultural heritage. A third woman was raised in a Baptist community in a religious family. She is now married to a Catholic, but no longer actively participated in Christian services of any kind. There was a young woman, who had been adopted from Lebanon. It is unclear whether it is due to terms of adoption or due to the adoptive family's religion, but she was sent to a Catholic school in Denmark, which she believes has had an impact on her attitudes to religion. She is no stranger to religion, although she does not practice it. Her close friend is an active participant in a Baptist community. She narrates how she is often in dialogue with her friend about religion and the appeals of modern urban

<sup>44</sup> See appendix 3.

<sup>45</sup> See appendix 4 for the form and count.

life for young people. There was also an elderly Jewish woman, who had been brought up in a traditional household, but who had rebelled against the many proscriptions as a young woman. She no longer led a Jewish life, although she told me that her children tried to practice a few Jewish rituals now and then.

In all the groups taken together, there were very few that actively belonged to a denomination. One elderly man was a practising and believing Christian (State Church). Another woman was married to a Catholic husband and led a purposeful Catholic family life. A third woman was religious of Christian persuasion, but rather than be active in one particular community, she explained that she is looking and learning by participating in different denominations. One young Asian woman was self-consciously Buddhist and participated both in Buddhist devotion and social networks, as well as in interfaith groups, where religion and similar topics are regularly discussed.

Finally, one young ethnic Danish woman stood out. She had grown up in Greenland and clearly did not feel that her experiences could be compared with those of Danes who have grown up in Denmark. As she put it: “Greenland, there’s a whole lot of spirit power all over the place, you know. People will tell you about experiences they’ve had ... without batting an eye, there is no doubt about what happened ... And I grew up with a belief in ghosts and a belief that Satan could infest this or that, and belief that churchyards were truly dangerous at night, and things like that, right, really demonic, how could I put it ... it was real, not just norms that were abstractions, it wasn’t just the Bible interpreted. It was real, you know, and this is still the case to a large extent. I have friends up there who believe in all kinds of strange stuff, and really believe it, and it’s both Christian stuff and more spiritual stuff. I think it’s much more common in Greenland than down here” [in Denmark].<sup>46</sup>

## Conversation cues

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Focus group and other qualitative research cannot be replicated exactly. There are too many variables that influence production of data, from group dynamic over

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individual proclivities and behavioural styles, to emotional and physical factors such as room temperature and experiences prior to the conversation. The flow of the conversation will naturally depend on all such elements, as well as on what the participants choose to bring up in the discussion.

However, two themes have been used to focus the conversation: (1) What might it mean to be a believer today? and (2) Is it possible to be more or less religious?

The choice of very open questions also pertains to the methodological and theoretical claims made here, that the participants should be permitted to develop and discuss religion and whatever it might signify to be a believer, as well as what belief might refer to. During the course of conversation, other discussions did emerge that I allowed to take their course in order to see, whether they would lead in interesting directions. However, such discussions were also moderated so as not to waste an inordinate amount of time.

## Focus group proceedings

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Most often I have gone to see people where they work. Generally I have been able to get settled and organized before the participants showed up. Usually the venue has been a conference or meeting room. We have sat around a table, I have been seated among the participants and we have talked informally for a few minutes. After that, I have taken charge of the conversation. At the outset, I introduced value surveys and focus groups and explained that I am interested in understanding how certain concepts might be understood. I would mention that I believe that the concepts in question might have multiple meanings, and that I wanted to know how they relate to them. I would also explain that there are no right and wrong answers; that I am interested in learning how they understand the concepts. I would furthermore emphasize that I am truly unsure what to make of the concepts I am talking with them about. Then I would tell them that according to the European Value Surveys three quarters of the population would label themselves believers. I would let them know that the first concept I wanted to discuss is what it might mean to be a believer. This would generally lead to approximately 10-20 minutes of conversation among the participants. I would then follow up with questions concerning whether belief is shared, practices, what might it mean to believe in

god in the present day and age and similar cues to continue the conversation about belief. Furthermore I was inspired by a European Social Surveys question to probe into whether it is possible to be more or less religious.

Despite my concerns that people might go completely blank when faced with abstract questions such as “What might it mean to be a believer?” this has patently not been the case. Each focus group interview is approximately 1 hour long. I generally occupy less than 10 minutes of that time. The participants have been curious about each other’s perceptions and I have often experienced that they started interviewing each other. Often they raised precisely the same questions that I would have raised.

Kvale encourages us to decide on modes of analysis even before carrying out research conversations. Even better is to include elements of the analysis in the conversations themselves, he says (Kvale 1996:160ff, 178). As I became confident that the participants would be able to discuss research oriented questions I began to include some sociological reflections in the conversations. I might discuss with them the question of whether there is social significance to their beliefs. Although most frequently they clearly understood the question, they were as much at loss as I was in respect to whether personal beliefs can be socially significant in other ways than organized religion is. Nevertheless, the fact that I used my focus groups as fora, where participants were equal to me in terms of giving content and meaning to concepts has been extremely fruitful. Kvale is unquestionably correct in emphasizing this aspect of qualitative research.

## Documentation and interpretation

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All encounters have been recorded on mp3 dictaphone. Each recording has been transcribed<sup>47</sup> verbatim to the extent possible. This changes the data from oral conversation to text. This is both problematic and beneficial. It has the benefit of moving the focus from individuals to text. The text and intertextuality of texts stemming from each focus group becomes the object of analysis, rather than the individuals and their contributions. But a transcript also removes the conversation

47 In the Transcriba application ([bartastechnologies.com/products/transcriba/](http://bartastechnologies.com/products/transcriba/)).

from its situatedness and contextuality. The analysis is now a dialogue between researcher, text and other texts. This raises the questions of understanding and truth, which are explored in the next section.

## Understanding, generalizability and validity

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This research project and book works on the constructionist assumption that the knowledge, beliefs and expressions given by participants are not merely individual. They also represent actualizations of the potential for making meaning within the context in which the participants live (Fern 2001:173).

The approach to philosophy of knowledge<sup>48</sup> used here is post-modern and constructionist in outlook. Kvale describes the post-modern approach to understanding as one that

*focuses on interrelations in an interview, on the social construction of reality in an interview, on its linguistic and interactional aspects including the differences between oral discourse and written text, and emphasizes the narratives constructed by the interview* (Kvale 1996:38).

Here the “conception of knowledge as a mirror of reality is replaced by a conception of “the social construction of reality” ... where the focus is on the interpretation and negotiation of the meaning of the social world” (Kvale 1996:41). He goes on to say that

*The qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge. The knowledge generated by interviews is related ... to five features of a postmodern construction of knowledge: the conversational, the narrative, the linguistic, the contextual, and the interrelational nature of knowledge. These intertwined features are taken as a starting point for clarifying the nature of the knowledge yielded by the research interview and for developing its knowledge potentials.* (Kvale 1996:42)

48 This book does not identify the utterances and negotiations in focus groups with symmetrical expressions of individual truths and perceptions.

Understanding is not only a matter of what goes on in the text and in the intertextual relation between texts; the internal reliability of the research project and the stringency of thought. Understanding is also a matter of external validity. Is the research valid in terms of how it is interpreted by the researcher and is it valid in terms of generalizability?

Generalizability from qualitative research on a small sample cannot be on statistical terms, and it cannot always be taken as representative of the general population, unless the total population is very limited. The focus group study that forms the empirical basis for this book does contribute to what we know about how one can talk about religion. Although the 12 focus groups took place in the Greater Copenhagen area, participants were not all indigenous to this part of the country, they had different backgrounds in terms of job and education, and they differed in age across the groups. It is significant that regardless of which people took part in the focus groups, there were certain patterns that were reproduced across groups. These patterns pertained specifically to the range of distinctions that were drawn when talking about beliefs and religion. These distinctions refer to personal beliefs as well as understandings of concepts relating to beliefs and religion. Furthermore, there was a clear pattern in people's attitudes to belief and religion. I shall return to the details of these patterns later on in this book. The fact that these patterns were repeated in the groups does indicate that as a case study, the findings may be valid in a generalizable way.

Validity of qualitative studies can be evaluated in the interplay between other researchers' work and assumptions in the field. One part of the process of establishing affinity with other researches entails raising questions about such pre-existing research. The topics that make up the central part of this book are essentially considerations about other people's works based on, and supplemented with my reflections while developing my method, as well as the results of my focus group study.

Pertaining to validity understood in this way, another of my aims is to contribute to theory building and methodology. My case study can contribute to developing research questions aimed at more precisely gauging religion in contemporary life. It does so by applying an unconventional methodology and perspective to explore the attitudes to religion among people, and using this knowledge to feed back into theory development. The next chapter discusses how to research religion among

people who are not selected due to eventual religious affiliation but rather because they are part of the population in general.

## Chapter resumé

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In this chapter I have argued that focus groups are appropriate as a means of exploring how religion is understood and used among ordinary people. The data produced in focus groups consists of knowledge, beliefs and expressions that represent explorations and actualizations of the potential for making meaning in the society the participants live in.

I have opted to use only a few criteria in recruitment: I carried out focus groups with ordinary people, who were not selected on the basis of any form of membership or affiliation with a religious organization. Focus groups took place in everyday surroundings such as the work place. Participants, preferably mixed gender, had some knowledge of one another in order to shortcut in-group negotiations. The groups addressed two main topics. 1) What does it mean to be a believer and 2) Is it possible to be more or less religious.

# Researching religion among ordinary people

This book is about how ordinary people talk about religion. The relations of ordinary people with religion is under-researched (Davie 1998). Our difficulties pertain to a certain extent to methodology and research strategy. One aspect of this is location – it is difficult to carry out research in a less than delimited field (Beckford 2003:28; Besecke 2005:187).<sup>49</sup> This chapter argues firstly, that it is necessary to conceptualize research among that vast majority of Danes that claim to have beliefs, but who are not present in those locations, where religion is usually researched. Secondly this chapter argues that this kind of research can benefit from an open-ended approach, where religion has not been pre-defined in any particular way. This open-endedness will allow insight into how religion is understood and used among Danes in the greater Copenhagen area today.

## How religion is often researched

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We often understand religion in terms of more or less systematized sets of belief characterized broadly in terms of either substantive beliefs or function. Religion in these senses is often researched among individuals, in groups or organizations

<sup>49</sup> Contemporary anthropology has engaged to a great extent in explorations of the field as a practical methodological concept, which opens up certain views and blocks others. The concept is being debated, especially in the light of globalization and self-narration, where both the location and boundaries of field and meaning making of people in the field are fluid, ever shifting and developing (Gupta & Fergusson 1996:3-4; Amit 2000).



vis-à-vis a given system of belief. When seen in this way, it is proposed that religion – certainly in Denmark – is in decline, as people are not expressing beliefs or behaving in ways aligned with such systems (Bruce 2002; Zuckerman 2008).

Religion is also frequently researched in domains that are perceived by researchers as having a religious “feel”. We research 12-step programs because their corpus, myths, rituals, norms as well as group structure remind us of forms of religious expression.

We also approach various literary, visual or auditory products to distinguish messages that remind us of religion. We look for religious expressions in politics, and for expressions that remind us of religion although they may not be what we usually associate with religion as such.

An important contemporary perspective when researching religion is related to the assumption that religion today is a privatized phenomenon. As institutional differentiation has occurred, religion has withdrawn to a particular compartment in society. The private sphere has also become a separate compartment from other aspects of life. As a result of these two simultaneous processes, religion no longer penetrates all spheres of life, but becomes an aspect of personal choice. Religion is something that is conducted within the private sphere. The authority of institutional religion is expected to decline – as it no longer penetrates the totality of life – without a necessary corollary decline in religiosity. According to this assumption religion can persist in new structures or as relatively unstructured. There are different explanatory logics to the claim that religion will persist (Andersen & Riis 2002): Religion might for example assume a taste or fashion-like character of transience and superficiality. It might also be perceived as a consequence of modern individual autonomy that people select and shape their own faith. A further explanatory logic claims that religion can be viewed as a commodity. If there is sufficient variety, people will find something for them. If there is no variety, people will lose interest.<sup>50</sup>

On such assumptions it is a natural step to research religion in individuals in order to understand what it might signify today. This is regularly done in interviews, diaries, time-charts, reading lists and similar expressions of individual relations to something with a religious feel. It is often found that people harbour eclectic

50 Andersen & Riis here refer to a selection of fundamental theories about religion including the post-structuralist; the individualist; and the supply-side rational choice perspective.

or syncretistic beliefs, quite often not even remotely systematized to themselves. Sheilaism is an iconic example of how we might interpret developments in religiosity and society by talking religion with individuals (Bellah et. al:1985, 2008).

Religion is also often researched from the perspective of the religious market. Woodhead & Heelas' Kendal project for example selects a variety of locations considered to belong to the holistic (spiritual) environment, including reiki, astrology, foot massage and pagan activities (Heelas & Woodhead 2005:156). The activities were included on the basis that they were "taken to be of sacred significance by those who provide them" (Heelas & Woodhead 2005:37). This roughly corresponds to their selections of Christian venues that have sacred significance to the providers (church and priests or preachers). Both selections are routinized in so far as they are organized (there are official venues, salons, etc.) and there is a corpus of literature, which routinizes the practice itself.

Subsequently, the project counted participation, and asked the holistic-domain participants to fill in a follow-up questionnaire concerning their beliefs, including what spirituality meant to them personally and to check where applicable from a range of beliefs (Heelas & Woodhead 2005:98).

From my perspective there are two problems here. One problem pertains to location. Selecting locations where something religion-like is presumed to take place runs the risk of over-emphasizing their significance in respect to their actual role in society. This leads to the second problem; the inability to reach the many individuals who are not seeking out the predetermined locations. However although it must be assumed that the majority of those that seek out the holistic milieu are already inclined towards it for some reason or other, they may actually have sought out a given venue for more mundane reasons. What about everyone else?

## Speaking with the overlooked majority

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Grace Davie's main critique (Davie 2005) of the Kendal study hinges upon the authors' inability to describe the middle ground of people, who do not frequent the spiritual market in Kendal, but who are also not seen in church on Sundays. What are these people doing in spiritual or religious terms? The European Value

Studies indicates that the equivalent group of Danes, comprising the majority of the population, have beliefs, but – one may ask - what are they like, how are they practised, sustained, developed, and can they exist individually, privatized, invisibly? There is something out there, which we are missing. For this reason precisely, it is necessary to conceptualize research that allows us to theorize about this space. This is a window of opportunity for research into religion.

Thomas Luckmann's concept, invisible religion (1967), argues that rather than disappearing, religion is relocating from an institutionalized form to a privatized one, and from a dogmatic form to a subjective one.<sup>51</sup> The results of the Danish European Value Studies cannot quite serve as proof for Luckmann's thesis, but he is not far off either. People have not left the church, but they are certainly not participating either. They report to have some kind of faith, but their patterns of practice insofar as they are represented in the European Value Studies do not overwhelmingly correspond to institutionally prescribed practices.

Besecke (2005:185-87) however draws attention to a conceptual gap in the public – private dichotomy, which penetrates Luckmann's thesis. Public is associated with institutionalization. Private is not. Private is personal or in very small, informal groups. Besecke suggests that there is a third domain in the goings on among people. This domain is neither private nor public in the institutionalized sense. It is informal, communicative and social, as is the case when individuals come together, for example in order to discuss conceptions of god.

Besecke points out that Luckmann might have drawn a different inference from his own thinking. Luckmann teaches us that symbolic systems are social, but he nevertheless locates much contemporary religion in the private sphere. In modernity, institutional differentiation has reached a point where the symbolic universes of traditional religion make little corresponding sense with the surrounding world.

In the course of religion's relocation from the public to the private there is no longer any overriding belief system, but rather an assortment of many smaller belief systems, which individuals pick and choose from. The by-product of this according to Luckmann is that religion becomes private and for this reason essentially invisible in society. Private, invisible religion has the implication to

51 Luckmann will be discussed further in chapter 5.

some researchers that religion is becoming less socially consequential (Besecke 2005:186). Bruce, for example, argues that because of increasing individualization and personal interpretation of a variety of sources, there is little hope that diffuse religion will attain the powers of social cohesion that religion did formerly. As he puts it:

*Diffuse religion is not literally inconsequential. It is ... practically of less consequence than either the church or sect types it has largely replaced in the West (Bruce 2002:105).*

Besecke draws attention to a contrary possibility; being fundamentally social, and for this reason not necessarily institutionalized, religion resides in a domain, that is public in the colloquial sense (Besecke 2005).

Religion seems invisible because the public in the colloquial sense is under-researched by religious studies. Approaching religion from the point of view of “ordinary” people facilitates a kaleidoscopic image of how religion and beliefs are understood, held, practiced and how and to which extent they penetrate individual lives.<sup>52</sup> This approach not only highlights the lives of individuals, it also has implications for how we understand religion in contemporary life. So long as we predominantly research religion in its more or less routinized forms, we will have little idea where the rest of the population stand. And this will inevitably skew our broader conclusions about religion in society.

## Listening to the overlooked by relocating research

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As we have seen earlier on in this book, we do not really know much about what Danes have in mind when in surveys they opt to call themselves religious. This is especially true because we find that Danes are largely unwilling in the surveys to agree that they believe in the kinds of belief we ask them about in surveys. Examples of this might be heaven and hell.<sup>53</sup> We are unsure what god signifies to the considerable percentage of Danes who say that they believe in god. Why do

52 Such perspectives might change our perspective on different emanations of religion, which are presently variously labelled in religious studies: Little and great traditions, popular and elite religion, official and unofficial religion, folk religion (Sharot 2005) or invisible religion, implicit religion, quasi religion and para-religion (Demerath 1999:2).

53 See appendix 2.

many of them simultaneously say that god has a minor role to play in their lives? Whatever beliefs Danes harbour, we can almost be confident that they are not practiced in church settings, but are they practised elsewhere? We cannot know because the surveys have not asked those questions. As an example of the complex relationship between routinized religion and belief, one of my focus group participants expressed her relation to church religion and belief in this way: “Belief to me is not going to church. Belief to me is not doing anything physical as such. I don’t think that one always has to do anything physical in order to be permitted to believe. Belief is in the mind too. To me. ... I don’t go to church, I don’t pray in that way. But I believe in higher beings. That’s how I feel”.<sup>54</sup>

In a different group, someone expressed it like this: “I consider myself a believer, but I also go to church more frequently than average, about 5 – 10 times a year. Not that it has anything to do with my beliefs. But my beliefs, that’s more that I believe that there is a god, and I can define what it is. I believe in what it will mean for me to be born again or not born again, and what happens when I die and stuff like that”.<sup>55</sup>

Sociologically speaking, meaning, including belief is an emergent social phenomenon. It need not be institutionalized or routinized in order for it to exist. Such un-routinized and un-institutionalized beliefs evolve in the interaction between inputs obtained in the social and mediated public and individual cognitive proclivities. This book argues that in order to research beliefs of people in contemporary Denmark, it is necessary to approach individuals at a time and place outside religious venues. It is here, in the shared, public daily life that we can talk about what it means to believe and be religious, without cuing in the direction of organized faith.

By designing a focus group survey I have attempted to locate research in spaces where religion is not usually researched, but where the broad population is to be found. I have described in the previous chapter how I have elected to recruit people, who would only incidentally be affiliated with routinized religion. My participants were recruited on the simple premise that they were members of the general adult population in the Greater Copenhagen area. As such, there was a high probability that they would represent that middle ground of people, whom

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Davie criticized the Kendal study for not reaching. My study is a small-scale single researcher project, for which reason I could not expect to conduct a generalizable study with a representative selection of the Danish or Copenhagenite population. However, the main aim has been to examine the potential of the alternative method and research perspective, which I have described in this chapter, for re-substantiating the concept religion. Nevertheless, the study has produced a range of insights into how one can talk about issues pertaining to religion. These are the subject of chapter 4.

## Developing concepts in collaboration with informants

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This chapter has at this point argued that we must improve our knowledge of how the majority of people actually understands religion in order to assess the eventual role of religion in contemporary life. The rationale behind this argument is that reversing the prerogative of definition from scholars to population might lead to a different perspective on religion in society (Schlehofer et al. 2008).

In this chapter, I have so far sought to show firstly that there is a significant section of the population that is falling below our radar, as we regularly omit to conceptualize research that reaches non-participants in routinized religion, however we may choose to define it. Secondly, I have argued that how these people relate to religion is significant in terms of understanding religion and in terms of understanding religion in contemporary life.

One example of how our scholarly debates might gain from such data is the question of whether individualized or privatized religion is effectively less socially cohesive than routinized religion (Bruce 2002).

During the course of my focus group study, I found that participants were equipped to reflect on the nature and role of religion in contemporary life in ways that feed back into the scholarly discussion about privatization and social cohesion.

In one focus group<sup>56</sup> the participants talked about isolation and loneliness, which one member of the group felt was increasing in our society. I told them that one of the things that I reflect on as a sociologist is whether a lack of a shared

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religious meaning system correlates (positively or negatively<sup>57</sup>) with a lack of social integration, and if so how. If every one of us has our own idiosyncratic, incoherent beliefs, which we are unable to share in a communal manner in some form of shared space and time, what happens to social integration?<sup>58</sup> They reflected on this question and one of the participants said: “But I think we do have, I mean, one still has the mentality one has, somehow, so even if one is a believer or not a believer, or whatever one is, then, if you take Denmark, somehow or other we have still been raised with the same values, you know what I mean?”

Another woman in the group disagreed with the statement concerning shared values. This brought the first woman to clarify that she was not talking about minor values, she had a shared cultural mentality in mind. She explained how she noticed when she travels that people do things differently in different countries, and this sharedness to her represents a relocated expression of social cohesion, from shared religious values to shared cultural values. In such ways focus group participants assisted in exploring sociological concepts and ideas.

In a different group,<sup>59</sup> the conversation touched on a similar issue concerning lack of shared religious meaning, space and time in an age where the church no longer fulfils these social functions: Has this kind of communality disappeared or has it relocated to somewhere else, and how would one know? A participant explained that to him communality arises when he is with his fellow believers. By fellow believers he did not mean believers in routinized religion, but believers in the same fundamental values. How did he know? Because these are the social situations where he feels at ease in the security that he shares values and morality with his fellow believers. How did he know that they share the same values and morality? “Through dialogue, I guess”.<sup>60</sup>

57 Shared religion is often perceived to correlate positively with social integration, but this point of view is also critized for its disregard of shared religion's potential to create conflict and alienation (Furseth & Repstad 2007:46).

58 Durkheim claims that in the ultimate consequence the only sacred left is the the human being (1898, 1969).

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60 The argument developed here is not about whether such beliefs are solid elements of religious or social cohesion or communality. The point is that participants were active partners in developing perspectives on issues, which we regularly explore in sociology.

# Talking about beliefs we know little about

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When we research routinized religion, both informants and researchers already know what is under research. They have a somewhat overlapping or shared understanding of what it means for example to be Christian, they have some ideas about the boundaries and they share a language with which to discuss and elaborate their meaning.

Locating research among the broad population accentuates the problem of how to talk about the beliefs that people say they have, when we do not know what they believe in. Significantly, I did not want to cue my focus group participants in particular ways to suggest that some particular beliefs were valid, whereas others were not. I wanted to know their thoughts; I did not want to label their thoughts in respect to some classification scheme.

## Importance of an open-ended attitude

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A significant hurdle in respect to talking with people about beliefs that they might hold is how to speak about beliefs, when I as a researcher do not know what they believe in, how such beliefs manifest themselves in their lives, how such beliefs can be expressed, or whether they are indeed shared by the participating individuals. While my intention was to be as open-minded as possible and to let the focus groups develop their own conceptions, I was nevertheless faced with the problem how to even initiate the conversation, how to make myself understood, preferably without using words that would point to routinized religion.

American sociologist of religion, Phil Zuckerman spent a number of months in Denmark doing interview-based research on Danes and their relations with religion. The resulting monograph<sup>61</sup> presents lengthy extracts of some of his interviews. In one instance, Zuckerman speaks with a hospice nurse, who describes her encounters with something unexplained that occurs at the time of death; something that she obviously experiences regularly. On one occasion she and a colleague observed a shadow pass out of a door at the time of a person's death

61 The monograph also includes a certain amount of data on Sweden.



(Zuckerman 2008:60). Previously in the interview, she asserted that she does not believe in god. Zuckerman ponders that despite of these experiences, she has no religion.

This is an example of what happens when we are speaking at cross-purposes about religion. The hospice nurse clearly has beliefs about what happens to the soul at the time of death. Her beliefs come up incidentally in a conversation, in which Zuckerman is trying to talk about religion. However, the word religion elicits certain (church-related) associations. Since the hospice nurse does not believe in the god conceptualized in church, she cannot in this context understand herself as religious. And she does not, at least in this context, find appropriate words to describe her beliefs in any depth or detail. When Zuckerman asks her directly whether she is an atheist or a Christian, she is unsure of both. She does not know whether she is an atheist and she does not know either whether she is a Christian. Her hesitant answers reveal that she does not really know what to believe, but her previous remarks about not having religion clearly refer to traditional Christian beliefs.

Zuckerman has a specific perception of what it means to be religious. In his eyes, religion must entail belief in a supernatural element. This belief must be sincere. In contrast, a person is culturally religious, if he or she takes part in certain expressions of routinized religion despite lack of sincere belief. This includes those Danes who only go to church for special events and who may or may not believe in other things (Zuckerman 2008:173-183). Zuckerman may be correct when he finds that Denmark is a society without much sincere belief in god. Certainly Zuckerman's definition is such that very few Danes, based on evidence from the European Social Surveys, would be able to claim to be religious in this way. The fact of the matter is, however, that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the population in 1999 claimed to be "troende", believers. Zuckerman's research does not sufficiently explore which kinds of belief Danes do actually hold. Zuckerman's expressed objective is to show that irreligious societies do not disintegrate into social immorality (Zuckerman 2008:19). However, if the objective is to understand what people believe – and thereby *possibly* find that the society in question is not precisely irreligious – it is preferable to allow people to elaborate freely about their beliefs, irrespective of predefined conceptions of what it takes to be religious. Whereas many of the conversations Zuckerman relates in his book are similar to conversations that have taken place in my focus groups, his

understanding of them is different from mine. His conception of what religion is shapes his conclusions. My attempts to put preconceptions about what religion is to one side opens up the quite comparable data to different conclusions.

My aim was to talk to people about their beliefs and other related areas with as limited cuing as possible, allowing them to develop their own thoughts and definitions in the interplay of the group. How could I express myself in ways that conformed to these intentions?

## A review of open-ended approaches

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The question is, how can we begin to draw out such meaning, when the words we traditionally use (god, heaven, hell, god playing role in life etc.) give us discordant answers, and when we are unsure of what people have in mind when they call themselves believers. Asking questions about god or belief in other theological dogma seems not to lead us very much further in this direction. Other scholars have faced equivalent hurdles. The following section gives a variety of examples of how such other researchers have attempted to solve the problems of how to research what people believe and what religion means to contemporary people.<sup>62</sup>

In his early study of “popular religiosity”<sup>63</sup> in Denmark Per Salomonsen explores people’s attitudes to belief based on 123 interviews conducted during the 1960’s (Salomonsen 1971:76, 79). The interviews were conducted in two waves. The first wave used a sparse interview guide with relatively fewer references to Christianity, theology and Church than the second wave, which also contained many more questions (Salomonsen 1971:44-49). It would seem that his search for popular religiosity led him to include many more expressions of traditional Christianity in his interview guide - perhaps as a way of establishing some kind of distinction between popular religiosity on the one hand and theology and Church on the other. This at any rate happens to become one of Salomonsen’s conclusions. As mentioned earlier on in this book, Salomonsen finds that typical beliefs are non-positively expressed attitudes to theology. His informants tend to explain that they do not believe in the teachings of the church. They have negative attitudes towards god, paradise, hell and so forth (Salomonsen 1971:283, 300). Salomonsen’s

62 Each of these studies has informed the conceptualization of my research, see the next section.

63 *Almen religiositet*.

findings are similar to both Zuckerman's and mine,<sup>64</sup> both in respect to how Danes do not believe in Christian theology and with respect to how they interact with routinized religion. Salomonsen finds, as does Zuckerman and I, that most Danes choose to mark name givings and other transition rites in a religious context, but evidently not for the religious content. They appear to be more positive towards the paraphernalia of Church and ritual than to the content itself.

Salomonsen's research recognized that people harbour beliefs that are not directly correlated to their membership and / or participation in routinized religion. However, his detailed interview guide does not allow his informants to develop their beliefs. This might explain why Salomonsen finds it difficult to gauge the positive beliefs that his informants might harbour. His material is mostly helpful in expressing what people find it hard to believe in. This evinces the need for open-ended questions with sufficient time for informants to reflect on the issues under discussion.

Developing Yinger's conception of religion as ultimate concern, Machalek & Martin conducted interview-based research to uncover the ultimate concerns and coping strategies of 112 individuals in the white, middle class neighbourhood of Southdowns, Baton Rouge, Louisiana (Machalek & Martin 1976). They found that only 17.9% of the respondents reported transcendent types of ultimate concerns. Transcendent types of ultimate concerns include man to god relationships; decline of traditional religion or moral values; salvation; what is god; man's love of god; and does heaven exist. A similar percentage reported existentialist concerns such as quest for peace of mind and happiness, what is meaning of life, knowing yourself, and self-actualization – issues which might be labelled spiritual in contemporary scholarship.

The rest of the sample reported ultimate concerns of macro-humanist, micro-humanist, or material kinds, including issues such as inter-personal relations, global problems such as war, poverty and starvation, or personal issues such as economic security, or quality of life.

The authors conclude that people's perceptions of ultimate concerns and their chosen coping strategies are not limited to institutionalized religious contexts.

Clearly not all ultimate concerns are religious. Or as Machalek & Martin

64 Discussed in deeper detail in chapters 4 and 6.

note, “not all of social life can be defined as religion”. It is perfectly feasible to be ultimately concerned with economic survival, to the exclusion of most other concerns without it remotely pertaining to anything sacred or religious. When fundamental needs for subsistence are not met or are endangered, these become ultimate concerns to any individual, whether the need is pecuniary, or in terms of dwelling or health. However, the study is successful in demonstrating that by asking the broader question of ultimate concerns, research becomes open to a much broader spectrum of potential answers. Had the same questions been asked within an institutional religious context, the risk is that answers would predominantly pertain to the given religious context.

Edward Bailey’s by now classic study similarly tries to grasp ordinary people’s religiosity. Bailey develops the concept “Implicit Religion”, which signifies what ordinary people believe in (Bailey 1997:268). By way of three explorative studies in England, Bailey and his colleagues attempt to discover beliefs as they play out individually through interviews, in a pub through participant observation, and in a residential parish where Bailey performs as an observing participant. While both the local parish and the public house studies would nowadays be considered unsurprising in their method and analysis, the interview study remains noteworthy in its design. Bailey is exemplary in his attempts to talk about meaning systems we know little about, without prompting the responses in religious terms.<sup>65</sup> He and his team develop a 50 item long list of what they call stimuli, which they put to about 100 informants. The stimuli were intended to enable the expression of long-standing beliefs (Bailey 1997:52) to the extent that people are aware of them by use of i.a. proverbs to uncover the extent to which people have concluded that life is as the proverb suggests, make-believe statements and attitudes implied by everyday behaviour. The stimuli are sorted under headings including world-view, values, beliefs and meanings (Bailey 1997:54). The stimuli have been designed by Bailey and his team as a means of engaging in conversation with people about such religious things without cuing explicitly in the direction of routinized religious faith. For example: “What do you think is the purpose in life?” (Bailey 1997:64)

65 It is important though to distinguish between Bailey’s methodology and the conclusions he draws in respect to religion. In terms of attempting to grasp the actual content of people’s beliefs, Bailey’s methodology is considerably better than most, including the value surveys or qualitative research that seeks to elucidate contemporary beliefs by way of traditional beliefs. Zuckerman (2008) for example concludes that Danes and Swedes just are not interested in religion and do not know much about it. Religion being understood as Christianity and the things they know little about being the Bible, Jesus etc. Truly, what he – and many others – is researching is decline in church religion, which cannot be said to be the same as religiosity.

or “If you were prepared to die for anything, what would it be?” (Bailey 1997:71). Responses were ordered into themes and condensed into three basic areas of beliefs: The nature of the Self; The received world; and finally Moral. These areas of belief are not intended to be conclusive or universal but express the findings of that particular study (Bailey 1997:121). The essence of Bailey’s findings is that the self is central to implicit religion. The self interacts with other selves, and in a way that must be mutually beneficial. Such belief is regularly expressed by means of Christian associations. Bailey’s monograph concludes:

*As a system, its implicit religion can be described as involving the sacredness of the Self, as its highest common factor; the sacredness of other Selves, as its lowest common multiple; and the sacredness of relationships with other Selves, as its infinite extrapolation. (Bailey 1997:271)*

Similar to Salomonsen, Bailey et al. find that the Christian cultural context, in which their study takes place, shapes how people are able to express themselves about their beliefs. The language with which one can express belief comes from that routinized religion that has shaped one’s consciousness in respect to those areas in life, where belief comes in; values, ultimate concerns, social and personal morality, the unknown. This is true to a large extent, even if people no longer believe in the answers the routinized religion has to offer. The common language of religious and cultural heritage is one vehicle for explanation of one’s beliefs, even when that language does not describe what one actually believes in.

Steve Bruce raises an important point in respect to Bailey’s conception of religion. It is difficult to think of anything that would not fit Bailey’s conception of religion, and for this reason it becomes meaningless as a tool for understanding the social phenomenon it is trying to grasp (Bruce 2002:201). This reminds us that distinction is a vital and necessary element of understanding. However, the act of putting distinctions to one side while allowing ordinary people to explore how they themselves understand religion or beliefs gives us access to a wealth of information, which would have been filtered out by a more stringent adherence to definitions and distinctions on the part of the researcher. By applying a quite open-ended, bottom-up method of acquiring knowledge, Bailey and his team are able to tease out much about how people understand themselves in relation to

religion. This is valuable information in itself, even if it does not constitute a new and comprehensive definition of religion, as Bailey would like.

In another piece of research mentioned previously in this book, David Hay and Kate Hunt assume that the spiritual dimension is hardwired into the human species (Hay & Hunt 2000:5). On this assumption they research the spirituality of people, who do not go to church or are otherwise spiritually or religiously affiliated, but who have also not dismissed spirituality altogether (Hay & Hunt 2000:7). Hay and Hunt invite people, who self-identify as either spiritual or religious to discuss their beliefs in focus groups and individual interviews. The authors believe that spirituality can be expressed in many ways, and they subsequently set out to understand how their 31 informants understand the term “spirituality”. Further, they ask about the content of the informants’ spirituality, how this spirituality is related to religion and, the report having an acknowledged Christian missionary slant, whether their spirituality touches upon the gospel, church etc. (Hay & Hunt 2000:6). The authors are careful not to define or in other ways limit their informants’ perception of the words spirituality and beliefs.<sup>66</sup> Such openness is productive in allowing for individual and collective associations, but does simultaneously create a bit of, what turns out to be informative, confusion. Spirituality is not a well-defined term in everyone’s active vocabulary, just as it is not a clearly defined term in religious studies. How the informants understood the term appears to be productive in gaining access to people’s understandings of beliefs, both negative and positive. Spirituality was understood by some to be an open and inclusive expression of belief, contrasted with the closed, rigid religious expression of the church. Others understood it as spiritualism (Hay & Hunt 2000:20).

Among other things, the authors conclude that although most people should be able to enter into dialogue about religion and beliefs, people simultaneously find the simple act of articulating beliefs difficult. This is a feature common to all the studies mentioned in this chapter. The language available to express beliefs is partly related to primary socialisation and the images transmitted during early life, formal religious education, popular culture, and New Age (Hay & Hunt 2000:21). This, however, does not prevent the informants from reflecting on their beliefs. The

66 However the list of topics covered by the focus groups reveal a strong interest in relations to church (socialization, god, prayer, Bible, church in media, church as brand, church as organization) which conceivably directs and delimits the discussions.

positions cover a variety of attitudes including defence of church related religion; struggle to make sense of what is the meaning of life in a situation where the religious meta-narrative has broken down, and the complete absence of contact with institutional religion. Their narratives evince the cognitive associations available to them.

Bailey (1997), Besecke (2005) (op. cit.) and Hay & Hunt (2000) conclude that almost anyone can talk about belief, but that there are linguistic difficulties in expressing what one believes in. Besecke's as well as Hay & Hunt's research have preconceived reference points, namely god in Besecke's case, and the church in Hay and Hunt's. While referentiality is inevitable, it obviously directs how people narrate their stories, positively and negatively.

Bailey is concerned to avoid such embedded direction. So is Abby Day. She also attempts to circumvent such obvious referentiality to tenets of faith and structures of organization in her thesis, *Believing in Belonging* (Day 2006:21, 26). The questions directing Day's interview-based research correspond to those of this thesis: What do ordinary people believe, and how do we know. By asking people: "What do you believe in?" followed by a number of probes intended to explore the subject (Day 2006:33), Day concludes that whether people believe in god or not, what they actually believe in is relationships (Day 2006:157-8). She is able to come to this conclusion by way of her sociology of belief. Rather than implicitly relating the beliefs people report to traditional, institutionalized belief systems, she allows individuals to develop their thoughts about whichever beliefs they hold (Day 2006:22). Day argues convincingly that beliefs must be understood as multi-dimensional – the dimensions most evident in her particular material are content, resources, salience, practice and function. But Day is quite clear that beliefs need have no religious supernatural referent; indeed she develops the concept "a secular supernatural".<sup>67</sup> This concept signifies that people have "spiritual" experiences such as a feeling that a deceased relative watches over them, while admitting that it might be their own needs or imagination rather than an actual supernatural fact (Day 2006:68-70). In other words, the secular supernatural denotes the ambivalence of informants about how to make sense of their beliefs and experiences, when they do not feel at home with established religious or secular vocabularies or universes.

67 Which brings Bailey's secular religion to mind (Bailey 1997:267).

It is clear that such openness to whichever beliefs people hold will lead to the inclusion of beliefs not generally understood to have much relation to religion. It nevertheless informs us what people believe and what their beliefs signify to them.

## How the discussed studies have informed this book

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There are a number of factors that become apparent from this selection of studies aimed at exploring beliefs held by ordinary people.

Firstly, research involving open-ended questions or discussion topics harvests more detailed considerations from the participants. Secondly, to the extent people are permitted to reflect on issues related to religion, they are able to do so. However, thirdly, they have limited language resources to draw on, when reflecting on religion. Finally, in whichever way people deliberate on religion, what they express does not by any means reflect or constitute a belief system as such.

With these points in mind, I decided to frame my focus groups as discussion fora aimed at exploring essentially two themes. Firstly, what might it mean to be a believer today? And secondly, can one be more or less religious? These questions were inspired by the European Value Survey<sup>68</sup> and the European Social Survey respectively.<sup>69</sup>

As I set out to moderate the first few focus groups, I was concerned that people might not be able to comprehend or relate to such abstract questions. But I was also comforted by Hay & Hunt (2000). As noted previously, their open questions produced a certain amount of confusion among their focus group participants. This uncertainty was productive in creating discussion in the group about what spirituality might signify. This discussion is mirrored in scholarly debates,<sup>70</sup> which can be informed by how non-scholars understand such concepts.

Indeed, as I gradually gained experience through focus groups on these

68 EVS Q63 "Uanset om De går i kirke eller ej, vil De da mene, at De er: ... Et troende menneske" ... "Et troende menneske, et ikke troende menneske, Overbevist ateist, Ved ikke). (Regardless of whether you go to church, would you consider yourself to be: A believer, A non-believer, Convinced atheist, Do not know. My translation. Colloquially, "et troende menneske" is the equivalent of a religious person, rather than a believer. Tro is faith or belief, but can also mean religion.) Only 5,4% check Convinced atheist, 18,1% are not religious by this measure.

69 EES C21 "Uanset om du tilhører en bestemt religion eller ej, hvor religiøs vil du sige, at du er? ... 0 betyder, at du slet ikke er religiøs, og 10 betyder, at du er meget religiøs." (Regardless of whether you belong to a certain religion or not, how religious would you say you are? 0 indicates that you are not at all religious, and 10 indicates that you are very religious. My translation). Please consult appendix 2 for graph illustrating answer distribution.

70 See chapter 5.



two main topics, I found that not only were people amply able to discuss the topics. I also found the focus group participants able to express distinctions between phenomena within the concept religion. What is more interesting, these distinctions were repeated across the groups. I began to notice that although my focus group participants had a hard time expressing what they believed in, there were nevertheless patterns. These patterns were not only clear in terms of what one can believe in, in contemporary Greater Copenhagen. They were also evident in terms of attitudes to belief and routinized religion. These insights are the subject of the following chapters.

## Chapter resumé

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In this chapter I have argued that religion is predominantly researched where religion or neighbouring phenomena are already presumed to take place. However, this approach regularly overlooks the large groups of people, who are not present in such locations. In Denmark the overwhelming majority of citizens do not participate, and are therefore seldom studied. There are studies that have sought in various ways to inquire into the beliefs of ordinary people. A number of such studies have been reviewed in this chapter. The main lessons are that although people are amply able and willing to discuss issues of religion, they apparently lack language with which to express positively what they believe. This chapter also argues that it is essential to allow such people to explore their conceptions and understandings of religion as a phenomenon and in their lives. This requires an open-ended approach, which has not pre-determined what can be understood as religious and what cannot.

# Talking about belief

In April 2008, I participated in one of my last focus groups with some financial and marketing middle management officers working in a large financial institution in a Copenhagen suburb. The three men and one woman were all in their late 20's or early 30's. They were highly educated and obviously had quite successful working lives. They were also a somewhat loud group, who clearly got on well with each other. I knew from my entry person that they were close colleagues. Once I had introduced the project and myself there was the by now customary silence, followed by a little restlessness as they looked at each other. But then the woman began to talk (Extract 2):

### EXTRACT 2

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**Woman 1:** *I can start by saying that [...] "I am a believer", and that's not because I sit and pray every day or think a lot about the 10 commandments or anything, but I was baptized, I was confirmed, I have chosen to be wed in church, my children have been baptized, I feel a sense of belonging to the Christian church, and in that way I feel that I'm a believer without being one of those people who go to church every Sunday and for holidays etc. So in that way I feel that I belong, but I wouldn't say that I'm religious. To me there's a difference between being a believer and being religious... [...]*

**Man 2:** *Yes, but believing can also be believing that there's something else, that there's a purpose of things, a higher being. I don't! I'm an atheist ... I think lots of people need for there to be something else, and belief can also be just, something, fate, something that plays a part, and that's all it takes to tick*

*“believer”, it needn’t be that one’s a practising Muslim, Christian, you know, just that one thinks there’s some greater whole ...*

**Man 3:** *I’m probably somewhere between the two of you, I also think there is something. I don’t believe that the world was created in seven days either. I think there is something, I was also baptized and confirmed, my child has been baptized ... I don’t necessarily believe everything that’s written in the Bible, but I believe that there’s a purpose, only we might not understand it ...*

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*080416 Financial & marketing mid-management.*

The group went on talking and in doing so they began to clarify to themselves what they believe in, at least to a certain extent.

They also began to consider some of the inconsistencies of their beliefs and actions. Five minutes into the conversation, man 3 who believes in something says to man 2, who doesn’t: “Isn’t it strange, I don’t even go to church on Christmas eve. You go to church, and you don’t even believe in it.” Man 2 responds: “It’s a social thing, rather than a religious...”.

## What does it mean to be a believer?

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The European Value Survey includes the question, “Regardless of whether you belong to a denomination or not, would you consider yourself a believer?”<sup>71</sup> The answer options are “Yes”, “No”, “Don’t know”, “Convinced atheist”.

One of the aims of my focus group survey has been to explore the breadth of the concept “troende” – to be a believer. Since about three quarters of the population opt to answer yes, it is of interest to discover what might be on people’s minds when they find themselves faced with this question.<sup>72</sup>

Each focus group has addressed what it might mean to be a believer today. I deliberately chose to frame the question in an open and impersonal manner, rather than ask what does belief mean *to you*. Apart from my concern that asking in a

<sup>71</sup> The word used in the Danish version is “troende” (a believer). The word used in the English language version is religious.

<sup>72</sup> EVS 1999.

personal manner might be rather more intimidating, there are also methodological reasons for my choice.

Asking about what belief means *to you* belongs more to the interview genre than to the focus group genre with its emphasis on discussion, as the personal framing might have inhibited the conversation among participants. Furthermore, since my aim has been to explore how people understand concepts under the heading religion, it is of less significance whether these particular individuals subscribe to such beliefs. An important issue lies in the potential of the concept as much as personal convictions.

As it transpired every focus group conversation oscillated between personal convictions, reflections on how others might think, and people's interpretations of the topics we discussed. The latter two were not simply reflections of an impersonal or generalized nature. They were also windows to how the participants understand what these concepts mean and how they relate to them.

In the following, we shall see how people developed what it means to be a believer in the focus groups. This did not occur simply as statements of facts. Indeed most participants evidently neither had very well developed ideas what they believe nor what it might entail in general. In most cases the participants were sensitive listeners and helped each other to articulate their beliefs.

In Extract 3 we find an example of such a conversation, through which people began to express their attitudes and beliefs, while at the same time developing their understanding of the topic, they were discussing. This conversation took place in a group of elderly volunteers. The group used religious concepts to develop a fundamentally inclusive concept of god. During the course of the exchange, god emerges as a principle, which can be expressed by many means but boils down to a single idea of good behaviour towards fellow man.

#### EXTRACT 3

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**Woman 1:** ... *I was born into a Christian family ... but would rather not call myself a Christian precisely because I'm aware that there are other kinds of faiths and I imagine ... that at some point maybe in thousands of years we'll meet because we're in the process of being mixed geographically to the extent that we'll either be extinct ... we'll kill each other, or we'll find the common god, which is up there at the top of the rest, as I see it. Call it god, call it a power, call*

*it ... whatever, but I believe in something, but I don't think, I can't just call it Jesus or Muhammad, the Torah and those different ... we've come too far for me to be able to say: This is the right way, because it's about human beings ... how we behave towards each other. And you can call it a god, spirit or power, that I can't explain...*

**Man 1:** *What's strange is that if we start to go into details, one can really think one's way out of it and say: If we take the Old Testament, all that about Jesus and virgin conception, then I can say, well it just can't be true. ... but if you take the story and see that it leads in a certain direction, where at some point or other god shows man that it is possible to behave oneself, you've got to behave properly towards each other, don't kill each other, that sort of thing that was in the Old Testament which we really live by today, that's in the constitution..., then it's all just about being decent to one another. And then the concept of god becomes really simple to me. It is about one thing: Behave decently, right.*

**Woman 2:** *Love your fellow as yourself.*

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080407 Elderly volunteers.

The first woman expressed the abstract notion of a universal god or power. The man latched on to that idea and developed a universal moral concept, which the last woman distilled into a single expression, which stemmed from their common cultural baggage.

As I discovered in every group, personal beliefs were seldom packaged, ready for statement. They were developed in the social interaction, which took place in the group. The inputs and questions from other participants helped each person to articulate beliefs that were not clearly expressed in their minds before they sat down and talked about them.

## How beliefs are explained and supported

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In most cases personal beliefs were developed through interactions like the one in Extract 4 where a self-professed atheist tries to understand why one of his fellow group members believes. The believer had just confessed that he wished he could be – or feel - atheist. The self-professed atheist clearly felt that becoming an atheist

should simply be a matter of choice. But he was also curious to know what makes a grown man believe.

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EXTRACT 4

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**Man 2:** ... *What is it, I mean, when do you feel religious? When do you believe in something or other?*

**Man 1:** ... *But you see, I can't just dismiss it, because, I can't take in everything that's going on ... and I'm not transparent to myself either, I don't always know why I react in certain ways at certain times. If I could, then perhaps I could see myself as in control of what's going on, but ... well... something else comes in somehow, so I don't think we can explain everything...*

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080227 Humanitarian aid organization, youth department.

The empathy, interest and curiosity exhibited by group participants in this and all the other groups led the conversations in many directions and helped to produce a broad spectrum of feelings and opinions within each group, and across all groups.

In some instances, personal beliefs were stated quite simply. Particularly in cases where individuals expressed non-belief or atheism, it seemed relatively easier for that person to articulate his or her position. The variation of non-belief appears to be more limited than the variation of belief.<sup>73</sup> Non-belief was expressed as a negation of ulterior causes, as well as through affirmation of natural causes and rationality.

Statements of non-belief or sincere belief in certain dogma were not left unnoted by other participants in the groups. Often other participants were rather surprised that a person could be so certain about what they believed in - or did not believe in. It appeared that the other participants found it difficult to comprehend that it was possible to be so confident about these issues. In the course of a focus group among elderly volunteers<sup>74</sup> the man whom we met earlier on in Extract 3 expressed literal belief in the passion of Christ. While conversing with the other three participants, he returned again and again to Jesus as an exemplary figure in history, but “only more than that”, as he expressed it. About halfway through the

<sup>73</sup> See box 1 (page 84).

<sup>74</sup> 080407.

hour, a woman asked him: “Do you in all seriousness believe, completely, literally? That’s amazing!” The man explained that he does not believe in the popular image of Jesus in a long, white robe, but that he believes literally in Jesus Christ. When the other participants added to the conversation that they were sure that Jesus was a historical figure, and that this figure has a function as an exemplary human figure in culture, the man maintained that Jesus was human, but only more than human. The other participants returned to their interpretation of Jesus as a historical figure, while the man held his stead. The three other participants clearly found it difficult to understand the man’s literal beliefs and tried to test his position with subtle challenges. The tension between his resolve and their less systematized beliefs was productive in developing their own positions, as it generated respectful but explorative dialogue throughout the hour.

As the participants’ perceptions were developed, people drew in various sources of knowledge and experiences they had had or had heard of. In the focus group with elderly volunteers, the religious man spoke at length about a film, which illustrated to him that man is not god. Referring to this film was a way of clarifying to the other participants in the group what he believes. The film, *Bruce Almighty* is about a man who complains about god once too often. In return, god gives him almighty powers in order to teach him how difficult it is to run the world. As Bruce exercises his newly gained abilities, everything begins to come apart. What this elderly volunteer was trying to convey was that for a long time, he had thought that he knew better than everyone else. But then he had found that in Christ, he could put away this awesome responsibility and learn to retreat into the background. As long as he had thought himself entitled to control, he had alienated the most important people in his life. His belief in Christ had relieved him of his responsibility and helped him to be more attuned to other people and to himself. He used this film’s storyline as a template for the narration of his own history of coming to terms with belief.

Another example of how personal beliefs can be framed with reference to external sources comes from a group of caregivers at a psychiatric institution.<sup>75</sup> As we were getting settled, before the focus group actually commenced, one of the participants, a man, explained to me that working in a feminine environment

<sup>75</sup> 080415/ 2.

such as the psychiatric domain leaves its impression on people. He told me that he quite often found that he talks as much as women. A work related handicap, he wanted me to know. He went on to explain that working in this domain tended to influence one's way of understanding the world. This resonated with a remark I had heard in another focus group, which took place at the same psychiatric institution, only with sanitary staff.<sup>76</sup> One of the cleaners had remarked that it is difficult to dismiss religious experiences, when you work with psychiatric patients. The reasoning was that psychiatric patients see and experience things, most of us would dismiss as figments of our imagination. However, they are real enough to those patients and perhaps similarly, religious experiences might be real enough to those who have them.

As we talked in the group of caregivers,<sup>77</sup> another one of the men said that he felt "cleaved". "I'm both a believer, and then I'm an atheist, is that possible?" he said. And he went on: "I like being a believing human being. I like to believe that when I say both yes and no to being a believer, it's really because I am seeking something, that I'll never find in the course of my life. I'm sure of that, and I believe that this is how it must be, if one's a believer." I understood him to say, that being a believer has less to do with certainty about things, and more about the search for truth. Uncertainty and searching are key elements to belief to him, and that is why he can neither say he is a believer nor a non-believer. He explained how he had met priests and theologians who expressed completely opposite views on life. As he had thought about it, he found what he perceived to be a cultural rift. Some of these people represent strict and self-assured belief in Christian dogma; others say that it is up to the believer to determine what to believe in. In his narration the psychiatric caregiver used a psychological analogy reflecting his own work environment to explain how he feels about his beliefs. He wants to believe and to continue to explore what that might imply, but at the same time he describes a force that drives him away. He states that the divide he feels inside is reflected in the surrounding Danish culture, as he has experienced it in encounters with clergy and theologians.

76 080415/ 1.

77 080415/ 2.



## Beliefs imagined

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Often the talk about beliefs would turn to why people believe. This question was directed both at those who participated in the groups and the generalized other, whose beliefs the participants reflected on.

One of the first groups I talked with in spring 2008 consisted of young men affiliated with the youth division of a humanitarian aid agency.<sup>78</sup> They were young professionals and university students, only one of whom expressed some sort of belief. Another expressed an atheist attitude, as we saw in Extract 4. The remaining two were non-believers, but did not label themselves atheists as such. This group had a lot to say, and often returned to the question of why people have beliefs. They were clearly curious about this question, which they discussed from different angles.

At the outset they discussed my initial remark that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the Danish population had answered yes to being a believer according to the European Value Surveys 1999. They found this relatively high fraction simultaneously understandable and strange, and they explored the reasons why so many people would answer yes to such a question.<sup>79</sup> In doing so, they reflected on the influence of media and political attention to religious difference, particularly Islamic difference. Religion is on the political and media agenda (Rosenfeldt 2007), and the group mentioned how this might be a reason to say that one is a believer. The presence of Islam in public debate might lead non-Muslims to identify as Christian, simply as a means of distinction, in order to identify as Danish by heritage and culture. It is not that this kind of cultural identification implies faith in itself. However, the fact that religion is on public debate as a means of explaining national heritage was mentioned by this group of young men as one reason why a relatively high percentage of the population might tick the yes-option in response to whether they are believers. Indeed Bruce & Voas (2004) Peter Brierley (2005) and Abby Day (2006) all discuss a related point. They find that people use religious affiliation as a cultural identity marker, to show where they belong, and what they are not. In fact, this group of young men including the atheist were all happy to call themselves

<sup>78</sup> 080227.

<sup>79</sup> The European Value Survey data itself was out of date by the time I conducted my research, but data itself has mainly figured in the groups as a way of initiating discussion about the concept of belief.

cultural Christians.<sup>80</sup> By this they meant that they have been raised in a Christian culture and society, with Christian traditions and heritage. Although they had no belief in the message of the Church, they used the concept cultural Christian to acknowledge that culture matters, as they saw it, to how society is constructed and how individuals understand the world.

As the focus group participants explored why people might tick the believer-option, they also mentioned that there might be an almost inevitable connection between membership of the state church and agreeing that one is a believer in a survey. As I understood them, they meant that if people are members of the state church, it is a huge leap for them to deny belief, even if that belief is not precisely aligned to what the church preaches.<sup>81</sup> Having answered that they are members of a church, it might seem odd to them to answer “no” to being a believer, the young men pondered.

The group also mentioned uncertainty about death and loss of loved ones and the hope that belief might offer the bereaved. One of the participants told the group about a close female friend, ambitious and successful, who apparently uses god as a discussion partner, when she is in doubt or needs counsel. In this case, he imagined that her belief acts as a helping hand in tough situations, where others might use a personal coach. And finally, the group mentioned that belief might be a way to combat loneliness or might even be compensation for disappointments in other areas of life.

The reflections expressed by these men, and by other people in other groups, about why others might have belief or be religious were oriented towards practical cognitive challenges in life, be they cultural or personal, in terms of identity or difficulty. About two weeks later, I met up with a group of hairdressers.<sup>82</sup> The three women and one man all said that they are believers. They did not believe in church and they were hard put to express precisely what they believed in. While their beliefs certainly had a utilitarian side to them, I also found that their beliefs were significant to them at a personal level in small and large ways.

80 “Kulturkristen”.

81 As I shall return to in chapter 5, the assumption that there is a default connection between belief, membership, practice, tradition and other expressions of religion must be re-addressed.

82 080310.

**Woman 1:** ... *I think that you create good and bad in your own life, you choose a lot yourself, actually ... so to me it's just a question of, I decide my way of life, I decide whether I choose to feel really good, I can choose to feel really bad. That depends on my actions and my attitudes and my behaviour. But the thing is with illness and death, and things happen that you can't influence in the least. You can't do anything, it's completely impossible, you are completely ... it's a blow. This is when it's good to have something else. But it's not ... nothing is dictated by a book or anything like that, not to me anyway...*

**Woman 3:** *But I think I still believe in god, somehow or other, I probably do.*

**Woman 1:** *I think I call it god.*

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080310 Hairdressers.

Here, in Extract 5 was a woman who expressed deeply held convictions about how to live life, and while she described her ethical stance towards daily life, she reserved a space for those experiences in life that are beyond her control. In such cases, she would have to turn to her belief in a “higher power”, which she calls god, but which is not systematized. A little later another woman in the group explained how her faith has been a red thread through her life. She has prayed in times of hardship. Indeed the fact that she prays tells her that she is a believer. She also calls what she believes in “god”. God to her represents hope, comfort and gratitude when things work out.

Similar sentiments were reflected in a group of female sociology students.<sup>83</sup> One of them described why she believes: “I’ve got to believe that there’s something larger that’ll help me get through things, and because when I feel that I’m in need of help, I pray to whatever to help me through. So that’s what I do, or if others, if I know that someone’s up for an exam, for example [...] or my friend who just gave birth.” She explained that the presence of prayer in her life had to mean that she is a believer. It was not that she had a clear idea of herself as a believer, but rather that the fact that she prayed told her that she must be a believer. When one of the

<sup>83</sup> 080228.

other women interrupted her to say: "...even when it's not like, Dear god", she responded: "I think it's like that to me".

The material we created in the course of the focus groups illustrates that there is no simple yes or no answer possible to the question of whether one is a believer or not. The concept of belief is not clear. Through the interpersonal exchanges that took place in each group, the participants helped each other come to terms with how they felt about belief, and what that term might include. As we have seen above, the participants not only drew on each other when they explored the concept, but also used analogies from their daily lives and history in order to explain what they meant, to themselves as well as to the others. Even people who had not previously reflected on the question, and who came face to face with the question unprepared, were equipped to have a broad discussion, which would inevitably result in a number of different meanings for the concept. Interestingly however, the variety of meaning that could be associated with the concept of belief was not infinite. On the contrary, the same kinds of understandings recurred across groups. The following section looks into these reappearing conceptions.

## What people can believe in

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Belief was not systematized in the minds of most people that took part in the focus groups. The beliefs that were developed through the focus group encounters included both personal convictions and reflections on what one can believe in contemporary Denmark. Box 1 sums up the categories of belief content that emerged from the focus group conversations. Importantly, these types of belief were not associated with any system of other beliefs, practices, traditions, institutions or other rationalizing phenomena. Beliefs were simply held in the minds of people, by association to life's experiences and the reflections that took place in the groups. Or beliefs were imagined in ways that seemed to the group participants to explain what a generalized other might be able to believe in.

BOX 1: REPRESENTATIONS OF WHAT ONE CAN EXPRESS BELIEF IN

<b>Higher power</b>	<b>Own god</b>
God More between heaven & earth Something larger than me	My own god I am god
<b>Something else</b>	<b>Social grace</b>
It can't all end with death Destiny Must be something	Golden rule
<b>Nature</b>	<b>Nothing<sup>84</sup></b>
Spectacle Incomprehensible	Coincidence Nature Atheism

The people I met during spring 2008 were all very inclusive in terms of what can be considered beliefs. It became evident to me that a single person can both hold and imagine other people holding many of the beliefs at once. In this way, people combine one or more expressions of belief in ways that reflect their personal experiences and attitudes to life. While the focus group participants listened to one another, they built on each others statements as a means of developing their own stand point. I did not once experience someone claiming to know the truth to exclusion of other perceptions of belief. On the contrary, I was touched by how open minded these people were to each other, even while they sometimes disagreed. I wondered though, about the true significance of these beliefs to the people I spoke with. We often expect from a sociological point of view that beliefs are social and must be supported by a plausibility structure (Berger & Luckmann 1966). However, the beliefs expressed by the participants in my focus groups appear to be individual or personal. They do not appear to have a social side to

84 The category “Nothing” is included here. This is not a claim to universalism of belief, by which logic even belief in nothing is belief. This is an interesting philosophical question, which I happily leave to others. I include the category only in order to highlight that there were people among the participants who expressed these sentiments.

them per se, although when they are expressed verbally, it is done by association to external sources. Would this apparent fragmentation of plausibility structure into individual constructions and legitimations of reality imply that sociability is lacking in respect to beliefs? Would such beliefs somehow foster a communal bond, even as they were expressed in personal terms, by means of personal experiences?

This is something that I discussed with many of the groups. We shall return to this concern in chapter 6.

For the present moment we will put this discussion to one side and let the participants' explorations of the concepts of belief and religion do the talking.

## Unfolding the concept of religion

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We have seen in the preceding sections how the focus group participants reflect on the question of what it might mean to be a believer. The implications of being a believer became much more clear as we continued to talk in the focus groups and as we also introduced my second main topic, which was inspired by a question from the European Social Surveys, namely "Can one be more or less religious?"

Every second year since 2002, the European Social Surveys has asked European citizens the question: "Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are?"<sup>85</sup> The scale is 0 (Not at all) – 10 (Very). 10% answer "not at all", and about 2.5% say "very". The remaining respondents map out in an approximately normal distribution.<sup>86</sup>

Inspired by this European Social Surveys question, I asked my groups to reflect on whether it is possible to be more or less religious. I did so by introducing the survey and referring to the question. As I have mentioned previously, there are two possible Danish translations of the English word religious. "Religiøs", which connotes religiosity and "troende", which can either mean being a believer or having beliefs. Etymologically speaking "tro" is also faithfulness, belief, and finally also means to think. When I raised this question in Danish, I did so with the word "religiøs", the word used by the Danish version of the European Social Surveys.

85 ESS c21 [europeansocialsurvey.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=63&Itemid=98](http://europeansocialsurvey.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=63&Itemid=98).

86 Please turn to appendix 2 for graphic presentation of response distribution.

This question would almost inevitably lead to an exploration of what it means to be religious.

The group of marketing and finance middle management were an extremely vocal group. They had a characteristic way of talking, interrupting each other as they were inspired to add to each other's statements. It was clear to me that this group of people loved to discuss things with each other, and they quite obviously had a lot of fun. Their reaction to the question whether it is possible to be more or less religious was typical in how they unfolded the concept religious, although perhaps not so typical in the way the conversation meandered (Extract 6).

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EXTRACT 6

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**Man 2:** ... *those who really practice religions, where religion is all they live by, the only thing on their minds, they are a 10, of course, but I'm not.*

**Man 1:** *But you believe, nevertheless, you still believe...*

**Man 2:** *Yes, but not as much as ...*

**Man 1:** *You may not believe to the same extent, but you still believe. How much do you believe, well ok (Imitates Man 2's voice) : "I'm only 1. It's only every 6<sup>th</sup> day that I believe in it, the 7<sup>th</sup> day I don't believe in it."*

**Woman 3:** *No, but it might be that you don't have so much to hang your faith on, perhaps all you believe in is that there's more between heaven and earth than meets the eye...*

**Man 1:** *Yes, but what if it's an emotion, and it gives you something, it might be that some people lie with their asses in the air and face the same direction eight times a day, right, but that doesn't mean that they believe more than you. Or less than you. You still believe that there's something above you. So it's wrong to ask to what extent you believe. Because you still believe. It might well be that you don't practice in the same way, but you are still convinced in your own mind that there's something...*

**Woman 3:** *I wouldn't understand the question in that way, I would understand it as if a 10'er is those that practice ... Jehova, Allah, something.*

**Man 1:** *Sure, but I can be as religious as them.*

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080326 Marketing & financial staff.

Clearly, there is limited agreement about what being religious entails. It might be a question of deeply felt faith, a matter of practice, or level of knowledge. As group after group debated this question, it dawned on me that they were operating with a set of distinctions. In actuality, they were unfolding the concept of religion into categories, and they used these categories actively to explain how they related to different aspects of religion. As I became aware of these distinctions, I noticed how these distinctions governed most of the conversations in subtle ways. While each focus group conversation took somewhat different paths the distinctions recurred. We shall see in the following section how religion as a concept became unfolded into distinct aspects..

## Aspects of religion

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As I talked to the group of sanitation staff at the psychiatric ward,<sup>87</sup> one of them said: “Church and prayer beads and things like that, that to me is religion, again it’s not my belief that comes into play, because belief – I believe in a whole lot of things. If you talk about religion, I would say that I’m at the bottom of the scale.” 1 minute and 16 seconds later she added: “I’ve kept those things (prayer book etc.) so that when my kids are confirmed ... but that’s more, it’s not belief, it’s tradition...”.

Within a few minutes of conversation, this particular woman distinguished between belief, religion and tradition. Religion in her understanding referred to what I call routinized religion, whereas belief is personal. When she talked about tradition, she meant those acts that pertain to routinized religion, which she does for the sake of tradition, not for the sake of religion or belief.

It came as something of a surprise to me how actively people distinguished between aspects of religion. As I transcribed this focus group recording and listened to its lucid distinction, it occurred to me that this division is very helpful as a means of understanding the contemporary religious landscape. I went through all the transcripts to see whether other groups operated with similar distinctions. What emerged was a 5-fold distinction rendered in Box 2.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>87</sup> 080415 /1.

<sup>88</sup> As I mentioned in the introduction, religion cannot be reduced to the cerebral or verbal expressions that emerge from my material. There are many other possible aspects, such as emotions, bodily experiences etc., that can be added to my 5-fold distinction, in various ways.



<b>Belief (tro):</b>	Personal, emotional
<b>Religion:</b>	Routinized, systematized, organized, dogmatized
<b>Practice:</b>	Rituals and practices in the routinized domain of religion
<b>Tradition:</b>	Personal, emotional or elective rituals and practices often derived from routinized religion that make sense or are carried out because they have always been done
<b>New Age:</b>	Either effective or ineffectual, understood as remedial practices

We shall see how each modality of religion is developed in the groups in the following sections.

## • Beliefs

As we have seen earlier on in this chapter beliefs are depicted as personal by the focus group participants. They are expressions of individual assumptions, hinged on personal experiences, which are used to explain and legitimize the beliefs held by that individual. They are not part of a package of beliefs. Nor do the individuals very often refer to routinized sources of religious belief in order to legitimize or understand their own beliefs, or the beliefs of a generalized other.

A recurring theme in the focus groups was privacy. Belief is perceived to be a personal matter, something to be contemplated in solitude rather than with other people. In fact, a number of the focus group participants stressed that they had never tried to impose any aspects of belief or religion on their children. As they saw it, their children must decide for themselves, what to believe. It was obvious that the idea of socializing them to accept certain beliefs as true was considered wrong. Similarly, many participants perceived discussing beliefs with other people to be difficult. Quite often they would explain that a discussion about belief or religion could never be won anyway, so it was better to refrain from it all together. Everyone is entitled to their beliefs, so discussing beliefs would lead nowhere, they explained.

Among the sanitation staff the idea that religion is private was discussed in the following way (Extract 7):

EXTRACT 7

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**Man 1:** ... *Religion is a very intimate matter*

**Woman 1:** *Yes, it's a private matter*

**Ina:** *Why?*

**Man 1:** *But there's a difference between religion and politics, you see. Politics you can talk about. Religion, like, it's a part of me, fundamentally; what I am. Because what I believe, that's what I am. Right. That's why one doesn't talk about religion so much. [...]*

**Woman 1:** *Come to think about it, I haven't taught my children anything about religion or Christianity. (The rest of the group concurs). That's also because I think that just because you've got some kind of faith yourself, you don't have to impose it on your children. I've got something or other ... because I've got a friend, well we're not friends any longer, we couldn't be in the same room any longer, because she turned Jehova's witness and she started to indoctrinate her little girl at that point, and I don't think that's the right thing to do. Because one believes in something, one needn't slam one's children with it. They've got to decide for themselves, when they grow older ... but my children have been baptized, that's because I thought, my kids shouldn't have to go to church to be baptized as 14 year olds, you know...*

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080415 /1 Sanitation staff.

In the group of marketing people, one of the participants had a different explanation of why belief is private. He said: "in essence, your belief is just an emotion."<sup>89</sup> Conveying the depth and complexity of emotions to other people is almost impossible and it would be devastating if others were to demean those feelings. This degree of privacy inhibits sharedness and social composition of belief. However, as we saw in the first sections of this chapter, the beliefs expressed by most participants did not elicit deep commitment in the form of piety or

89 080326.

worship. Indeed regardless which beliefs the participants expressed, they appeared not to be something most of them reflected on regularly or carefully.

In his 1971 study of belief among Danes, Salomonsen finds that typical beliefs are expressed as non-belief in theological or Christian tenets of belief, such as heaven (Salomonsen 1971).<sup>90</sup> This suggests that even if people do not believe in particular expressions of Christian belief, the language that they use to say so is to some extent drawn from the same Christian context. While it is clear that the concept “troende” (believer) can include many things to the focus group participants, the groups also conveyed that there were things one cannot believe in. Similar to Salomonsen’s findings, individuals in my groups regularly expressed non-belief in biblical or traditionally Christian representations of what to believe. Biblical representations often took the form of childhood representations of religion, such as god in heaven, god as an old man with white beard, heaven and hell as particular locations in the universe, and pre-determination of destiny. One of the marketing people exclaimed: “I think that I’m you know, quite concrete ... you know, go to heaven ... like, where’s heaven, where’re all these people going to be?” and one of her colleagues said “Well, I don’t believe in granddad and beard, you know.”<sup>91</sup> The religious elderly volunteer man was also very clear that although he believes firmly in Jesus as saviour, his Jesus is not equivalent to the popular image of a longhaired, bony man clad in white robes.<sup>92</sup>

Religion is often expected to perform at least some of the functions listed in Box 3 (Weber 1922 (1993); Yinger 1970). Interestingly however, none of these came up during the focus groups in respect to beliefs.

Since belief as it emerges through my focus group conversations is distinguished from religion and does not appear to perform such basic functions, it raises the question: How do people explain why they maintain belief? There are three types of explanation that reoccur in the focus groups, the first of which has to do with crisis and suffering. When faced with death, illness, problems at work or similar challenges of a personal nature, belief acts as relief. The second way of explaining the persistence of belief is as a kind of residue. As science unravels more of nature and life’s mysteries, there is less that we cannot know. Yet, when contemplating

90 Other studies of belief in Denmark include Gundelach et al. (2008) Højsgaard & Iversen (2005) and Rod (1972).

91 080326.

92 080407.

this unknown we must turn to beliefs. Finally the third way of explaining the persistence of belief is to do with the complexity of nature, life and death. For example, the cleaners discussed what would happen after death and the meaning of life. “Flowers bloom and die”, one of them said. “Well, that depends on whether they are seeds or bulbs”, said another. They used this flower analogy to illustrate two ways of thinking about whether the purpose of life is procreation or life after death.<sup>93</sup>

These explanations of why people believe are positive in the sense that having beliefs is perceived to help people personally to deal with and understand the world.

BOX 3: FUNCTIONS OF RELIGION

Togetherness	Practice
Community Support Validation	Ritual Cult
Devotion	Meaning
Piety Doctrines Worship	Myths Symbols

• Religion

EXTRACT 8

**Man 1:** *I don't believe in god. I think that oneself is god, you know. What I mean is that when one says, god helps me or something, right, it's because you need ... support and someone to help you. So, to me religion's a road to becoming a better person. You know, that's why I say, believe in yourself, right, you know.*

93 080415 /1.

*It's not religion that shows you how to be a good person.... Through religion you can say, ok, I agree with that. You can't agree with the church, when it says, that one, ... says that one shouldn't use a condom. Hello, that's where I've got to say stop. And that's catholicism for you, for example. That's where I've got to say no, I'm not religious, right.*

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080415 /1 Sanitation staff.

The man who speaks in Extract 8 was born in Italy and raised as a Catholic, but has lived in Denmark for some years. He works as a cleaner in a psychiatric institution. What he voices here, as I understood him, is the conviction that one must be in critical dialogue with the messages of the church, and apply common sense to select the things that enable you to become a better person. He believes that the church is a formalized channel for asking for help and support. When he says oneself is a god, I understood what he is conveying to be the human ability to decide for oneself what is right. Since church to him is associated with doctrinal dogma, he feels the need to reject being religious. The church is not synonymous with his beliefs and does not set him free to align his beliefs with his reality. While he was searching for a way to express how church was not synonymous with his beliefs, other people expressed it more clearly. A young female middle manager in a financial institution said it with simplicity less than one minute into the focus group: "To me there is a difference between being a believer and being religious, that's how I see it." <sup>94</sup> A psychiatric caregiver used similar clarity when he said "I will claim any day that I'm a believer, but I'll be damned if I'm religious." I asked what was the difference between the two, and he explained: "You see, religion is ... I think of it as something that has been made by human beings, you know it might as well have been a philosopher, who had thought up all this stuff, to me it is sort of believing in something pretty much common sensical, right, and I happen to have been brought up with one type of common sense." When I asked where belief comes in, he answered: "But, strictly speaking, I think belief is something you have inside yourself." Another man in the groups agreed: "because I also want

94 080416.

to maintain a clear distinction between belief and the kind of belief that builds on a set of rules ...”<sup>95</sup>

The picture of religion that emerges through the focus group conversations depicts religion in two ways: Religion as institution (what I call routinized religion) and religion-as-heritage. Religion-as-heritage pertains to shared culture, whereas routinized religion alludes to an institutionalized system of beliefs, whether Christian or Muslim, Buddhist or otherwise. It is impossible for most of the participants to feel that they can accept and align themselves with such a parcel of routinized religion.

While my focus group participants are critical of people, whom they perceive to accept a full package and to submit wholly to a particular religious package, they do consider religions to rest on fundamental truths. These truths are perceived to be culturally cogent to the social environment to which they belong. The fundamental ethical and social rules are understood to be interwoven with the surrounding culture, so that certain rules make more sense in certain cultural contexts than in others; this is religion-as-heritage. One of the marketing people expressed it like this: “The values one has are a question of social inheritance and where one is raised. Obviously, if you’ve been raised in Denmark, you will have a different attitude than if you were raised in ... Iran or Iraq or some other Islamic country ... but that’s why I am thinking, I wonder whether there is that big a difference. The common thing is probably that you seek something that enables you to cope with your life as a human being.”<sup>96</sup>

While most of the participants disassociated themselves from routinized religion, they often saw it as a reservoir of ideas that one can “shop” from, as one man expressed it,<sup>97</sup> and as this exchange among the marketing and finance professionals illustrates (Extract 9):

#### EXTRACT 9

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**Man 1:** *I bet that if I took all the religions, I would be a bit Buddhist, and a bit and something else.*

<sup>95</sup> 080415 /2.

<sup>96</sup> 080326.

<sup>97</sup> 080330.

**Woman 1:** *One tends to shop in the religions more than ... There is not only one road, is there?*

**Man 1:** *You make your own religion.*

**Woman 1:** *You pick what you like from the pallet.*

**Man 1:** *Your own definition of what you can use and then you become a strong believer.*

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*080326 Marketing & financial staff.*

Religion in the sense of a shared cultural heritage is similarly positive. In such cases it is referred to as a common language and imagery, which sometimes performs as a stenographic way of explaining something to others. Talking about the imagery of the bible and god one of the cleaners said “I think it is an easy idea to relate to” and one of the others responded to him “that’s right, I’ve got this story, that everyone knows”.<sup>98</sup>

While religion is a supply of culturally acceptable norms, ideas and values, as well as a common language, it is also identified with violence, war, hatred, self-righteousness, intolerance, etc. Religion is frequently mentioned as the underlying reason for conflict in the world today as well as historically. One of the marketing people exclaimed: “I’m against religion, actually. It can really aggravate me!” Another woman in the same group said: “If there’s a single thing, which is the root of evil in this world, it’s religion.” One of the men in the group moderated this thought by explaining that it is not religion as such, but rather the motivations of men that utilize religion for the sake of personal greed and power.<sup>99</sup> Among the elderly volunteers the routinized religious man also emphasized that it is not religion as such but rather personal ambition that drives evil in the name of religion.<sup>100</sup>

The distinctions that emerge from the focus groups between religion and belief show belief to be a personal, voluntary, beneficent and transient expression. While being a potential source of belief elements, religion on the other hand is understood as a system, which aims to hold sway over people. As we discussed

98 080415 /1.

99 080326.

100 080407.

religion, the focus group participants did not exhibit substantial knowledge about the actual belief content associated with any forms of religion, including their own. But many clearly were convinced that as such religion circumscribes individuality. Religion as system is overwhelmingly perceived as negative, whereas religion-as-heritage (social and cultural values and ideas) is not, as long as they are not imposed on anyone in any dogmatic or religious way.

## • Practice

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While most of the focus group participants were completely at loss as to any practice related to belief, they easily associated practice with religion. Some of the participants did use prayer as a practice in relation to their beliefs, as we saw earlier on in this chapter. In fact their practice of prayer was evidence to them that they are believers. Some also mentioned fundamental social rules, especially trying to live the golden rule,<sup>101</sup> as a practice related to their belief.<sup>102</sup> In such cases, the motivation was personal. It expressed a personal need to pray or to behave in certain ways. Religious practice, to the extent that it came up in the focus groups, was in contrast understood to be determined by external requirements such as the strict social controls in Jehovah's witnesses, the demand for regular prayers or the veil in Islam, confession in Catholicism, or kashrut in Judaism.<sup>103</sup> In all such cases religious practice was presented as inhibiting the lives of individuals. One of the psychiatric caregivers had second thoughts about this interpretation. He referred to the needs of psychiatric patients for regularity and predictability and speculated that religious practice might perform a similar function for religious people. As he thought about it, he realized that religious practice might not only create a secure framework for life, but might also perform as a kind of identity boundary and marker for some people.<sup>104</sup>

101 Do unto others as you would wish them do unto you.

102 080407, 080330.

103 080330, 080407, 080326.

104 080415.



## • Tradition

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To the extent that most of the focus group participants performed religious practice, they did so under the name “tradition”. They freely acknowledged that tradition is often rooted in religion, but they also made it apparent that to them tradition is without significant belief content. When they baptized their children, got married in church or participated in Christmas services, they did not personally feel that they were involved in a religious ritual as such. Neither did it have anything to do with their personal beliefs. They were performing a traditional ritual for reasons other than religion and belief. The financial officer who said that he believed in nothing explained that “even though I am a mere product of my actions and choices, I will still admit that yes, on Christmas eve we do go to church and recite the Lord’s Prayer, because it’s nice, it’s part of tradition.”<sup>105</sup> The sanitation staff discussed baptism in the following way (Extract 10):

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### EXTRACT 10

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**Woman 2:** *I baptized my children, but that is as much because this is what’s always been done.*

**Woman 1:** *It’s tradition.*

**Woman 2:** *It’s tradition. It’s not that much to do with belief ... mine haven’t been baptized because I’m a believer, it’s just because of tradition ... and they look so cute in those tiny white dresses and all that, it’s as much tradition as anything else.*

**Woman 3:** *We did it consciously with this in mind that, well, we have both been baptized, but it was so as to say, we will baptize him. And then he can choose for himself, right. It was more, you know, where one says, ok, they want to be confirmed and it’s kind of embarrassing to have to be baptized first and things like that. So, we were very conscious that, ok, he will be baptized and then we have done, like, what we could, and after that it’s his ... duty to say yes or no, when he...*

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105 080416.

As tradition is perceived to be liberated from its religious content, it is also released from its religious system, although it takes place in surroundings that belong to the religious domain. A tradition appears to be a practice you elect to uphold, because it makes sense to you, or because it has always been done.

## • What the aspects of religion mean

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As it is unfolded in the conversations, religion as a concept pertains to at least five elements, namely *belief*; *routinized religion*; *religion-as-heritage*; *practice*; and *tradition*. It also appears that there is no unifying belief system that binds these five elements together.

Belief appears as an assembly of personal assertions, with no necessary common core. Belief furthermore is not necessarily something the individual is very conscious about on a daily basis.

Routinized religion is church or similar organization, institution or system, as distinct from religion-as-heritage. The latter concept covers culturally specific values, norms and a shared background in terms of religious heritage, which maintains influence on the shared culture in contemporary society even though it no longer retains any significant religious belief content as such. In this way it is a shared system, which people utilize to some extent while not submitting to it. Religious practice pertaining to routinized religion is perceived as constrictive and submissive. In contrast the practices people chose to embrace are perceived in a much more positive light, as traditions.

The focus groups regularly touched on these five elements. In this way it became clear in terms of how they discussed the question, that it is quite possible to say that one is very much “a believer” but only slightly religious. Or to say that one has a high score in terms of tradition, but low in terms of practice. Or even to claim that one opposes religion while embracing religion-as-heritage, as in the case of the self-assured atheist, who would happily identify as a cultural Christian,<sup>106</sup> or the participant in the first aid course who repudiated being a believer but agreed that he is a Christian.<sup>107</sup> These five aspects of religion need not signify the same thing and they need not perform in unison.

<sup>106</sup> 080227.

<sup>107</sup> 080330.

Meredith McGuire argues that “Focusing on individuals’ religions, we can observe a great deal of distinction-making today.” (McGuire 2008:6) She shows in an American context how people operate with similar distinctions as the one’s we are discussing in this book. However, she finds that religion is *lived in embodied practices*. She argues that “religion-as-lived is based more on such religious practices than on religious ideas or beliefs, it is not necessarily logically coherent” (McGuire 2008:15). While she is able to show how people in an American context have an abundance of practice, I am unable to find the same thing. This is certainly to some extent due to different methodologies and research locations. However, it is also probable that there are cultural and historical reasons as well. For the last couple of centuries, Denmark has been under the influence of the Grundtvigian branch of Protestantism, which emphasizes inner spiritual communion with an explicit aim to repress outward expressions of religion (Gundelach et al. 2008:152). For this reason, religion in recent history has retreated from public display and public rituals are rare. Rituals take place in the home as ritual meals, as well as in church. The emphasis on personal communion with Jesus has diminished public conversation about religion and belief, and it could be argued that this arrangement is reproduced as cultural patterns in the meagre practices related to belief, as narrated by my focus groups. The practices associated with belief, as we have seen, are mostly limited to prayer, the inner communion, and to good social demeanour. These expressions are certainly reminiscent of Grundtvigianism, which has been prominent in recent Danish history.

## New Age

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It is not uncommon to find in sociology of religion the expectation that as people become less engaged in routinized religion, they turn to newer forms of religion (Davie 1998). The Danish Pluralism project indeed included quite a number of such religions in their count (Kühle 2007).<sup>108</sup> For this reason it was surprising to me that such beliefs only came up in a few of the groups. In the group of young men affiliated with the youth division of a humanitarian aid organization, one of the men mentioned that he thought that an increasing number of people harbour

108 Although the number of adherents is assumed to be relatively small. Personal conversation with Lars Ahlin 081023.

such kinds of beliefs. He mentioned astrology and numerology.<sup>109</sup> However, in other groups where New Age was discussed, it was not understood to be related to religion or beliefs. Forty minutes into the conversation with the hairdressers, I remarked that alternative beliefs had not come up in their discussion. I asked them why, and did these things relate to their conception of belief? The remaining twenty minutes circled around various experiences they had had with alternative or New Age-type practices. At the end I asked them, just to be sure that I had understood them correctly, whether they would consider such New Age-type beliefs to be related to the kinds of beliefs they hold. Each of them said emphatically no.

A number of the participants in my focus group had tried one or more New Age type activity such as healing, feng shui, astrology, clairvoyance etc. Those for whom it had not worked dismissed that particular practice as bogus. One hairdresser told the group that he is dyslexic and had been taken as a child by his mother to see a healer, who tried to cure his dyslexia with tuners. In order to appease his mother and the healer, he had claimed that he had experienced some improvement, but as an adult he admits having lied about the effects and dismisses this practice as a sham.

Those who had experienced results were adamant that the particular New Age type practice had worked, and for that reason this particular practice was no longer perceived as something pertaining to belief. It was now categorized as truth. This means that if the practice had produced results, it was credited with value beyond belief, regardless of whether the practice has been proved scientifically. One hairdresser mentioned Feng Shui. It works, she said, because its principles change the environment physically. Another of the hairdressers described how her grandmother suffered from insomnia and had her property charted for energy lines. The consultant concluded that she was suffering from geopathic stress and should rearrange the furniture. The grandmother apparently experienced benefits, and although the hairdresser was doubtful of the method's utility, she was not dismissive of her grandmother's feelings that it had helped.<sup>110</sup> One of the cleaners had experienced the effects of healing and remarked: "Well I have proof, because when my partner tried to cure me of some things, for example allergies, it's not

109 080227.

110 080326.

that I'm cured, but it's strange because during the time I tried it, I felt much better. That's proof enough."<sup>111</sup>

Only one of the 42 participants mentioned using a new age-type practice to affirm his beliefs in a "higher power". One of the marketing professionals consults a clairvoyant once a year. To him it is a way of affirming his belief that there is more between heaven and earth than meets the eye. He called it an interesting journey, where he experiences things that he finds hard to explain and that appear to him to confirm his belief that there is a higher power.<sup>112</sup>

While results of for example the Danish Pluralism Project show that there are quite a lot of new age-type practices about, it is clear that these types of practices did not spring to mind among my focus group participants, as we discussed religion and beliefs at length. Though these practices are clearly "spiritual" to the practitioners themselves, and probably also to some of their clients, it appears generally that such practices are not related to beliefs of the kind, that my focus groups would associate with belief or religion.

As the focus groups discussed the questions what it might mean to be a believer and whether it is possible to be more or less religious, they unfolded the concepts into fairly succinct categories. Religion as a concept is understood by my focus group participants to break down into belief, routinized religion, religion-as-heritage, practice and tradition. These five categories do not necessarily point back to a single source, although they may do so in some instances. Beliefs are personal. Routinized religion is institutional. Certain practices are understood to pertain directly to routinized religion in that they retain religious content. Such practices include for example Sunday sermons. Most of the focus group participants were distant from that kind of routinized religious practice. Other practices go under the name tradition. Traditions do originate in routinized religion, but no longer evoke any significant religious meaning or content. Traditions are elective and are retained primarily for social reasons. Religion is also perceived as a heritage, and in this sense religion is understood as positive, as a shared cultural resource. Where there is quite a lot of attention within the study of religion on new age, new age to my focus group participants appears to point to something different.

The distinctions that have emerged from my focus group study indicate that it

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might be worth the effort to revisit our fundamental assumptions concerning the concept religion, in order to see whether the distinctions utilized by such ordinary people can improve our theoretical conceptualization of religion. This is what we shall turn our minds to in the next chapter.

## Chapter resumé

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This chapter has seen how my focus group participants explored the concepts of belief and religion. Religion evoked a number of relatively distinct associations, which were replicated across groups. The aspects that emerged from the conversations were routinized religion referring to church as institution and system; belief referring to personal subjective beliefs and it was clear that although beliefs were subjective, there was not an infinite variety of belief types; religion-as-heritage signifying shared values, norms and attitudes, which to a considerable degree either grow out of church or are attributed to church, but have lost religious implications; traditions are shared social practices also stemming from church but devoid of religious content. Finally practices, which pertain to any individual's beliefs. It is evident that religion as it is conventionally conceptualized in academia does not correspond very well with its associations among ordinary people.



# Unpacking the academic concept of religion

Towards the end of my survey, I talked to a group of women that were very different from the rest of my groups.<sup>113</sup> In various ways, each of them had a much closer relation to routinized religion than most of the other people I talked with. One of them grew up in a small Methodist community in the northernmost part of Denmark. Now married to a Catholic from Columbia, she remains a tithing member of the Methodist community, but does not go to church regularly. She has chosen to baptize her children in the Catholic Church. Her reason for making this decision is that she thinks it is so much easier to be a Catholic in Denmark than a Methodist in the almost entirely Catholic Columbia, where religion plays a more prominent role in public life. The second member of the group had grown up in a self-consciously left-wing family. One of her grandfathers had been a priest in the Danish state church. But according to her parents the state church had maintained a hard-core conservative policy in the 1960's and 70's and the family had chosen to leave church. As a teenager, this particular girl – one out of a flock of four – had decided after long and serious deliberation that she wanted to be baptized and confirmed. She had spent a lot of time deliberating about her faith, whether her faith was appropriate to the state church, and she had been an active churchgoer, even after her confirmation-quota of services was filled. In fact, her parents rejoined the church when she was confirmed. They did so thanks to a

113 080408.



very kind and welcoming priest. This woman has now married a Danish Catholic and has taken Catholic-classes, as she calls them. Once again she has deliberated with herself as to whether it would be right for her to convert, and has decided against it. While her children are brought up as Catholics, and the family lives an active Catholic life in the Danish Catholic community, she does not feel that she can accept the full package of beliefs. She is less concerned about issues such as transubstantiation, and much more concerned about the rights of homosexuals and female priesthood.

The last one of the participants in this group was a woman of Hindu origin who had been raised in a traditional household, and who is married to a Dane of Christian heritage.

These three women seemed more than averagely informed about routinized religion and the beliefs, practices, communities, organizations, etc. associated with it. Nevertheless, they also unfolded the concept of religion in much the same ways as the people I had talked to, who were less knowledgeable about routinized religion, see extract 11.

#### EXTRACT 11

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**Woman 1:** *People often ask me whether I am Hindu, and I find that a hard question to answer. I usually answer that I was brought up as a Hindu, and I think that there are many beautiful things ... and I am very much a believer, but whether I'm a Hindu? I don't think so. I feel kind of like what you said before about not being a Catholic, because you can't accept the whole package. I feel the same way; that I can't say that I'm a Hindu because there are many things that a Hindu would do that they would say that I don't do well enough. But that thing about belief, I think it's only as an adult that I've discovered what I believe, and then I've returned and seen that I grew up with so many beautiful things that I can use in my own life, but at the time it felt suffocating.*

**Woman 2:** *But when you say that you are very much a believer, what is it that you believe in?*

**Woman 1:** *I believe that angels watch over me, I believe that I get lots of help in my life all the time, I feel really grateful and I would say that this is something*

*that has happened over the last ten years. I can't explain it, it's very personal. I think that when I'm outside, in nature, I can really sense that I'm not alone, the wind blows, the trees are in bloom, the snow...*

**Woman 2:** *So you have a protector in mind, who watches over you, rather than what I said about guidance?*

**Woman 1:** *Both, I feel guided too ... What I choose to say is that I have choices in my life, but I choose to say that I will not be brought down. I just know that something good will come of this, and that I will make it.*

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080408 IT-professionals.

This group of women also distinguished between their beliefs and their religion-as-heritage, and in similar ways they talked about tradition as something that – although related in certain ways - is separate from the other two.

It is clear that the ways in which religion as a general concept is understood by the people I have talked to during the course of my research do not correspond to the ways in which the concept is generally understood in the study of religion.

In this chapter, I will explore the concept religion as it is conventionally employed and understood in the study of religion. During the course of my research I have found that the religion expressed by the people I have talked to does not conform to the expectations we have in the academic study of religion. It struck me that what they were expressing should not necessarily be understood as lack of religion. Perhaps the concept religion is not very helpful in terms of understanding the religion these people express.

Religion as a concept in the study of religion is often understood broadly as a set of cultural ideas, values, beliefs, experiences, and practices or as a number of different dimensions, for example ritual, mythology, sociality, or intellectual, institutional, ethical, juridical, etc. (Furseth & Repstad 2007:49-50). These dimensions or ideas form a kind of framework. This is what I term packaged religion, which signifies a complex of ideas, behaviours, frameworks that are all related with a common essence.

However, these expectations are not met by most of the people I talked with

during my focus group research. We have seen in the previous chapter how the participants in my focus groups did not think about religion as one unified concept, but rather as a number of different categories: Routinized religion, religion-as-heritage, belief, practice and tradition, which did not necessarily pertain to the same core. According to many of the people who have taken part in my focus groups, they have beliefs, they believe in their beliefs, even though they are not meticulously articulated, and even while such beliefs are not part of a system and a practice. As one woman expressed it: “Since childhood I have had plenty of experiences that have been special, and that’s my way of believing ... whether it’s Christianity or Buddhism or whatever doesn’t matter to me, but I have very strong faith in some of those things, they clearly exist.”<sup>114</sup>

In a conversation with sanitation staff at the psychiatric ward,<sup>115</sup> the exchange reproduced in Extract 12 took place regarding the meaning of life.

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EXTRACT 12

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**Woman 3:** ... *I often come to the conclusion that somehow or other we have been given a life on earth, and we will have to mind it as best we can. For the duration of our stay, right, because I don’t think that there’s any reason why small children are born and get cancer and ... that those who live in Africa die of hunger...*

**Woman 1:** *That’s something to do with nature, again, starvation etc.*

**Woman 3:** *Yes, so somehow or other I don’t think that there’s someone up there who decides that you will have a good life and you will have a bad life.*

**Woman 2:** *Still this is how I feel somehow, that I don’t see myself as Christian, but I don’t believe that we have been put on this earth to live ... 70 years and then it’s all over. I don’t believe it, I can’t believe it. There’s got to be something after that, I can’t believe that I’ve been put on this earth to have kids and work like hell, and then when the time comes, I’ll be put in the soil and that’s that. I don’t believe it, there’s got to be something, only I can’t tell you what it is.*

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080415/ 1 Sanitation staff.

114 080415 /3.

115 080415/ 1.

The beliefs expressed in Extract 12 and throughout most of the conversations I have had are obviously not parts of a religious package or system as such. The beliefs are not expressions of routinized religion. They came out as associations and hopes. The beliefs appear not to form a very integral part of people's daily lives. They do not seem to be something that these individuals think about very regularly. Furthermore, there seems to be very little active interaction with others in terms of developing and establishing such beliefs. I shall elaborate more on this subject in chapter 6. Suffice it for the time being to say that while private beliefs are developed through life's experiences and in interaction with a large variety of sources, I find that my focus group participants do not actively come together with other people in order to develop or sustain their personal beliefs.

We have also seen in chapter 4 that the people I have talked with are very inclusive in terms of beliefs. It is evident that a single person can both hold and imagine other people holding many tenets of beliefs at once. In this way, people combine one or more expressions of belief in ways that reflect their personal experiences and attitudes to life. And we have seen as well how the focus group participants did not interact with their beliefs or with religion as systems, but rather actualized claims and expressions in an ad-hoc manner in respect to their present context.

Indeed, confronted with increasing evidence to suggest that religion in the contemporary Western world is an enigma, Woodhead and Heelas wrote in 2000 that "religion in modern times remains relatively uncharted territory" (Woodhead & Heelas 2000:1). Voyé asserted in 2004 in an overview chapter on new approaches in the sociology of religion that the question "What is religion?" still remains a central question in the sociology of religion (Voyé 2004:195).

The people I spoke to generally did not have beliefs that came out as if they were long-term, vested with higher meaning and with consequences in their daily life. In fact this lack of system and persistency, which Zuckerman (2008) also finds in his research and which has lead him to conclude that Danes are no longer religious, but rather culturally religious, a light version of Christianity resting primarily on heritage.<sup>116</sup>

However, we might want to think about this question in a different way and ask

<sup>116</sup> See chapter 3.

ourselves whether our premise is correct. Our expectation is that religious people hold systematized beliefs related to the religion they belong to.

In contrast, Martin Stringer who has spent years doing field work in Christian parishes in Manchester and reflecting on the nature and content of belief concludes that:

*... ordinary Christians do not think in terms of systematic beliefs or systems of theology at all; rather, they tend to think almost entirely in terms of specific belief statements as and when these statements are needed.* (Stringer 1996:231)

Ahern & Davie (1987) makes a related point about beliefs among unchurched London Eastenders. To these people beliefs are related to past experiences and exist as discreet statements, many of which are unquestioned. Because such beliefs are discreet expressions, they may be contradictory and will not form a system as such. Such beliefs are actualized in an ad-hoc manner.

Distinctly routinized-religious people might perhaps be expected to recognize that there is a system, which encases the package of endorsed beliefs. However, Stringer finds that despite their acknowledgment of a system of belief, which they are expected to adhere to and to which they claim to belong, even practicing Christians do relate to beliefs in an ad-hoc manner. They also hold non-Christian beliefs even though such beliefs contradict Christian beliefs. Stringer narrates how even contradictory beliefs are actualized in the same conversation without apparently giving rise to worries about logic or consistency for the person or persons participating in the conversation (Stringer 1996:218). Ahlin also remarks that individuals harbour internally incongruent beliefs (Ahlin 2005:14). Similarly, Voyé in her interview based survey of people at the fringe of organized Christianity in Belgium finds that although her informants categorize themselves as Christians, they draw on many diverse inputs including science and oriental religions in a personal quest to find god (Voyé 1995:201).

Stringer finds similar patterns in respect to belief among Christians, as I find among my focus group participants. It has been my intention to explore what would result from collaborating with those people, whose beliefs and religion we are studying. Stringer also allows his data to drive his theory building. Based on his findings, he acknowledges that his informants actualize beliefs ad-hoc and

in ways that are internally incoherent. However, he maintains that a belief must be qualitatively different from other statements, in that it requires commitment. Stringer proposes what he calls a “situational theory of belief”, which implies “that belief statements are used only in relation to specific situations, as and when they are needed, and are otherwise forgotten or dismissed” (Stringer 1996:229). Stringer’s theory of belief hinges on the situational actualization of beliefs that need not form a system. Beliefs, he says, are unverifiable (beyond ordinary discourse), and the truth of such statements is asserted by reference to the past or some other external authority such as community, faith etc. Stringer claims that this process of asserting belief requires that the believer has a certain level of commitment, whereby such belief statements become more significant to the individual. It is unclear however, why Stringer would hold that such intensified commitment is necessary. If belief statements are indeed context-bound actualizations of experiences as he says, why should they require any commitment beyond the context where they are actualized? As Stringer himself notes, they are “used only in relation to specific situations, as and when they are needed, and are otherwise forgotten or dismissed” (Stringer 1996:229).

One might ask, what would be required of such a commitment, in order for it to constitute a belief? Does this commitment to a belief have to achieve overarching significance to a person’s life in order to be understood as a religious belief? And how can one reconcile any lack of commitment with the assertion that this is religious belief to the informant in question? While it may from the point of view of the study of religion be expedient to distinguish between religious belief and other expressions of what one assumes to be true, it remains unclear why the former would require a greater commitment than the latter. For example, the assumptions people have about fundamental laws of nature do not require greater commitment than acceptance that they are true. Why would we expect religious beliefs to require more than that? One reason might be the pervasive conceptualization of religion in our field.

# Back to basics on religion

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The ways in which religion is frequently conceptualized are rooted in the history of European study of religion, which evolved with the objective of exploring faith scientifically. Initially it walked almost and sometimes completely hand in hand with theology (Smart 1999:xiii). The faiths one wanted to study were predominantly Christianity as well as Judaism and Islam, the two other main forms of monotheism to come into contact with Europe. Religion as one understood it at the time was therefore basically a relation with a supernatural source of power and knowledge. Religion was described with the terms and knowledge that was believed to be applicable to these three religions, as perceived from a European point of view. These included the expectation that there should be a supernatural entity (godhead) and mediators. Feelings about the godhead were described by aid of terms that were considered descriptive in a Judeo-Christian and Islamic context in terms of sacrifice, devotion, and a relatively tight knit community of believers. As the study of religion met other philosophically elaborate belief-systems such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Hinduism, these were hence conceptualised as religions and studied as such. Other forms of faith of a less scripturally elaborate kind were considered archaic forms of religion.<sup>117</sup>

In the 1960's, a new awareness arose in an interchange between the emergence of religious studies as a non-theological discipline and actual developments in society during the same period (Smart 1999:ix).<sup>118</sup> The distribution in the West of ideas from other parts of the world had an impact on the emergence of modern forms of belief and the newer syncretistic or idiosyncratic phenomena. The debate about what qualifies as religion subsequently regained interest (Voyé 2004:195). However, the concept of religion as a meaning system, a framework which incorporates ideas, values, and practices, etc. that somehow pertain to the same core, is persistent (Beckford 2003:15).

117 Examples of this are evident in the writings of for example Durkheim (1912, 2001).

118 It is not so, of course, that there were no non-theological studies before the 1960's. However the discipline came together as a multi-disciplinary field – including not only comparative studies of religion but also sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy and others (Smart 1999:ix).

The question is however to which degree that concept retains explanatory power at the individual level in a differentiated<sup>119</sup> society?

The uncomfortable fit of packaged conceptions of religion in respect to everyday understandings of the concept is hammered out by Beckford when he points out that “Given the wide extent of uncertainty and disagreement about what counts as religion in everyday life, it would be unwise for social scientists to intuit or to impose a definition of their own making, especially if it were restrictive. A better strategy is to map the varieties of meaning attributed to religion in social settings, to discern the relative frequency of the prevailing meanings and to monitor changes over time. ... This strategy also offers the advantage of maintaining a close connection between everyday uses of the term ‘religion’ and the identification of religion as an object of social scientific study” (Beckford 2003:20).

## Packaged religion - Bruce and Luckmann

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It is often said that there are two quite different perspectives in the sociology of religion. The substantive perspective on the one hand maintains that there must be an impersonal element at the core of a faith. On the other hand the functional perspective is generally not very concerned with whether the religion has a core set of beliefs involving an impersonal element. It pertains more to the functions that the particular religion performs to people and in society (Connolly 1999:7; McGuire 2001:9-15).

While Steve Bruce and Thomas Luckmann are regularly cited as representing the substantive and functional perspectives respectively, they nevertheless share fundamental assumptions about the importance of religion in terms of society and the individual.

Steve Bruce understands religion as

*beliefs, actions and institutions that assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose (the Hindu notion of karma, for example) which can set the conditions of, or intervene in, human affairs* (Bruce 2002:200)

<sup>119</sup> See definitions in the introduction.



Thomas Luckmann argues that there is a socially created transcendent layer of meaning that may or may not point to a superhuman or supernatural idea, which transcends daily meaning-making and permeates culture and human activities. Luckmann calls such meaning systems symbolic universes

*socially objectivated systems of meaning that refer, on the one hand, to the world of everyday life and point, on the other hand, to a world that is experienced as transcending everyday life [...] The organism [...] becomes a Self by embarking with others upon the construction of an “objective” and moral universe of meaning. [...] We may, therefore, regard the social processes that lead to the formation of Self as fundamentally religious* (Luckmann 1967:43, 48-49).

It would appear that these two conceptions of religion are quite different. However, these differences are not quite as significant as they appear. Bruce’s notion remains relatively specific in its requirement that religion must entail supernatural or at least impersonal powers. Luckmann puts the emphasis on the social aspects of religion in the social creation of Self, and on the social construction of meaning from a common pool of social reconstructions of transcendence.

However, as Hervieu-Léger remarks “Paradoxically, there is a constant pull towards the substantive definition of religion for those who mean to discard the limitations it puts on empirical research as well as on theoretical construction” (Hervieu-Léger 2000:37). This pull is evident in Luckmann’s claim that religion somehow involves “transcendent layers of reality” (Luckmann 1967:44). The further thrust of Hervieu-Léger’s criticism is that substantive approaches such as Bruce’s are so restrictive that they cannot account for change and have little alternative but to predict the decline of religion. In contrast the functionalist approach, of which Luckmann is often cited as an example, suffers from the opposite problem. It sees belief systems or symbolic universes, which it calls religion, to potentially emanate from everywhere.<sup>120</sup>

Luckmann’s assertion that symbolic universes are socially objectivated systems of meaning implies that they are socially created, mediated, negotiated, and sustained in the social universe of meetings between social actors. This means that

<sup>120</sup> I agree with Hervieu-Léger in her claim that the functional-substantive divide in sociology of religion is largely posturing, and as McGuire states, most frequently a matter of research strategy (McGuire 2001:15).

specialized institutions are not a necessary prerequisite for religion. Institutions in some circumstances happen to arise in order to structure certain representations of symbolic universes.

Bruce would almost certainly agree with Luckmann's characterization of religion as socially objectivated symbolic universes, which may or may not find structure in institutions. Bruce equates religion with "belief system" and "worldviews" (Bruce 2002:236). He asserts – quite along similar lines to Luckmann - that "where it is possible to imagine almost any sort of supernatural power and impute to it almost any characteristics, what are the chances that people will naturally imagine the *same* religion? Very slight, I would have thought [His italics]" (Bruce 2002:237).

While Bruce's and similar substantive definitions of religion are helpful in terms of establishing research and terminological boundaries, they come with other problems.

Bruce argues that "The fate of religion ... turns on the difficult notion of the extent to which religious ideas need to be shared for them to be socially significant and to be sustainable" (Bruce 2002:237). One can understand that Bruce thinks religion must require high degrees of commitment in order to be sustainable and maintain social significance. If not, they will be individualized, diffuse beliefs with "very little impact even on those who carry them, let alone on their wider societies" (Bruce 2002:240).<sup>121</sup>

Bruce argues convincingly that religion, in his sense of the word, is in rapid decline in the West. This much is evident, certainly in a Danish context as we have seen previously in this book. Bruce points out that this decline has created a vacant space in society, which he does not believe "diffuse religions" will be able to fill (Bruce 2002:236). However, Bruce does note that "phenomena can be religious to varying degrees" (Bruce 2002:202). While on the one hand, there are the self-consciously religious, there are also on the other hand "actions and states of mind that are influenced very slightly by religious ideas ... and we can even imagine that the people in question may be largely unaware of those religious influences". Whatever the religious ideas, they must have a substantive referent (Bruce 2002:202-3). While Bruce appears to be willing to allow that people can be more or less religious, what he means by religious refers back to some form of

121 Chapter 6 will discuss these questions in a different framework.

supernatural or impersonal elements. However according to him it is increasingly improbable that people will share the same religious notions.

Luckmann, in a move not that different from Bruce's, claims that contemporary Western societies offer "assortments of social reconstructions of transcendence" (Luckmann 1990:134). This "assortment" includes

*themes that may be legitimately defined as religious; they are capable of being internalized by potential consumers as significant reconstructions of experiences of transcendence. ... The autonomous consumer selects, instead, certain religious themes from the available assortment and builds them into a somewhat precarious private system of 'ultimate' significance* (Luckmann 1990:134).

However he also stresses that the assortment of themes has a substantive referent, transcendences in Luckmann's words. The traditional substantive referents – churches and similar religious systems and institutions - are great transcendents, whereas many of the newer forms are this-worldly transcendents, for example nationalism, community and self-fulfilment (Luckmann 1990:135). Such substantive referents find expression through institutions or groups, as do great transcendences, in a competitive market. From the assortment offered by the totality of these groups and institutions, people pick and choose elements that together form a precarious belief system, according to Luckmann. While the groups and institutions may be involved in packaging religious meaning systems with myths, practices etc., Luckmann agrees that "the chances of success for such firm institutionalizations are not great" (Luckmann 1990:136). The precarious belief systems, named "a social form of religion" by Luckmann, do not offer generally plausible models of transcendence but do have a common referent in the sacralisation of subjectivity (Luckmann 1990:135).

Despite the differences between Luckmann's and Bruce's understandings of religion and its future, their positions as we have seen already are not as different as they would appear. They both describe earlier manifestations of society as sites where overarching systems of belief had an integrative function in society. They agree that in contemporary Western societies, there is a wider market of ideas,

which one can decide to believe in. People interact with whatever religion is in society in a consumerist and transient manner.

While Bruce looks at modern beliefs and finds that they have little impact on those who believe in them and on society, Luckmann argues that modern autonomous individuals are looking for a private belief system that attaches meaning to themselves as individuals, precarious as that belief system might be. Bruce however asserts that even if it is true individuals may have an inherent need for religion, such needs are not always met (Bruce 2002:236).

Significantly however, Bruce and Luckmann share the premise that they are seeking to grasp a belief *system*. Luckmann, albeit asserts that such a meaning system in modern societies is “precarious” and “private”, but nevertheless he maintains that it takes the shape of a meaning *system*.

When Bruce discusses what he perceives to be modern diffuse religion, he continues to rely on the church-model in several ways. In terms of individuals in society, he claims that such diffuse religion is unable to generate and enforce consensus. The voluntary nature of contemporary belief limits community. Diffuse religion is faulted for not eliciting commitment, distinctive lifestyle and sacrifice (Bruce 2002:93-5). According to Bruce religion in order to be significant beyond the individual level must take place in communities headed by organizations, which are un-voluntary or at least overarching to the individual, and which elicit and control commitment, common lifestyle and sacrifice among believers.

Luckmann similarly discusses the development and sustenance of a religious consciousness in contemporary society. He argues that there are few sources of what is taken to by people to express legitimate and objectified knowledge that sustains an individual’s religious consciousness. What emerges from this situation, according to Luckmann, is a high degree of bricolage, where the potential religious themes are almost infinite (Luckmann 1979:135-36).

Despite their intricate descriptions of social processes that lead in this and the other direction, Bruce and Luckmann persist in using the term religion in a way that signifies the sum of those processes and distinctions, they operate with. Bruce does however appear to concede that people or phenomena can be more or less religious, but in the latter case the religiousness has limited social potential. Similarly, Luckmann is not optimistic regarding chances for firm institutionalization of the contemporary, this-worldly transcedents.

Bruce and Luckmann are probably correct in their analysis of historical and cultural contingencies and their influences on contemporary societies. However, based on my focus group findings, I would agree with Beckford (2003:20) and propose in contrast that it is expedient to take as our starting point everyday conceptualizations of religion. My focus groups indicate that it is more descriptive of everyday perceptions of religion to break down the concept into distinct categories rather than to aggregate such categories into a whole, which we claim comprises religion.

This is certainly the case if we are interested in describing religion at the individual level, where we observe seemingly incoherent relations to religion. Breaking down the concept of religion is certainly one way of attaining a higher degree of insight and clarity in respect to the seeming inconsistencies that we observe in peoples behaviour towards religion. Chapter 6 will address my claim again in further detail.

## Spirituality, another approach

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The problem with the concept religion becomes especially evident, when we try to understand what Luckmann calls the “religious consciousness in modern societies” (Luckmann 1979:121) among the broader population. Research in sociology of religion as well as my own research detailed in this book repeatedly finds that many people interact in personal ways with a variety of religious sources. I have referred to a number of such studies in the preceding parts of this book. There is some agreement about the historical and cultural contingencies that have led to these circumstances in a European context. Nevertheless, sociologists of religion are still trying to grasp religion in contemporary Western societies. In the present context there is a strain of thought that stands out in particular. This idea is spirituality.

Spirituality is a term, which is increasingly applied to explain the religious consciousness in modern societies (Flanagan & Jupp 2007; Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Löwendahl 2005; Schlehofer et al. 2008). An often used framework for understanding and researching religion and spirituality works on the assumption that these form two extremes of a continuum, a polarized approach (Schlehofer et al. 2008:412). Attempts to distinguish between religion and spirituality for example associate religion with routinization as well as outer-directed quest for truth. This

means that truth is attainable through external sources such as church, scripture, priest, etc. Spirituality is then conceptualized as less routinized and implies a strong emphasis on an inner-directed quest for truth. This means that truth must be sought through introspection rather than by means of external sources.

An example of this is Heelas & Woodhead (2005). They think about the contemporary spiritual / religious domains as two ways of seeking the truth: Internally, as residing somehow within each person, or attainable through introspection, and externally through communion with something outside of oneself. These two ways of reaching truth can be more or less institutionalized and routinized. There is no necessary correlation between inner quest and non-routinization. Their Kendal study actually works on the premise that both domains consist of many smaller congregations.<sup>122</sup> However, the religious domain has formalized its dogma and practise (church Sunday sermon, prayer meetings, parish priest etc.) to a higher degree than the spiritual, given that the spiritual domain facilitates individual and to a higher degree idiosyncratic ways of seeking the truth. What counts as belonging to the spiritual domain is much more contested than what counts as religion. Yoga might be considered an exercise regime by some and a means to insight by others. Furthermore, spirituality with its multiplicity of expressions is not structured by established rhythm to practice, it has no common rituals, no necessary membership, although practitioners perform as spiritual guides and are often involved in more than one kind of spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead 2005:33-37).

However, Schlehofer et al.'s research indicates that religion and spirituality may not in fact be distinct expressions of faith. With a similar objective to mine, they set out to explore how "lay people" (sic) understand the terms religion and spirituality. They conduct their research among 67 elderly residents in three retirement communities in California. One community was explicitly Christian and required residents to have a minimum of twenty years of employment in a Christian based organization behind them. The other two communities were religiously unaffiliated. Schlehofer et al.'s interview based research indicates that a significant part of the

<sup>122</sup> Grace Davie remarks in her review of the Kendal Project (Davie 2005), that she is bothered by the count. She fears that a number of less structured and institutional Christian activities might have been missed, because the count of participants in church-activities was done on a Sunday, whereas the count of holistic activities were done over a week to compensate for lack of routinized practice. This, she says, will skew the findings in favour of the holistic milieu. However, one might equally point out, that the Kendal Study does not account for practices conducted outside of the congregational venues, which would tell us something more about the salience of beliefs in people's lives.

sample in fact identifies as both religious and spiritual (Schlehofer et al. 2008:422). Their findings in response to how lay people understand the terms religion and spirituality show, that these concepts “clearly shared more commonalities than differences among our sample of older adults. However, in contrast to most recent scholarly theorizing ... our findings suggest that older adults may not view these constructs as strictly polarized concepts” (Schlehofer et al. 2008:423). Schlehofer et al. find that their participants had a more vague understanding of the concept spirituality than of the concept religion. Religion is often associated with “both personal belief systems and community affiliation” (Schlehofer et al. 2008:424). It is suggested that personal belief systems find support and solidification in religion, where religion is understood in terms of community and organization. However spirituality is not understood by the participants to be of an entirely different nature. “When describing religion, participants mentioned behaviours such as meditation, reading the Bible and other forms of religious literature, and praying, all non-organizational activities ... These same non-organizational forms of searching for the sacred were also part of many participants’ ... conceptualizations of spirituality” (Schlehofer et al. 2008:421).

The benefit of the polarized model is that spirituality and religion are clearly about the same thing, namely how to become aligned with a symbolic universe of whichever distinction. However, there are several problems inherent in such an analytical distinction, seen from my perspective.

The first problem lies in the analytical distinction itself. Individuals might not see the same distinctions and might well combine practices, as indeed Springer, Voyé and Schlehofer et al. as well as Ahlin (2005) indicate in their studies. The second problem, which is closely related to the first one, is that the distinction implies “packaged” sets of beliefs. However ordinary people might well mix both types, which suggests that while the distinction may be apt on the organizational level, it is considerably less useful as a means of understanding the religious consciousness of ordinary people at the individual level. These points are also stressed by Schlehofer et al. in the conclusion to their research report:

*Our results suggest several implications for measuring religion and spirituality. First the definitions of religion and spirituality were distinct, yet overlapping; thus, the findings suggest that multidimensional measurement of these constructs is warranted. ... Second, the findings demonstrate that no existing theoretical framework can fully explain ... definitions of religion and spirituality ... suggesting that it might be fruitful to ground scientific definitions and measurements of these constructs at least partially in the lay definitions from the population of interest. (Schlehofer et al. 2008:423)*

## Is religion a zombie category?

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At the top of this chapter I noted that religion in modern times remains relatively under-researched and it is unclear what religion is (Voyé 2004; Woodhead & Heelas 2000).

The question, what is religion, takes up a weighty part of Hervieu-Léger's book, *Religion as Chain of Memory* (2000). Her objective is to bridge the substantive and functional definitions of religion through her own new definition of religion. Religion, according to Hervieu-Léger consists of three elements, which must be adhered to. These are "the expression of believing, the memory of continuity, and the legitimizing reference to an authorized version of such memory, that is to say to a tradition" (Hervieu-Léger 2000:97).

Hervieu-Léger admits that everything that takes the form of tradition need not be an "integral part of believing" (Hervieu-Léger 2000:97). And furthermore that "Anything in our society which relates to believing does not necessarily relate to tradition" (Hervieu-Léger 2000:99). So religion in her understanding would refer only to instances where tradition, belief and memory adhere to a common reference point. Hervieu-Léger herself affirms that while modernity inhibits the vibrancy of chains of memory, there remains a demand for traditions. However,



there is no reason why demand for traditions, or need to believe, should necessarily give rise to the re-creation in some new form of an overlap of belief, tradition and memory, i.e. religion (Bruce 2002:236). And given the ad-hoc manner in which beliefs are actualized one might ask; what constitutes belief, a chain of memory and a tradition in those events when they come together to become religious in Hervieu-Léger's terms?

The question is whether such definitions make sense at all in a modern, differentiated society, where traditions, beliefs and memories are actualized and contextualized in ad-hoc manners, and seldom find expression in coherent systems. To loosely paraphrase Luckmann,<sup>123</sup> the sociology of religion should perhaps revise its assumption that religion - as a package of dimensions with a common referent and substance, which is mirrored in the lives of individuals - is the measure of whatever religion that goes on in contemporary, differentiated society. The purpose of this revision would not be to show that there is more – or less – religion going on than meets the eye, but to explore how religion actually plays out among individuals in contemporary society and why.

In a 2007 review of three monographs on religion and secularization, Adam Possamai raises the possibility that religion might be a zombie category.<sup>124</sup> A zombie category is an idea proposed by Ulrich Beck, which signifies “living dead categories within a national framework that we still use in research and are no longer applicable in a cosmopolitan society” (Possamai 2007:237ff). Ulrich Beck is mostly interested in national and cosmopolitan frameworks. My book however is about religion at the individual level. For that reason, what I mean by zombie category is slightly different. Religion is a living dead category because it assumes relations of meaning and belonging, which pertain to a differently structured

123 “Once the sociology of religion uncritically takes it for granted that church and religion are identical it blinds itself to its most relevant problem. It has prejudged the answer to the question whether, in contemporary society, any socially objectivated meaning structures but the traditional institutionalized religious doctrines function to integrate the routines of everyday life and to legitimate its crises. It therefore fails to concern itself with the most important, essentially religious, aspects of the location of the individual in society” (Luckmann 1967:27).

124 Possamai himself concludes that as a field we may have to live with zombie categories such as religion in the understanding that they are neither particularly descriptive nor perfect. He prefers to emphasize the processes of studying the flesh of such concepts and their constructions in academia and among other social actors (Possamai 2007:242). I agree fully that the emphasis should not be on the label as such but on the content. However, in order to move the focus resolutely away from the zombie categories themselves, it is necessary to deconstruct them and recalibrate research to a flexible approach that emphasizes the everyday negotiations that construct the conceptualizations in social relations.

society, and which are no longer applicable.<sup>125</sup> In order to revive the category, it is necessary to re-substantiate it.

As I argue in this book, the category religion describes a set of relations, which are not descriptive of religion as it presents itself at the individual level in my data. The people in my study do not behave towards or understand religion in the ways we would expect them to. In contrast they break down the concept into distinct categories that do not point to a common core. My focus group participants express beliefs that they believe in. As we saw in chapter 4 such beliefs can include something experienced as a higher power that is sometimes called god, or nature as a force. Such beliefs are actualized in an ad-hoc manner rather than in terms of a belief system, as is evident from the ways in which people help each other to express their beliefs. In the group of sociology students,<sup>126</sup> the young Buddhist explored the idea that beliefs might refer to some kind of philosophy. In this instance she was using what was clearly the language derived from her own routinized religious background to define in some sense or another what beliefs might be. She extemporises on the subject and ventures that such beliefs might be a way of raising oneself to a higher level. One of the others in the group asks her, whether this elevation takes place in order for life to become more exiting. She is clearly not following her friend's reasoning. The Buddhist explains that it is in order to come to terms with the abstract universe and to find a place in it as a person. The third participant interjects that beliefs are also to do with basic orientations in life. She finds life complex and lacking in clear direction. Beliefs to her also have to do with every day life and its problems. In conversations like these it becomes clear how unsystematized and unreflected beliefs are, even though they appear to have a significant value to the people, who hold them. People also use church but apparently not for religious reasons. As I have shown in chapter 4 they use church for certain social events such as weddings, baptisms, Christmas services or similar events, where social belonging and identity are established. It is clear however from my focus groups that only a very small minority of my participants use church for religious reasons, because they believe in the message or feel a belonging to the church as religious institution. My focus group participants also have religion, but by religion most of them mean the shared cultural heritage, which originates

125 I will discuss this further in chapter 6.

126 080228.

in the church as organization and belief system, but is not religious. They are often happy to agree that they are cultural Christians. By this they mean that they have a shared cultural religious background, which they believe is associated with particular shared social values that penetrate contemporary Danish society. As we saw in chapter 4 there is no conflict between being an atheist or non-religious and being a cultural Christian. Religion refers to a shared heritage and certain shared assumptions, norms, values as well as traditions. For indeed my focus group participants do also have traditions, which they know are often founded in church, but these traditions are perceived as voluntary practices. Such practices do not pertain to their religion, nor to their beliefs, but to the social expectations of how things “are done”. Such traditions sometimes take place within a religious context, as I mentioned when infants are baptized and couples wed. Traditions are also held in the home, when families get together for Easter lunches or Christmas Eve. Other traditions might take place in public or in the media, such as when the Danes watch the New Year service on television, a religious ritual per se, but consumed as part of the social celebration of the new year. Remarkably, it emerges from my focus groups that most often there are no significant practices related to beliefs, except for prayer and good behaviour. Belief is essentially unsupported by practices and system, and clearly pertains to something else than routinized religion, religion-as-heritage and tradition.

If these beliefs and behaviours are set against the packaged conception of religion, we would have to conclude that the people I have talked to have very little religion. Their beliefs are personal and situated in secular contexts, and whatever religion they do have pertains primarily to social and cultural expectations and conventions. However, as we have also seen, even practicing and believing traditional Christians construct their beliefs from heterogeneous sources. Their beliefs are not expressions of a belief system, but they do incorporate elements of that system along with other sources and ideas, and they actualize them in ad-hoc and situated manners. Are these people then also merely culturally Christian?<sup>127</sup> Are they not religious?

However, if we unpack the concept of religion and break it down into sub-categories that may or may not point back to the same core, we should be able

127 Zuckerman 2008.

to get a somewhat different picture of the “religious consciousness” in modern societies.<sup>128</sup>

The question is though how and to what extent the beliefs, religion-as-heritage and practices people have, according to my research, have any impact in terms of sociality and greater social significance. Or to put the question differently, is our expectation that religion as a meta-category should have social significance and impact in terms of sociality valid? I shall turn to these issues in chapter 6.

## Towards unpacked religion

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Inspired by Bellah et al.’s *Habits of the Heart* (1985, 2008), Gundelach et al. have published a study on Danish majority attitudes, which in part succeeds in unpacking religion.

In respect to religion, and on much the same kinds of evidence as this book, including quantitative survey data and interviews, Gundelach et al. find that Danes are generally happy to call themselves believers and Christians, and even to claim that they believe in god, whereas they are unwilling to call themselves religious (Gundelach et al. 2008:138-39). The ordinary Dane seldom identifies absolutely with any kind of religion, but remains emotionally open to various forms of ritual practice (Gundelach et al. 2008:143). Such Danes are not dismissive of church as such, but do not use it much either except for transitional events. They are more inclined to think of church as a cultural institution. The authors assert that Danes are generally more inclined to cultural Christianity. However this, they say, is not a form of religion in itself, but rather a link to church Christianity (Gundelach et al. 2008:149). They conclude that

128 Other attempts have been made to unpack religion (Küçükcan 2000; Yinger 1970). One prominent example is Stark & Glock’s (1968) multi-dimensional model of religion. Along a differing number of main dimensions and a further variety of sub-dimensions they seek to break down organized religion into discernible aspects. The hypothesis is that all of the dimensions pertain to a common core inherent in the particular religious system. While this is a fruitful and testable approach, it differs from mine in where it is applied, namely among members in organized religion. It is perhaps not very surprising that members of organized religion evince relatively high degrees of correlation between a number of the aspects of religion, particularly in an American context 40 years ago. Other approaches such as King (1967) or Verbit (1970) also operate with multi-dimensional perceptions of religion, and similarly to Stark & Glock they hypothesize that these dimensions refer to a shared religion (Küçükcan 2000).

*The faith of Danes is not particularly conspicuous in daily life. Only a few express it actively, a few pray now and then, and belief in a spiritual power is more common than belief in a god comparable to the Christian personal perception of god. Nonetheless Christianity contributes to the creation of an us-them relation to other lines of faith, particularly Islam (Gundelach et al. 2008:240, my translation).*

While I am much in agreement with Gundelach et al.'s conclusion, they combine various indications that are somehow assumed to jointly describe religion and this blurs the clarity of their findings somewhat. The authors are aware that the patterns they observe seem dissonant in terms of the concept, religion. In what is in practice an attempt to unpack religion, the authors remark that the question is whether religion is mostly about knowing, doing or being, rather than about a necessary overlap of these three modes of religiosity. In this they follow Fishman 1980 (Gundelach et al. 2008:136). Where religion can be approached either through knowledge, practice or identification according to this set of distinctions, a vital question nevertheless remains, knowing, doing or being *what*? This threefold distinction although an attempt to break down the concept of religion into various modes of interacting with it, nevertheless suggests that religion is a complex of something (in relation to which one knows, does or is) that has a common core; i.e. packaged religion. However this seems not to resonate very well with the data.

It emerges from my study that the majority of my sample does not to any great extent associate from belief to religiosity, neither do they associate from belief in god to religiosity, nor do they associate from their self-identification as Christians to religiosity.

By going even further in the attempt to unpack religion as I do in this book, it becomes clear why Danes do not make the associative connections, we expect them to. The distinctions I find in my data (routinized religion, religion-as-heritage, belief, tradition and practice as I have shown in chapter 4) explain why Danes in quantitative surveys claim both belief, Christianity and belief in god, but answer negatively to practices, specific tenets of belief, etc. To the people I have talked with, there generally is no real link between religion, belief, practice and institution in the ways we would expect. This accounts for statements such as those I have already referred to in chapter 4. A woman for example explains how she has

had her children baptized, but that has nothing to do with her beliefs and there is nothing religious to it either. It is tradition, it is how things are done, and there is also an emotional and aesthetic pull, when she mentions that the babies look so sweet in their little white gowns.<sup>129</sup>

Certainly it is evident from my focus groups that belief content is actualized in ad-hoc and contextual ways,<sup>130</sup> which does not suggest that these people “know”, “do” or “exist” in relation to it as such to any significant degree. All those aspects could however in various ways contribute to the identity project of individuals as well as societies, as Gundelach et al. suggest in the former quote.

## Chapter resumé

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This chapter argues that religion is conventionally understood as a number of aspects with a common core. It is inferred that norms, values, beliefs, practices, etc. somehow and to a certain extent pertain to a shared belief system. Newer attempts to a certain extent seek to circumvent the problems inherent in this system-perception. However they do so predominantly by including more phenomena into what might be perceived as religious. In this chapter I call this system-perception packaged religion. I suggest that religion is a zombie category, which assumes certain relationships, which no longer exist. In contrast I point out that the data I have found among my focus group participants should induce us to unpack the concept of religion.

129 080415 /1.

130 See for example Extract 1 in chapter 2.



# Unpacked religion

In the previous chapter I raised the question whether the aspects which we include under the meta-category religion are bound to have impact in terms of sociality. This broad concern remained a stone in my shoe all the while I conducted my focus groups.

In chapter 4 I showed that religion as a meta-concept can be unpacked into more discreet aspects, which do not interact with each other in the ways, we would expect if we apply the packaged conception of religion. Having unpacked religion, and identified how the various aspects evoke different associations to my focus group participants, it became clear to me that the expectations we might have in terms of social impact should also be unpacked. This involves exploring belief, religion-as-heritage, practices and traditions separately in terms of their social functions.

Most importantly I could not quite resolve the question about what kind of impact individualized expressions of belief might have on people as well as on society. In that context I kept returning to the problem concerning how beliefs are developed and sustained, if they are ad-hoc statements that are actualized contextually.

We usually expect that beliefs and other ideas are socially constructed and maintained by aid of a plausibility structure. Such plausibility structures are commonly supposed to be relatively stable in the form of groups or associations of people, who use approximately similar language to express shared values



and worldview.<sup>131</sup> But this somewhat diagrammatical conception of plausibility structures is clearly not mirrored by the sociality we observe in a kind of society, where the inputs for values and worldviews come from a large range of sources that do not appear to be incompatible from the point of view of the individual.<sup>132</sup> Bruce is correct in his assertion that it is hardly likely in such an environment that people should actually share the same weave of ideas (Bruce 2002:237).

During the period of time when I talked with the focus groups my presumption was that there had to be some form of shared plausibility structure. Perhaps it would not surround the beliefs as such, but at least I thought it might surround the attitudes that enabled beliefs. But since this issue was on my mind, I frequently asked the groups to share their thoughts on the subject.

The young woman,<sup>133</sup> who had considered converting to Catholicism, reacted to my question by saying that to her, with her background and her life, as a member of the Danish state church, living a practicing Catholic family life, she feels that there is a close connection between belief and belonging to a community. This sounded contradictory to me, because her beliefs apparently prevented her from converting to Catholicism, but she nevertheless clearly felt that belonging to a faith based community is extremely important to her, in maintaining her beliefs. Then she added that she was not sure that faith must be social by necessity. "You've got these 75%, but only a few of them ever go to church, so it's only a few that seek that communality, and even when you go to church, it's like, very god-ish."<sup>134</sup> To me there's a very marked overlap between the feeling of belonging and being a believer, belonging to god and community, but I don't think that most people long for the social aspect."

Since I was struggling to understand how belief is sustained, I asked her about her views on that. She responded: "You know, I don't really know, I don't understand that either, but perhaps the premise of your question's wrong. You

131 "Members of the community will likely use a somewhat specialized language and participate in sacred rituals as important means for expressing, sharing, and internalizing their beliefs. [...] believers also must develop appropriate socialization processes to ensure that new and future members accept their faith as plausible. Some sociologists refer to the concept of "plausibility structure" when describing the sociocultural context or "base" for meaning systems" (Encyclopedia of Religion and Society 1998:364).

132 This does not imply that the concept plausibility structures is redundant. However, it appears likely that plausibility is sought in numerous places and from many sources and brought together cognitively.

133 080408.

134 She was alluding to the situation that church services are predominantly to do with the vertical relationship between god and believer rather than the horizontal interaction in a shared social and communitarian environment.

see, if you think that you are able to define what it means to be a believer, and that you can define what you believe in, whether it's called god or whatever, then you really don't have to believe in anything apart from yourself, actually, in order to find confirmation." I understood what she said as meaning that if people perceive themselves to be a believer, and do not look outside themselves in order to define belief, but rather think that they decide what to believe in themselves, then no system or structure is in fact necessary in order to sustain whatever such persons believe in. All a person would need is herself. It is the subject in self-referential confirmation of subjective beliefs.

Her answer stuck with me, and later on I realized that her answer might in fact be the key to my concerns. The concept religion as we have applied it in the study of religion is in many ways a zombie category. By implication of unpacking the concept religion, it follows that many of the expectations we have entertained of the consequences of religion must need to be re-examined.

As we have seen from the discussion of my focus groups in chapter 4, belief, routinized religion, religion-as-heritage, tradition and practice may in fact be five relatively distinct phenomena, albeit with certain possible overlaps, as we have seen in the unfolding of what my focus group participants convey through their discussion. It stands to reason that our conventional expectations of how these aspects of religion perform should also be readdressed.

Beliefs are developed through individual life experiences and are actualized ad-hoc and contextually. They are understood by my focus groups as personal, private, and in the event that they are expressed through practice, this most commonly takes place as inner prayer rather than in outwardly visible forms. A tradition, such as it is understood by my focus group participants is something one does because it is expected, because it has always been done, or because it makes social sense. Religion-as-heritage is understood by my participants to be a cultural expression, a shared background stemming from a shared religious history of values, ideas and norms. Routinized religion pertains to the organization, institution and religious system of beliefs and practices. Traditions and religion-as-heritage are aspects of socially shared life, whereas belief and frequently also practice is not. How might these distinctions be theorized?

Grace Davie who has had an influence on the thinking about belief and belonging in recent scholarship notes that "... the phrase 'privatized religion' is

misleading to the extent that it overlooks the origins of our beliefs and the context in which they are held. Belief is not self-generated, nor does it exist in a vacuum; it has both form and content ... which are shaped as much by the surrounding culture as by the individual believer” (Davie 1994:76).

However, as I have argued in the previous chapters of this book, the term religion itself is misleading in that it would have us assume a close relationship between a number of separate aspects including those I identify as belief, routinized religion, religion-as-heritage, practice and tradition. Religion as a meta-concept should be unpacked. There is no convincing reason why we should assume at face value that all the unpacked aspects of religion are in the process of becoming privatized. Indeed in the following sections I shall argue that it is only belief that is privatized, whereas the other aspects of religion are not fully privatized.

## Theorizing unpacked religion

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The privatization of religion in fact involves several processes. One process lies in increasing institutional differentiation by which religion has lost its general social influence and has withdrawn into specialized institutions with limited range of responsibilities and powers (Casanova 1994:212).<sup>135</sup> Another process, which is interwoven with the first, has been the gradual establishment of a private sphere in society, which is to a large extent segregated from the public or larger social and communal spheres. People go to work, to school, they participate in communal activities, and then they go home to their private sphere. The result is that home is divorced from religion. It no longer matters much socially, whether religion is conformed to, particularly within the private sphere at home. And the process has gone even further in that individuals in any given household may not share the same beliefs, have the same religious heritages, or participate in the same traditions.<sup>136</sup>

135 Casanova's line of argument pertains to the institutional level of society. The processes he describes are formative for how societies develop, and as such also create certain circumstances that influence the interpersonal and individual levels of society discussed in this book.

136 Voas & Bruce (2004) discuss the consequences of this situation for social surveys, where the head of the household is often asked to fill in the survey form. This person cannot be expected to be representative of the household itself, in terms of sex, age, worldview, religious orientation, etc. A related issue, which Voas & Bruce do not discuss, concerns the fact that it is increasingly questionable whether a person can answer in terms of exclusive identity markers in contemporary society. It is quite possible to be a member of more than one denomination. It is also possible to be of several ethnicities, etc.

In fact the same individual may incorporate several religious heritages and enjoy religious traditions arising out of more than one religion-as-heritage. The private sphere has in this way been drawn back further from the public, in to the inner subject of a person.

As a consequence of these two processes religion has become an institution or organization among others in the public sphere.<sup>137</sup> Belief on the contrary now resides solely in the private sphere, in the inner minds of individuals.

The growing distance between the public sphere where religious and other forms of institutions reside and the private sphere inside each individual calls attention to a space that arises through the processes that work to segregate the private from the public spheres.

This space is sometimes conceptualized as a civic space.<sup>138</sup> Civil society in such terms is the mass of voluntary and social organizations and institutions that exist in society. These are not elements of state, neither are they private.

The same space is also sometimes conceptualized in terms of community. Communities are imaginary associations of a more or less permanent kind. A review of literature shows that the term, community has at least three central associations. (1) Communities are a “consciousness of kind”, which means that members feel a connection to one another and difference from others. (2) Members have shared rituals and traditions that function in a Durkheimian fashion. (3) They finally feel a sense of moral responsibility to the community as a whole (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001:413).

In terms of religion in contemporary Danish society, civil society is not a comprehensive description of the space between the private and public sphere. Neither are communities. While both civil society and communities are certainly important aspects of society, the implication is also that they are somewhat

137 I am not using the term public sphere to allude to Habermas. To Habermas the public sphere is a symbolic space of negotiation among equals ([wolton.cnrs.fr/EN/dwcompil/glossaire/esp\\_public.html](http://wolton.cnrs.fr/EN/dwcompil/glossaire/esp_public.html)). I am using the term public sphere to signify such elements in society that are formalized and routinized, such as the State Church, Islamic congregations, Scientology, etc.

138 The London School of Economics centre for Civil Society uses this working definition: “Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women’s organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy group.” [lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what\\_is\\_civil\\_society.htm](http://lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm)

structured and that individuals form conscious or affective bonds with others through or in them. However, a significant part of the third domain between institutional and private sphere is in fact relatively unstructured or tacit (Besecke 2005). The space that becomes more evident with the increasing gap between the public and private spheres might be – for lack of a better word - termed *social*. This space incorporates civil society and communities, as well as the public and private spheres. But vitally this space also includes informal and tacit meetings of minds regardless of whether such people are incidentally also members of more formal expressions of the social sphere. This space is where private individuals are constructed. Private individuals are constructed in this space through their meetings with many diverse inputs from other individuals as well as from other social actors including civic society, and public institutions and denominations.<sup>139</sup>

## Institutional religion, personal beliefs, shared heritage and tradition

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One important development of Danish society is institutional differentiation (Åkerstrøm Andersen 2008). The outcome of this development in respect to religion is that no religious institution has any significant influence on other institutions in society. Religion is one compartment among others. Religion here refers to a routinized meaning system, which would previously have had crucial impact on other aspects of society. The influx of other forms of religious meaning systems has further eroded any religious hegemony in contemporary society. The effects of this process of differentiation are that all religions and religious groups enter the denominational market on more or less equal conditions. They become equally legitimate and must compete for members on the same terms (Casanova 1994:213). In a differentiated society such as the Danish, religion has become privatized in the sense that religions have become denominations in a market, rather than a total institution.

Danish society has furthermore undergone a significant degree of privatization of religion. In this sense of the word private (personal), beliefs have become

139 For discussion of similar conceptions of a social sphere, see for example Weintraub & Kumar 1997:1-43 and Besecke 2005.

subjective and can in principle no longer be integrated into a comprehensive religious world view (Casanova 1994:35).

For this reason religion is private in the sense that routinized religious normative proscriptions no longer overarching or inevitably regulate individual choices in respect to belief and religion. Nor do such proscriptions necessarily regulate other aspects of life.

The private sphere is where private beliefs are held, whereas public institutions with the exception of the State church exist without reference to god. The State church has relinquished its influence on other institutions and has become one among many institutions vis-à-vis the individual's private sphere (Casanova 1994:40).

In Danish society, where privatization has occurred to a large extent, the public sphere has become quite distinct from the private, individual sphere. The public sphere consists of specialized institutions, including state departments, a large array of services, education, and a wide range of denominations.

The private sphere resides in the subjective minds and hearts of individuals (Sointu 2005). While the private subject may draw on many diverse sources in order to become a subject, identity formation is not dependent on any particular source in the public sphere. Schematically speaking this public-private dichotomy is augmented by a social sphere.

The social sphere occurs when heterogeneous expressions are fused into shared structures, meanings or emotions. This might happen in conversation in a focus group just as easily as in a voluntary political organization, in the shared experience of music or art, in the casual conversation or through consumption of mediated messages.

The social sphere is the product of human interactions, where many diverse sources of meaning are brought together. Some forms of sharedness are more permanent than others, however. This might be in a culturally shared attitude towards how something is done. Some of these sources originate in the public sphere, as might for example be the case when a tradition is expressed by reference to church.

One of the caregivers at the psychiatric institution talked about religion and its plurality of expressions, even within Christianity and Islam. "if we must talk about religious beliefs, then they are of course also a community, because somehow or

other, regardless of whether you like it or not, you do have a sense that you can always rejoin the religious community you belong to.”<sup>140</sup> He goes on to explain how the religious community is inclusive in many ways. He reasons that a person will be welcomed into the religious community irrespective of other differences, simply on the basis of certain formal requirements. The religious community that is alluded to here is the formal routinized religious one, which according to the schematical representation presented in Box 4 would fit in the public sphere.

The psychiatric caregiver went on to describe what he thinks of as an alternative type of community, based on belief (in contrast to religious belief). As he explained it, the belief-based community signifies feelings of community, which arise when one experiences togetherness with people, with whom one shares beliefs. He sets this kind of community up against the religious community. The belief-based community feeling arises in the meetings of minds among people with similar personal values centred on personal beliefs. He explains how this kind of community is more fickle than the religious community. This belief-based community is tacit rather than structured. It pertains to the social sphere in the schematical representation presented in Box 4 below in this chapter.

In other words, according to this psychiatric caregiver there is the religious community on the one hand and the belief-based community on the other. The former arises within certain formal structures, irrespective of whether other values are shared. The latter arises based on emotive parameters, which are largely unspoken, and which are recognized through the feeling that one shares values rather than on the basis of formal criteria.

The latter indication of the social sphere materializes in the goings on among people, in brief encounters as well as in shared cultural assumptions. It is neither private nor public, although it certainly draws on elements of the both spheres. It is primarily social. It can even take place within an institution, without for that reason belonging to it. This is where religion-as-heritage and traditions belong, in the space where culture as a social manifestation is found.

140 080415/2.

Box 4 illustrates schematically the three spheres, as they pertain to unpacked religion.<sup>141</sup>

BOX 4: UNPACKED RELIGION <sup>142</sup>

Public sphere	Social sphere	Private sphere
Denominational market including routinized religions.	Religions-as-heritage. Traditions stemming from routinized religions. Shared values. Shared institutions. Shared attitudes.	Personal beliefs.

In a relatively mono-cultural society such as the Danish, there may be a considerable overlap between general culture on the one hand and religion-as-heritage and traditions on the other. While the Danish mono-cultural context exhibits a great deal of identity between culture and religious heritage, the young sociology student of Buddhist faith for example saw no conflict between her personal faith and the broader Danish culture. “Society has been built around some religious principles, that have passed from generation to generation”<sup>143</sup> she said, but these principles are embedded in so many layers of culture that she thinks it is no longer vital that citizens deliberate on or even take any notice of the religious nature of those principles. The principles have become values and social norms rather than items of belief or religion.

As an expression of how little significance religion-as-heritage and routinized

141 A schematical representation is always misleading. It is important to understand that the social sphere arises in more or less informal meetings of social actors and messages. This indicates that the social sphere can take place within the public sphere when for example a tradition is done within church surroundings. When a wedding is conducted for no religious or belief related purposes, it is a tradition, it belongs to religion-as-heritage. It belongs to the social sphere because it is done for social purposes in order to affirm sharedness and sociality among family and loved ones. In another example, a member of a denomination (public sphere) might meet and converse with other people at the bus stop in order to convert them to that belief system. This is an informal meeting among social actors where a message from the public sphere is actualized in the social sphere. How such messages pertain to an individual’s beliefs in the private sphere is contingent in respect to that individual’s life experiences in the past, present and future.

142 Besecke appears to be thinking along somewhat similar lines when she writes that “Religion understood institutionally looks like a church, sect, or cult; religion looked at individually looks like psychological orientations and the occasional belief. Looked at culturally, religion looks like a conversation – a societal conversation about transcendent meanings” (Besecke 2005:190).

143 080228.



religion can have in daily life, one of the psychiatric caregivers narrated how his son had suddenly come to know that a colleague of his is a Muslim. The son had never previously entertained the thought that his colleague might actually have a different religion-as-heritage than him. Religion-as-heritage plays no necessary part in everyday life and need not be in conflict with a larger, shared culture. For this reason it had never come up in conversation in the workplace.<sup>144</sup>

However, not all societies are mono-cultural, certainly not to the extent hitherto seen in Denmark. The scheme illustrated in Box 4 can also describe the shared religion-as-heritage and traditions of smaller groups of people in a more heterogeneous kind of society. Religion-as-heritage and traditions are just two among many components of identity and sociality. Indeed it is easily possible to enjoy, as an individual, several religions-as-heritage and traditions, as the woman of Hindu origin evinced as she envisaged how her children would comfortably grow up with knowledge and experience of several religions-as-heritage and traditions.<sup>145</sup>

## Personal beliefs

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As I mentioned before, I was much concerned during the course of my research with how individuals maintain and develop their beliefs. I raised this question of how one sustains one's beliefs in contemporary society with many of the groups. As sociologists we would expect beliefs to be sustained by some kind of plausibility structure, which might include practices and meaning bearing communities. However, as I have also discussed in previous parts of this book, the people I have talked with were unable to confirm this expectation in the ways we would expect them to according to the packaged religion paradigm.

I mentioned to the groups that in sociology we expect church related beliefs to be sustained both by church and by fellow believers. And I explained that I was wondering how beliefs are sustained when they lack a church-like system of established practices or meaning systems, etc., and when one does not have fellow believers as such.

144 080415 /2.

145 080408.

One of the psychiatric caregivers, a slightly older woman who had deep beliefs and had told me that she had experienced numerous psychic events in life, was quite explicit that there are no rituals related to her personal beliefs. A hairdresser responded that “It has nothing to do with community or anything, it’s only got to do with oneself, I would say”.<sup>146</sup>

The group of financial & marketing middle management discussed the church as a social space in earlier historical epochs. But nowadays, as they said, church is only one of many options, with internet and television, leisure and after work activities and similar alternative social spaces where the need to belong is met. In the course of this discussion, one of the men exclaimed that belief is a social thing. Another of the participants disagreed. “Somehow or another we’re all pack animals, but I don’t think that’s why people believe, because they might as well play a game of football. They have chosen to believe and some of them might also play football while they believe.”<sup>147</sup> In another group, one of the young affiliates of the humanitarian aid organization said “I don’t think it’s community, it’s something personal and something they use in many different ways.”<sup>148</sup>

## Subjective beliefs

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Routinized religion incorporates beliefs with other aspects of religion including practices and community. However the social aspects, which would have been part and parcel of a religious package are now quite possibly met by a variety of different activities. In contrast, belief has withdrawn into the private minds of individuals. For this reason, beliefs in contemporary differentiated societies become extremely personal, on par with other emotions.

The group of marketing and financial staff from a bijouterie company<sup>149</sup> discussed this privacy of beliefs at length. This discussion was actually initiated by one member of the group, who did not believe in anything, as she insisted. She raised the question “Why is it personal?” To her, as a non-believer, it seemed strange that something, which apparently seems quite important to many people, should be considered virtually taboo as a topic of conversation. While almost

<sup>146</sup> 080326.

<sup>147</sup> 080416.

<sup>148</sup> 080227.

<sup>149</sup> 080326.

all the groups talked about belief as something personal, there were different explanations as to why this would be the case. These explanations ranged from fear of conflict that might arise due to differences of opinion over anxiety that others might think of one as a weak or perhaps even a somewhat insular person, to the feeling that one's beliefs are emotions so deep and at the same time abstract that even beginning to verbalize them would abase them.

As I thought about the issue of privacy during my focus group research, I interpreted these points of view as indications that social harmony is often valued over social exchange of ideas. I furthermore thought of it as an expression of the fear of standing out, or of attracting negative attention, which is a manifest characteristic of any group formation. I also reasoned that this general characteristic might be augmented culturally by the Danish Grundtvigian emphasis on inner communion with god rather than expressive religion, resulting in an introverted orientation of belief. Expressed by one of the sanitation staff, "... my mother always said that it's better to stay at home and believe in god than sit in church and believe in all the things you have to get done at home".<sup>150</sup>

While these reflections do retain explanatory relevance, a remark made by one of the marketing managers made me consider whether I was overlooking something quite basic.

He was trying to explain why he would be reticent about entering into dialogue with others about his beliefs. He explained that "... it's a difficult task for me to describe, it is much easier to say, well here are the ten commandments ... but when one's own religion is not about ten commandments, but is a mixture of all kinds ... something that exists and something that doesn't exist, something that is a product of one's own imagination ...".<sup>151</sup> What this man seemed to express is that organized religion has an entire ready-for-use language with which to explain one's beliefs. This language is easily applicable as a social code, which lets people express beliefs without necessarily having reflected on the full package. But personal beliefs lack such language in almost every respect and indeed also lack the packaging, which would have increased the likelihood of coherence as well as the possibility to talk in apparently consistent narrative. This deficiency of language and package interferes with the ability to talk about and to even begin to express what one believes in.

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In routinized religion, language with which to express beliefs is formalized and can be easily tapped in to by individuals in their endeavours to talk about beliefs. In contemporary society belief among individuals regardless of eventual association with routinized religion taps into numerous and heterogeneous sources.<sup>152</sup> However, due to the processes related to privatization of religion, beliefs are withdrawn into the private minds of individuals. Although associated with or expressed by means of many different and internally incoherent sources (which stem from the public and social spheres and are actualized in subjective ways), beliefs as they are expressed by individuals in contemporary differentiated societies are subjective and deeply personal. It might have been that the immediacy and accessibility of sources of belief could have facilitated shared meaning and spaces. However it might be conjectured that the Danish social processes that have relegated belief to the inner lives of individuals prevent the emergence of shared language and shared sites. Belief as it resides in the individual, personal sphere is a way of making sense of one's own situation in the world, in Luckmann's terms "self-realization", personal autonomy, and self-expression" (Luckmann 1990:138). In the absence of an established space and time outside the inner mind, it can only be actualized ad-hoc in response to given emotional or social contexts, as exemplified in Extract 13.

#### EXTRACT 13

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**Man 1:** *My faith shows up when I need it (snaps his fingers). Damn, today sucks! And wham, I just pull something out of the hat. See, this makes sense of it, right. That saves me, right. There is no routine. It's just inside me, it makes my daily life a bit easier.*

**Woman 4:** *It's a part of you.*

**Man 1:** *Yeah, somehow.*

**Man 2:** *But I think that often if you feel under pressure or face new situations, you start to think whether there is some kind of meaning to it all. Do I get help now or will ... when everything is right on track and there are no real*

152 However, even when they use this language package in contemporary society, individuals are not insulated from other ideas and meaning systems. As Stringer (1996) shows, even participants in routinized religion incorporate ideas that are not part of the routinized language package, nor are they consistent with such routinized beliefs, and finally they are not internally consistent.

*challenges, not challenges but difficulties, then it's kind of like, everything is fine and you ...*

**Woman 4:** *In those cases you don't think much about it.*

**Man 2:** *No, no, then you don't really need that much else.*

*(...)*

**Woman 4:** *Not only that. I also feel that, you know, if I'm doing something or other, especially if I'm in nature, its kind of like, where I think to myself, wow this is amazing, god it's wild, you know? And that's where, without it being negative or without needing help or support or need to know that there's a purpose ... but just where I feel, this is fantastic, there is a purpose.*

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080326 Marketing & financial staff.

Belief as it materializes in the individual sphere is directly correlated to the individual, both in terms of larger issues of coming to terms with a personal purpose in life, of understanding personal relations to nature and the universe, and in more isolated instances of distress, confusion or marvel. One man expressed it quite simply: "What I believe in is what I am."<sup>153</sup> The deeply Christian elderly man similarly talked about his beliefs as a way of orienting himself personally. He said that belief is really simple. To him it has to do with self-esteem rather than believing in something big and theological.<sup>154</sup>

Similarly, most of the people I have talked with express beliefs as abstract feelings and ideas as we saw in chapter 4. Belief is a reflection of the individual's subjective needs and feelings. Belief is furthermore a cognitive device, which enables the individual to interpret life experiences as they are actualized. "It's also something psychological; one needs an outlet, right. It's kind of like, Yes, help, come and help me, right, and it's not every little detail that one can ask others for help with."<sup>155</sup>

On the evidence of the focus group conversations I have had, beliefs may sometimes be basic orientations in life, such as in the case of the woman of Hindu heritage, who fundamentally believed that something good would always be

153 080415 /1

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derived from a difficult or bad situation. But more frequently beliefs are simply actualized in particular contexts, such as when the topic comes up in conversation.

In daily life, beliefs are actualized in terms of a small prayer for help, or an inner dialogue in the mind of the believer, that makes sense of a particular experience or sensation. The employees at the bijouterie company mentioned how their sense of retribution for bad deeds was shaped by their beliefs. When they have unpleasant experiences with unreasonable people, their belief in greater meaning is actualized, “And then I think to myself, ok, that deed, it will come back to haunt you. That’ll teach you.”<sup>156</sup>

One of the young sociology students, a Buddhist, expressed her personal need to believe like this: “If you start to think about the universe and world and life and that sort of thing, then it becomes so abstract and you can’t really relate to it, right, because it’s so far beyond what we can comprehend, so you’ve kind of got to believe in something, because, how else are we, you know ... are we just ... how did the world come about, why, what is the purpose to life, and that sort of thing, ... you’ve almost got to believe, or you want to believe in something.”<sup>157</sup>

## Shared religion-as-heritage

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The subjectivity of belief, as it emerges among the participants in my focus groups, is pronounced in the discussions about child rearing, which we touched upon in chapter 4. While it is acceptable that children are educated by schools and in this context encounter and study a variety of religions, it is most generally not acceptable to socialize one’s children into a routinized religion as such. Among the group of elderly volunteers two of the participants had to a certain extent been raised with a revenging conception of god, but they were quite explicit in their disassociation with this image of god and it was clear that they had not raised their children with religion.<sup>158</sup> In this respect only the group of women of Methodist, Hindu and Danish state church heritage stood out. As they spoke it was clear that they would not hesitate to include beliefs and religion in the fostering of their

156 080326.

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children. However, the Methodist woman emphasized that there is a difference between having religion in the home and using religion as a tool for child rearing. While her parents brought her up in a deeply religious environment, they never used god to modulate her behaviour, she explained.<sup>159</sup> In every other group, influencing children to believe or to have religion was perceived as a violation of a child's personal integrity.

The notion appears to be that if religion and beliefs are omitted in primary socialization, the child will be able to make the right personal choices in adulthood. A young woman praised her parents for having taken this open-minded approach: "My parents have truly allowed me to believe what I want. They are not believers themselves, but they have never said that there is nothing. They have let me decide for myself, right ...".<sup>160</sup> She has chosen not to be a believer.

## Traditions as religion-as-heritage

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It struck me as strange that people think about socialization of belief or religion in this way as incursions into the private integrity of their children, because at the same time they did speak warmly about traditions. It was evident that my focus group participants would not hesitate to socialize their children in terms of traditions.<sup>161</sup>

As we saw in chapter 4, it is clear that people do not associate traditions with routinized religion although they do recognize that traditions quite often have roots in routinized religion. "I don't think, I mean, I haven't had a Christian upbringing, but I've learned all the things, what is allowed and not allowed, and we have been to church on religious holidays, for christenings and weddings and what have you, but apart from that I haven't had to go to church", said one of the sanitation staff.<sup>162</sup>

Most of the people I have talked with do not associate the practice of tradition with religious socialization as such. Traditions are evidently part of socialization, as a way of teaching children how to do things in Danish society and in the

159 080408.

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161 Only the Jewish woman stood out. She had rebelled against tradition in her youth and had not socialized her children in terms of tradition. The focus in Judaism is on ritual practice and tradition, rather than on faith, which makes for an inverted relationship.

162 080415 /1.

smaller emotive units such as family or community. But traditions are not a way of educating children about routinized religion. The focus group participants referred with affection to Easter lunches, Christmas and Christmas services, baptisms, confirmations, weddings, burials, etc. as wonderful or meaningful as social events where families get together. “It’s a social thing” as one of the financial middle managers expressed it.

In fact, traditions appear to be vital social spaces where bonds are affirmed, regardless of whether the individual feels any connection to the religious origin of the tradition or not. One of the irreligious young men affiliated with the humanitarian aid organization stated that even though he feels no affinity what so ever with church or Christianity, and also would not agree that he is a believer “I am also a part of that community, which involves celebrating Christmas and other Christian traditions. It’s nothing I chose to stand apart from, because many of them are enjoyable and I don’t think that it’s something one should ... well, it’s community!”<sup>163</sup>

Similarly, traditions are not as we saw in chapter 4 related in significant ways to beliefs. “Our religion is becoming more and more tradition, and then we believe individually”, as one of the sanitation staff observed. “I also think that is more tradition by now than anything else, religious I mean. I think, like Easter and Whitsun” another person in the same group remarked.<sup>164</sup> Or as one of the sociology students observed: “To me, all those Christian traditions, they have nothing to do with belief, if you ask me, even though I know that this is where they come from. It’s to do with family and community. It’s not what ... I associate with belief.”<sup>165</sup>

Traditions are first and foremost social sites where communal or family ties are re-affirmed. Such sites are shared, cultural space-times, where certain programmatic practices are enacted within a socially shared and agreed upon framework. A Christening for example is acted out within a certain institutional space and follows certain order of events. Roles and rituals are relatively pre-determined. An Easter lunch often consists of particular dishes, which allude to its former routinized religious content. It takes place in a routinized religious time frame, and in some ways remains a re-enactment of the last supper. Other

163 080227.

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Easter traditions allude to Nordic fertility religion. In such ways, traditions draw on a religious framework. However as it becomes apparent in my focus groups, there is absolutely no conscious affirmation or ratification of religious content. Furthermore, just as beliefs do not pertain to routinized religion, the tradition similarly neither evokes, proclaims, nor confirms any belief content what so ever.

One of the young affiliates of the humanitarian aid organization reflected on the endurance of tradition even in the face of a vacuum of routinized religious belief and practice that “traditions are much better grounded than the institutions as such.”<sup>166</sup>

Indeed traditions seem to persist in recognizable forms even as the belief content slowly changes or evaporates. Traditions alluding to a Christian and Nordic religious history appear to remain a perennial aspect of sociality, as a shared religion-as-heritage, which is delivered to the next generation through socialization. “You are a member of a family, and you are raised and, well, we go to church for christenings and weddings, and that’s that”, said one of the sanitation staff.<sup>167</sup>

## • Religion-as-heritage in connection with routinized religion

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Shared religion-as-heritage can also be actualized within a social context closely connected to routinized religion, as in the case of the Methodist woman as well as her friend who lived a practicing Catholic family life. Their beliefs were individualized and personal, just like most of the other participants in my focus group study, and they similarly tapped into traditions in ways, that were largely devoid of routinized religious content. However, they did actively and intentionally participate in a number of the social activities provided by their churches. These included play groups for their children as well as family weekends. In this sense they were satisfying parts of their need for community or sociality within a context, which was closely related to routinized religion. To the woman in the Catholic community, this was clearly a way of affirming her belief, as she explained it. To the Methodist woman, it appeared natural to use the local church. This was how she

<sup>166</sup> 080227.

<sup>167</sup> 080415 /1.

herself had been raised, in a close religious community where church was a social hub as well as a religious platform. To her, sociality, participation or belonging to a community of people came first, and as she envisioned it, religious belonging might come at a later stage.<sup>168</sup>

## Shared values as religion-as-heritage

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The shared religion-as-heritage goes beyond shared traditions. It also involves a sense of shared values, or fundamental attitudes to life and fellow human beings. Again this sense of shared religion-as-heritage is not associated with routinized religious or personal beliefs. It is rather a feeling of being a member of a group, which shares many of the same cultural assumptions and basic orientations. This sense of togetherness was often alluded to in my groups, often in terms of affirmation of Christianity. However, this assertion of Christianity was not an expression of Christian belief. It alluded rather to the shared heritage, which is perceived to draw on a historical Christian background. Some of the participants used the term, cultural Christianity to describe this position. One of the first aid course participants explained this notion; “well, if I were asked whether I am a believer, I would probably say no, but if I were asked whether I am a Christian, then I should say yes ... because there are a whole lot of elements to Christianity that ... values that I have been fed from childhood, love of fellow man and that sort of thing. Would I believe in a bearded gentleman who has created the world, on the one hand no, but is love of fellow man a sensible principle to live by? Yes.”<sup>169</sup>

## Routinized religion as shared institution

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Given the fact that 4/5 of the population continue to be members of the State Church it is remarkable how little emphasis my focus group participants actually put on church. Very few of them used the church for services apart from in connection with tradition, for example funerals, weddings, etc. as I mentioned earlier.

<sup>168</sup> 080408.

<sup>169</sup> 080330.

One of the first aid course participants explained that she uses the church more than average, between five and ten times a year, as she said. Remarkably she did not mention a church that she felt was her own. When she goes to church, she mostly seeks out churches that preach what she already believes. She added that sometimes she goes to other forms of churches out of curiosity, to learn what such churches stand for.<sup>170</sup> The elderly believer also used church - in his case a particular one - and spoke about his experiences as meditations on self as well as a space where he could experience community for the duration of the service.<sup>171</sup> The Methodist as well as the potential Catholic convert did not appear to use church for services, even as they participated in the social activities provided by their churches, including play groups and family outings.<sup>172</sup> In this sense they were using the sociality offered by the church rather than the institution, the beliefs or other religious elements of routinized religion.

In the group of financial & marketing middle management an explicitly irreligious man in the group was asked by one of the others in the group whether he would be willing to participate in a christening in church. He replied, "Yes of course I would, it's a social event, I also go to children's birthday parties, there's no difference to me. It's just that in this case, someone has chosen that this particular social event will take place in a church and there may even be a priest present."<sup>173</sup>

This man is not representative of my participants in his view of church as completely divested of particular significance. Church, and in a single instance synagogue, remains significant as an institution and space to many of the focus group participants in respect to those traditions that make sense to them, which they have been brought up with or which fill them with positive emotions and memories. "I can go to synagogue as a non-believer too, and I like the people, the spirit, and to sit and contemplate those of my relatives who have died and that sort of thing, yes, peace of mind" explained one of the elderly volunteers.<sup>174</sup>

The church as shared institution was more often referred to as an iconic building or symbolic space rather than as an institution as such or as a social space. Church in this sense was not the local church. The church was not a familiar space

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to most of my focus group participants. Only a few mentioned a church that they personally used and felt a sense of belonging to. Only the Methodist woman, the elderly male volunteer and the woman who lived a Catholic family life mentioned church as a personal space. To the extent that the other focus group participants mentioned church at all, they discussed exceptional churches. Such churches were referred to in terms of particular aspects, which are taken to have special significance by the focus group participants, even though they do not frequent that church themselves.

The Marble Church was mentioned as an example. This church in the centre of the capital city, Copenhagen is an example of new classicist architecture. It expresses a certain floating feeling as well as an air of strictness in architectural simplicity, but it also evokes Grundtvigian grandeur. It is surrounded by punishingly severe statues of Danish priests and theologians including Grundtvig himself and Kierkegaard. This church was highlighted by one of the participants for its impressiveness and the clever use of circular space to transport sound around the church room.<sup>175</sup> Other specific churches are mentioned by the focus group participants by virtue of particular priests, who are acclaimed to offer experiential services or a particularly inclusive message.<sup>176</sup> In these ways, churches appeared to be cultural symbols to most of the participants, rather than buildings with which one was familiar through participation. Only a few mentioned a priest they considered to be their own. The priests who were mentioned were mostly media celebrities.<sup>177</sup> Apart from these few well known clergymen, priests came across as a generalized category of bad salesmen with a “low key”<sup>178</sup> spirit or as downright tedious speakers.

While the church as building and cultural artefact evokes positive emotions and even in some cases awe, the religious content, which is transmitted in church does not appear to reverberate with most of the focus group participants. As one woman said about the life altering experience of loosing a loved one, “I’ve just been to church because my mother just died, and it’s not that long ago that I went for a different occasion, a christening and things like that, but the atmosphere in a church, the music, it’s pleasant, right! And if it’s a nice church at the same time,

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176 080415 /1, 080407, 080416.

177 Thorkild Grosbøll became a media figure after stating that he does not believe in God and sees no conflict between that and being a parish priest. Johannes Møllehave is a writer, critic and star preacher.

178 080326.

so that there's something to look at, that's fine, then the experience pleases me, but there's nothing religious to it at all."<sup>179</sup>

## Shared attitudes to belief and religion

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Very early on in this research project I had considered the possibility that there might be some kind of shared belief system underpinning the many private configurations of belief I assumed that I would find in the course of my focus groups. While I could identify several belief types (for example higher power or something else) among my focus groups, as we saw in chapter 4, I could not discern a shared belief system.<sup>180</sup> However, I could clearly identify a shared attitude to belief and religion, which penetrates all groups.

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### EXTRACT 14

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**Woman 2:** ... but I can't understand how you can ... that you can value the Koran more than yourself. I don't understand how you can believe so much in a story, a book, a legend, whatever. A person who lived a long time ago. That you can submit to this faith, so much so that you are willing to take your own life, for your faith. ... But again if you've imbibed it from a young age and been told the story again and again. Then in the end you will believe it. It becomes normal. But to me, it's really unnatural.

**Man 4:** It's not only Muslims that feel that way.

**Woman 2:** No, but ...

**Man 4:** There are also Christians who are Christians to the extent that if God wasn't with them, they wouldn't be able to do anything.

**Woman 2:** Sure, that's true.

**Man 4:** But I really feel it's equally bad, you know, I don't think anything should be fanatical. I find that really difficult to relate to, that one becomes ...

**Woman 2:** You should believe in yourself.

179 080415 /1.

180 The reasons for this are discussed in chapter 5 and theorized at the top of the present chapter.

All participants in all groups echoed the notions expressed in Extract 14 in various ways. Even the few that professed a direct and active association with routinized religion revealed an inclusive attitude to religion and beliefs generally. All the focus group members simultaneously voiced an individualistic attitude to what they could believe in personally. Moreover they made it clear that they did not find the act of submission to external authorities and other sources of true belief at all acceptable.

## Shared positive attitudes to belief and religion

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Based on a somewhat negative bias against Muslims and Islam in Danish media and politics (Rosenfeldt 2007), I had assumed that my focus groups would discuss Islam as the antithesis of their own beliefs. However, although some of the participants did mention Muslims and Islam, they did so primarily when enumerating different kinds of religion or as an example of prescriptive religion.

In fact, my focus group participants appear to be comfortable with the co-existence in society of many expressions of belief and many kinds of routinized religion. Simultaneously, they express very little exclusive loyalty towards their own religious heritage. “It would be pretty neat in school, in religious education classes, that there were different things, if one wanted to become a Hindu or a Muslim” one woman said as she alluded to religion as a commodity, and voiced that children should be able to select what they feel is the best fit for them personally. One of the other women in her group responded “Yes, one never knows whether there might be something that suits one better.”<sup>181</sup> None of the participants gave any indication that they thought any one particular routinized religion was superior to others. This suggests a certain shared ethics; an attitude of religious pluralism and inclusiveness towards different expressions of belief and routinized religion.<sup>182</sup>

<sup>181</sup> 080415 /1.

<sup>182</sup> This generally inclusive attitude is also noted by Andersen & Riis in their interpretation of quantitative data on religion in Denmark. As mentioned previously in this book they find that Danes generally hold that there are many spiritual routes, none of which are more correct (Andersen & Riis 2002:90f.).

This way of thinking was often attributed to a Danishness, which was regularly characterized in terms of both a tolerant mindset and a degree of indifference to dogma. The self-assured atheist affiliated with the humanitarian aid organization said “I would answer yes to being a cultural Christian, because then it’s in a larger context, but you know, I grew up in little Denmark and one happens to think in particular ways here, it’s kind of how our society has been created, and we must be good to one another and that sort of thing, right, so I would have no problems in identifying myself in this way”.<sup>183</sup> One of the hairdressers explained that growing up in a country, which celebrates freedom of expression, she feels entitled to believe whatever she likes. One of her colleagues responds “I just also think that us Danes, we have a very relaxed attitude to many things, right. We are like a, well, everything will be alright kind of people, and that’s how we feel about belief, too.”<sup>184</sup>

## Shared negative attitudes to belief and religion

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As it emerged, the antithesis of the focus group participants’ attitudes to belief appeared to be a much broader, one might say generalized behaviour; not simply Muslims, as I had imagined based on broad and often adverse media coverage of Muslims in Denmark (Rosenfeldt 2007). Subjectivity is the norm among my focus group participants. Individuals who relate to routinized religion and to beliefs from this selective and personal point of view are therefore contrasted with such people, who are presumed to submit themselves to external authorities. Such external authorities include priests, bible or similar sources in terms of guidance. Religious Muslims were mentioned in this respect as an example of people, who submit to prescriptive religion. Such people are believed to follow someone else’s counsel than their own needs, emotions and life experiences. Such people are therefore perceived to live by rules found outside themselves. Indeed such people are presumed to be particularistic in that they are believed to follow a strict and uniform set of rules, and to live by external prescriptions rather than by personal motivations. Furthermore, such people are presumed to hold that their own beliefs are superior to others’.

There is an unresolved tension however between this disregard for submission

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to external authorities and a yearning for explicit rules of conduct in contemporary society. “We are totally lost and that’s why we hang on to fashion and that our hair is just right, etc. And get more and more depressed as human beings, because we suffer from lack of religion” said one of the employees at the bijouterie company. Her colleague added “Yes, or you lack a set of rules of conduct ...”<sup>185</sup>

It is nevertheless evident that people who are perceived to hold particularistic religious views or who submit to external authorities are largely disapproved of. The sole believer among the groups of men affiliated with the humanitarian aid organization told us that “There’s no doubt that many of the points of view, methods and values that have been marketed by Christians, Muslims and Jews throughout the ages, I am hostile towards them! I’m not just talking about, well like I kind of disagree, I mean, I’m talking about really marked differences and hostility, and the same goes for many of the religious spokespeople of today. They define themselves in completely different terms and their ways of talking, they talk in the name of god.”<sup>186</sup> His loathing of this kind of attitude was palpable. One of the sanitation staff said “I think that those people who are very religious, you know where I come from, the West Coast,<sup>187</sup> you know from Jutland, right, where ... they are too fanatical sometimes, right, I sometimes think they’re the worst, those who’re very prejudicial and ... those things, right, I don’t like them much...”<sup>188</sup> In the same group, one of the other participants observed that “other religious communities, and also our own, they read something and interpret it in a certain way. That’s how it is, but I think that’s dangerous, right, because I think that often, the way you look at things has to do with your background [...] and that’s why I think it’s difficult to point my finger at others, like, and say that mine’s the right way.” Here her self-perceived inclusiveness was opposed to the perceived rigidity of the routinized believer, and found expression through her experiences in childhood in comparison with her own present attitudes to belief.

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187 The Danish equivalent of the Bible Belt.

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# Unpacked religion – a different mode of understanding

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The State Church as it presents itself to individuals in Danish society is in effect no more than one among many denominations.

The market analogy is apt to describe the religious situation in this kind of society. Religious institutions become specialized providers that function in a market, where other religious organizations and denominations also move to sell their religious product. None of these suppliers are hegemonic by nature, although some may be more popular than others at any given time.

Individuals on the other hand can be likened to consumers, who combine purchases from various shops in personally meaningful ways. Contemporary culture is to a certain extent characterized by a shift from relational role-determination to subjective role-selection (Heelas & Woodhead 2005:2). The consumer therefore casts herself in various subjective roles, actualized contextually and by means of signs that are appropriated in the market. This means that the individual can use elements from many shops to realize her subjective self in relation to any specific context. When she leaves that context, she finds herself in a new one, and has to re-actualize her subjective self anew with whichever signs she finds appropriate to the new context. The subjective self is furthermore engaged in self-analysis and self-construction, even within the confines of the mind, where she seeks to identify her subjective authenticity (Sointu 2005).

I have described a public sphere and a private one in somewhat schematical terms. However, there is a third sphere. This sphere is realized socially, but can take place more or less informally.<sup>189</sup> This social sphere is also a source of inspiration for the subjective self, as well as a space where the subjective self is played out. It must of course be pointed out that these three analytical spheres are constructions and as such not insulated from one another and that the boundaries between them remain fuzzy and overlapping. However, this should not deter us from applying this schematical model as a device for grasping sociality and the role of religion in society.

<sup>189</sup> See Besecke 2005, Weintraub & Kumar 1997.

To use a market analogy in understanding my findings in respect to the three spheres mentioned above it may be said that religious institutions are service providers and brands.<sup>190</sup> They are specialized shops that sell a particular conception of religion. One particular provider, the Danish Lutheran Church has a long history in Danish society as a virtual monopoly. For this reason many of the religious needs have been met historically by this service provider. It has therefore become tradition to use this trusted service provider in certain circumstances such as weddings and funerals. However, there are many more such service providers in contemporary society, and the monopoly of the church has been eroded. Nevertheless, among the population in this country, the State Church has succeeded in establishing a social way of doing things, which survives even in a competitive market economy. The shared social space is a forum, where many service providers including non-religious ones meet with the consumers. This shared space is where religion-as-heritage, values, traditions, norms and other expressions of sociality are developed in more or less structured forms.

Due to the societal processes of differentiation described previously in this chapter, the private individual has become constructed as an autonomous being. Being autonomous does not imply disassociation from other individuals or entities in society, but rather that each individual must establish personal meaning for himself. Routinized religion is now only one source of meaning among many others. It usually no longer entirely satisfies the subjective, self-reflexive and changing needs of most individuals. Personal meaning is contextual to a much larger extent than routinized religious meaning; a routinized religious organization can define and systematize a set of beliefs, values, practices within a specific time-space framework. This is much more difficult for individuals, and indeed that kind of rigid behaviour is considered pathological in our society, as several of the employees at the psychiatric institution noted.<sup>191</sup> Individuals actualize meaning contextually, in an ad-hoc manner, drawing on many external sources and integrating them in ways that seem personally appropriate. When my focus group participants talk about what they believe, they are involved in

190 While it is obvious that religious denominations aim to provide more than services, in terms of belonging, believing, security, exaltance, etc., this is not how the clear majority of my focus group participants relate to church or other religious denominations. This is not to say that religious denominations are unable to perform in such significant ways in people's lives. In a market analogy the term brand evokes the latter kind of service, where individuals select a specific provider, which to them stands out and offers a deeper level of commitment and meaning.

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this dialectic yet idiosyncratic process of realizing themselves as subjective beings. This process is different from what these people associate with religion. Religion refers to the routinized suppliers of religious meaning, the churches and religious organizations. Individuals may have personal practices in respect to their beliefs, whether in terms of an inner dialogue or a prayer or even in meditation within a routinized religious framework. Individuals also share religion-as-heritage, which is characterized by a shared cultural legacy with values, norms and practices. Such shared practices go under the name of tradition. Traditions are not celebrated for their religious content but for their social strength in terms of sustaining community.

At the beginning of this chapter I asked whether the aspects, which we include under the meta-category religion are bound to have social impact. This question is an important consequence of my way of thinking. In the packaged conception of religion, we expect a number of different emanations or aspects of religion to share a common core. We expect that people believe in what their religious organization preaches, at least to a certain extent. We also expect a degree of practice and a related set of norms and values in a community of believers. If we do not unpack this package, a decrease in one specific aspect will mean a decline in the whole package. When we find that people do not believe in what the church preaches and they do not participate, it looks like a massive decline in religion. And indeed it is, if by religion we mean the full package.

When we use the packaged conception of religion, we find that people relate to religion in inconsistent ways. Why do people remain members of the church, when they do not believe in it? Why do they persist in re-enacting traditions they clearly do not believe in? Why do they believe in god, when they do not believe that god has any role to play in life? What does it mean when they respond with the relatively wishy-washy “greater power”? Why do so many people believe at all?

In my research, I have allowed ordinary people to unfold the concepts of belief and religion. The aspects of religion that have emerged from these conversations are quite distinct. They are belief, routinized religion, religion-as-heritage, practice and tradition.<sup>192</sup> If we unpack religion we will see a different picture of the contemporary religious consciousness. And that picture corresponds with

<sup>192</sup> This is not to claim that there are no other aspects of religion, which should be unpacked. Religion is after all a broad category that includes sensory experiences, music, art, psychology and many more expressions.

the differentiating societal developments we are able to identify in contemporary society.

When we unpack religion we are able to unearth new answers to such questions as I mentioned a moment ago. We find that people think of church mostly as a provider of space, for the practice of socially important traditions that are devoid of religious content. We find that belief is a personal attempt to develop their subjectivity in ad-hoc ways, which does not in significant ways pertain to the belief systems that are prescribed by church. They use the word god, which is appropriated from church, as a code but the word god does in no way connote the god in church. For this reason Jesus is all but absent in their conversation. And for the same reason, god does not act. God is not god, but a figure of speech. God signifies the need to understand the world and one's place in it. People believe in order to make sense of themselves in their own lives.

Religion such as it has been conceptualized in a package is a transient historical emanation, which has been successful in establishing itself for a time due to various other historical contingencies. As society changes it is vital that the sociology of religion re-addresses assumptions that are grounded in that particular historical era and in particular intellectual conceptions of society (Beckford 2003). This book is intended as a step in that direction.

## Chapter resumé

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In this chapter I link the unpacked conception of religion to larger societal structures inherent in differentiated societies, certainly in contemporary Western European societies. Religious organizations now compete in a relatively open market as a consequence of institutional specialization and differentiation. However other, coinciding social processes have relegated belief to the inner minds of individuals. In between these two spheres lies a social domain where shared traditions, values, norms, attitudes, etc. are actualized. These societal conditions explain why beliefs appear personal and subjective. They also give reasons for the persistence of traditions and church membership in the face of declining belief in the church as belief system and organization.



# Conclusion

In the prologue I described research through the analogy of art. A work of art reveals a certain perspective. This book is an attempt to show how a perspective enables a fresh point of view on religion in contemporary life in Danish society. Seen through the optic of packaged religion, religion in Danish society appears thin, cultural, declining or diffuse. This book however shows how an unpacked conception of religion as aspects pertaining to different slots in society provides another explanatory model for the contemporary religious consciousness in society.

The picture I have painted in this book takes its starting point with the indication that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the population in Denmark would say that they are believers.<sup>193</sup> As a sociologist of religion and inquisitive person I wondered what all these people believe in. This large proportion was cause for wonder also because the answer distributions in the same survey seem to point in many directions and it is clear that people do not believe in fundamental religious dogma of the religious organization to which they belong.

My way of obtaining qualitative knowledge about what a broad selection of the population believe and how they understand religion deviate from how religion is most frequently studied in qualitative research. Religion is often researched in spaces, where we already see religion taking place. Religion in this sense alludes to what is commonly agreed upon as religious. What I call routinized religion. Phenomena reminiscent of such religion are also often studied, even though not commonly assumed to be religious, but to somehow include elements that appear to invoke something similar to or reminiscent of religion; for example in terms of emotions, belonging or sacrifice. The fact of the matter is however, that the broad public may not participate in such activities to any significant extent. What is more, they may also not appear to adhere to such beliefs to the extent that would suggest that they are religious. In Denmark 80% of the population belong to at least one religious denomination. But hardly anyone participates in

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religious events, even if we include new forms of religiosity and New Age (Ahlin 2005). The sizable belonging and miniscule participation, as well as the relatively large percentage of believers calls attention to a need to research religion beyond religious places and spaces, and irrespective of eventual membership, affiliation, belief and participation. If in a society such as the Danish we research religion mostly within religious spaces and places, we will have to conclude that there is very little of it. The question to me however has been, whether we would find the same if we studied religion in the broad public. The much larger body of research in routinized religious locations very often leads to the general assumption that there is a decline in participation, belonging and believing. This raises questions concerning the viability of religion as such in contemporary life. The dearth of research to understand the religious consciousness of those people, who do not belong or do not participate further compounds this concern. It appears that religion is in decline, and our understanding of the religion among non-participants and non-members is insufficient.

Understanding the religious consciousness of ordinary people requires a research location, where such ordinary people can be reached. Ordinary people in this book implies simply that such people have been chosen irrespective of any affiliation with a religious organization or community, and regardless of whether they believe or not. An obvious research location is the work place or other similar venues where people go to do something, which is not religious. With the location in place, the question turns to how to obtain information within the location. I was concerned with how belief and religion are understood and used both by individuals and socially. For this reason I settled on focus groups. Focus groups are useful devices for orientation in a new field as well as for hypotheses generation, and therefore they were well suited for my purposes.

The relocation of research space to the broad public in everyday, non-religious sites and without regard for eventual membership or affiliation raises problems pertaining to how we gather data. Elementarily it is evident that we must remain open in terms of what religion and belief might signify to the people we study. This is so because surveys show that people do not overwhelmingly believe in the things we commonly assume to be religious. Evidently they do not hold the beliefs that would have bound them closer to routinized religion. It was essential to me to avoid cuing my focus group participants to routinized religion and beliefs. During

spring 2008 I participated in 12 focus groups in the greater Copenhagen area dedicated to two main topics. The first was what it might mean to be a believer today. The second whether it is possible to be more or less religious. I believed and was gratified to find that these questions are open enough to generate discussion and to give me insight into how my focus group participants understand religion and belief.

On analysis of the data I found several interesting notions. Firstly religion elicits five quite distinct categories in daily speech. These are belief, routinized religion, religion-as-heritage, practice and tradition. Similar categories or dimensions of religion have not gone unnoticed by other researchers. However other such researches have used conventional research spaces. In my study beyond the usual research locations indicates that these categories do not in fact point in the same direction, to a common core or belief system as such. The finding that the five categories were not fundamentally overlapping would possibly have been different, had I conducted the same research among traditional and sincere believers in routinized religion.

The category of beliefs describes the personal feelings and reflections that reside in the inner life of each individual and are developed cognitively through life experiences. Such beliefs are contextually actualized in an ad-hoc manner.

When the focus groups talk about religion, they also mention what I call routinized religion. This category alludes to the church or other similar religious organization. The focus groups also talk about practices, which belong to routinized religion. These are perceived to be pack and parcel of a routinized religious life and might be for example the Eucharist. Such practices are far removed from most peoples lives. And significantly such routinized religious practices have no necessary bearing or reflection on a person's beliefs.

Nevertheless there are practices, which most of the focus group participants were happy to observe. Such practices are called traditions. The focus group participants were aware that traditions usually take their origin in routinized religious and refer to religious content. However, as traditions are actualized they are in practice and in spirit empty of religious content to most of the people, who observe them. Traditions perform a social function and reaffirm social life and shared heritage.

Traditions are part of a the wider religion-as-heritage. Religion-as-heritage is



free of religious content as such although it evinces a shared religio-cultural history of people, whose heritage is in a particular church or other religious organization.

Research methodologies aimed at understanding the religious consciousness often find that individual's religion is diffuse, individualized and for that reason not able to sustain social or moral cohesiveness. The question is whether this diagnosis of religion in contemporary Danish life is pertinent. And furthermore whether our theoretical assumptions retain sufficient explanatory power. The conclusion that religion in a society such as the Danish is diffuse and socially insignificant while compelling, is closely connected with what I call packaged conceptions of religion. The packaged conception of religion perceives religion to consist of a number of dimensions, all of which pertain in some way or another to a shared matter. It expects values, norms, beliefs, practices, traditions, and institutions to conform to a certain degree, and to have impact on individual lives. There is little doubt in cases where there is an overlap of religious organization, community and society, where the religious content and organization impact on all levels of society, religion has immense social significance. However in societies where religion has become privatized and beliefs personal this convergence need not occur. This does not necessarily suggest that religion is diffuse and individualized. It indicates however that our conception of how religion performs in society and individual lives needs to be readjusted to conform to the social organization of such a society. Unpacking religion into aspects and attempting to comprehend their functions as independent variables rather than dependent ones of each other leads to a different understanding and diagnosis of religion.

A packaged conception of religion is useful in societies where there is a considerable overlap between religion, society, emotive communities and individual lives. This might perhaps be descriptive of a smaller routinized religious community, but it is not descriptive of a society such as the Danish. The unpacked conception, which I call attention to in this book takes its starting point in the social organization of a society where religion has become privatized and beliefs personal. Such a society is characterized by a public sphere of specialized institutions, which is clearly detached from the private sphere in the inner lives of individuals. This gap between public religion and private beliefs accentuates the social sphere, which consists of more or less structured interactions between individuals and the tacit and unstructured meetings of social actors and messages

in society. The social sphere can be exemplified in media influences on individual attitudes, in the incidental conversations that arise among people, as well as shared norms, values and assumptions.

In a society with privatized religion it is very unlikely that any given meaning system will be able to incorporate all three spheres, particularly because there are a large variety of competing meaning systems available in this kind of society. For this reason it is likely that certain aspects of religion reside comfortably in the public sphere, while others are found to lead a viable existence in the other spheres. But there is little likelihood that the elements of religion that are selected in the three spheres and privileged by any individual will all be constituted by that individual as pointing to a common core, such as one would expect according to the packaged conception of religion.

What this conveys is that the individual is in charge of choosing elements of religion from the public sphere to incorporate somehow or other in everyday life. Nonetheless the individual is also part of a greater social sphere, where one is socialized with particular norms and values, as well as traditions and language. These elements are in dynamic, contextual interplay in his mind as well as in the many social contexts he moves in throughout life. The chances of him experiencing an overlap of influences and meanings in respect to what he considers religion are slim. As my focus group participants evince to a convincing degree their traditions and religion-as-heritage all stem from a shared religious system in the Danish Church. However they do not believe in what the church preaches. They use the church as a symbolic space to reproduce certain traditions, but all of this is bereft of religious meaning or beliefs. Beliefs in contrast are personal and do not often pertain to the church and are only seldom associated with expressive practices.

When we find that people believe individually, privately in personal ways, this is because belief has been withdrawn into the inner lives of individuals. They assemble their beliefs on the basis of life's experiences and actualize them contextually. Such beliefs therefore cannot mirror any system offered by denominations or other institutions, organization or groups found in the public sphere. The routinized expressions of religion are located in the public sphere, where they compete with each other for attention from individuals. In some societies one or a few of such routinized religions have had a near monopoly historically speaking and have succeeded in becoming a symbolic location for certain traditional events. Similarly

such routinized religions have provided a cultural influence, which no longer invokes religious associations, but has become a kind of shared attitude and a way of establishing belonging in respect to other kinds of religions-as-heritage. When individuals elect to perform traditions, they do so for social reasons. They use traditions to affirm social bonds and attitudes. Some traditions take place within a routinized religious context, for example in church when a child is baptized. Others take place in formal remembrance of a religious event such as the birth of Jesus. But in most cases none of them are performed for the sake of religion or for the sake of belief. Traditions no longer have any religious value, whereas their social value is hailed.

Through unpacked religion we can understand why religion appears diffuse. It appears diffuse because we persist in expecting all the aspects of religion to point to a common core. But this expectation is untenable in a society such as the one we see in Denmark. This does not mean that it can never be the case in such societies that people actually believe, belong, participate and practice in respect to the same belief system or routinized religion. What it means is that this will not be the case in many or most instances. But this should not lead us to assume that religion is in certain decline. That may be the case, but we cannot really claim that religion is in decline unless we investigate it with perspectives suited to how society develops.

This book has not intended to argue for either increased, decreased or sustained degree of religion in Denmark or in general. Instead the point is to explore the potential for new insights and perspectives based on a methodology intended to reach the broad population, irrespective of religious belonging, participation or beliefs. I find that the concept religion as it is conceptualized in a packaged form is not very helpful or appropriate for describing the relationships of ordinary people with the phenomena, we as sociologists of religion like to group under the meta-concept religion. I would argue that the packaged concept of religion belongs to a particular vision of society, which is not evinced in contemporary Danish society. Certainly this kind of societal organization is eclipsing in many Western European countries. For this reason it is not an appropriate way of conceptualizing religion in such societies. Religion as it presents itself in such societies is complex. For this reason we must apply new perspectives and new methods to develop theories, which are descriptive of this kind of society. The concept religion must be re-substantiated in accordance with other developments in society.

I have carried out my research in Denmark, which is regularly portrayed as a country where religion plays a miniscule role in society and in the lives of ordinary citizens. This is in glaring contrast to the results of social surveys, which show that a majority of Danes believe or are willing to identify as religious to a lesser or greater extent. While the same Danes relate negatively to traditionally Christian tenets of belief such as heaven and hell, they are similarly negative in respect to a number of New Age tenets of belief such as amulets or telepathy. Social surveys also find that Danes believe in god, but that they simultaneously do not believe that god plays a role in their life.

Denmark is an example of a society, where routinized religions abound and where surveys indicate that individuals believe, that there are many equivalently valid forms of belief. Denmark is furthermore a society where an overwhelming majority of citizens belong to a religious organization, but overwhelmingly they do not participate in services and similar religious events.

The concept unpacked religion makes sense in such a context as the Danish, as indeed it has been developed on the basis of Danish data. However, one important point in this book has been to underline that this is a small research project with limited generalizability in terms of its case study. Despite that, I have claimed that this study has generalizability in terms of methodology and theory development. The question then must be to which extent the concept unpacked religion and its location in everyday life in society is applicable to other contexts than mine. While this claim cannot be tested in this book, I would argue that the research location and method should be applied to other contexts in different studies, in order to test whether my claim is supported.

Religion remains a multifaceted phenomenon. Belief, routinized religion, religion-as-heritage, practice and tradition are just some of the aspects grouped together in that meta-category. They are the aspects, which I was able to tap into through my focus group based research in a Danish context in the Greater Copenhagen area.

To return to the art analogy, a work of art is mainly interesting in the context of others, as they illuminate each other, as their strengths and weaknesses combine and teach us about the world. I do not in this book claim to offer a comprehensive model for religion. This book is intended as my contribution to the further

academic discussion about religion, in whichever mantles we find it through a variety of methods and from many different perspectives.

# Epilogue

This book has been written partly in the reading room of the Danish Royal Library North, which is dedicated to the natural sciences. Looking down at me, as I have worked, are larger than life murals of scientific saints, Einstein, Ørsted, Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, Aristotle to the left, Darwin, Pasteur, Newton, Steno and Hippocrates to the right. On one back wall is a large mural portraying some of these men at work. On the other is a mural of a child, illuminated by a ray of light from the heavens. The eye is drawn to him, forced to contemplate this infant in a man's world. He looks up innocently, an arm reaching for the warm light that envelops him. Below him (I assume it is a boy, this is a quintessentially male universe) lies a woman asleep, under the shade of a tree. Is she the mother, quiescent while her son is enlightened? Or does she represent the masses, unaware, unenlightened, resting, assured that they will be taken care of, spirited along by science? To the right, we see a paradisiacal landscape, where the angels of science walk among men. To the left we see two groups of figures. The outermost shows two sages contemplating a globe while pointing to the stars, explorers of the universe. Closer to the centre of the picture, the other group of two stands around a smoking pot; the smoke rises to the sky. Are they offering a sacrifice? Or are they sending smoke signals, declaring to the world that the first star is visible on the horizon? There is little doubt, as I sit there under the gaze of giants that I am meant to feel that I am being initiated in the traditions of Greek philosophy. I shall become one of the chosen; I am that child, still innocent; the prerequisite for learning. But in this room I am promised that one day, I too shall know.

Outside this room, the world goes on in its usual ways, but here, in the presence of greatness and light, we are protected from distraction, from noise; devoted to enlightenment.



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# Appendices



## Appendix 1:

# Considerations about composition of focus groups

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Fern (2001) recommends homogeneity in groups intended to elicit knowledge about attitudes and experiences. The topical question is, homogenous in which way? This appendix details considerations about what homogeneity might mean in terms of my study.

### Homogeneity by gender

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In terms of self-disclosure all-female groups are expected to show high degrees of self-disclosure, all-male groups will have low degrees, mixed-gender groups will achieve medium levels of self-disclosure. This hinges on research findings that females disclose more, and higher levels of disclosure result in reciprocity<sup>194</sup> from conversation partners, including males (Fern 2001:36-38). Although these remarks are not intended as general guidelines or principles, they indicate that all-male groups are relatively less able to elicit data in the form of conversations about beliefs, especially given the emotional implications of the topic. For this reason, it is in theory preferable to work with mixed gender groups.

My first group consisted of four 20-something men, either in the process of doing an MA or already young professionals with completed higher certificates.<sup>195</sup> They absolutely defied the expected low reciprocity degree by talking essentially uncued for more than one and a half hours. My second group consisted of three female sociology students.<sup>196</sup> Where the all-male group overwhelmingly tended towards rejection of any kind of religious belief the all-female was just the opposite. In the all-male group, a single individual was willing to say that he was bound to believe in something, a sentiment all the women in the second group also expressed. It was my feeling that a mixed gender group might have lead to

<sup>194</sup> Reciprocity has been found in dyadic relations and cannot be taken as a general principle (Fern 2001:36).

<sup>195</sup> 080227.

<sup>196</sup> 080228.

broader discussions, and for that reason it has remained a preferred element of group composition throughout my data collection. Sometimes it has not been possible to get mixed-gender groups. Rather than say no to a group, I have chosen to conduct such single-gender groups, where there has been no other possibility.

## Homogeneity by sociological classification

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Traditionally, sociological markers such as age, gender and class have been understood as central to religious involvement. Older people, women and the lower classes are often found to be more disposed to religion in terms of participation and emotional involvement than others. However, recent social developments in the Western world tend to iron out these differences to a certain extent. Gender continues to play a part in self-reported religiosity – women tend to report believing more, praying more etc.<sup>197</sup> The experience with the differences between the all-male and all-female groups discussed above would seem to support that expectation. This may be because while attendance traditionally favours women, women in the workforce participate at approximately the same (lower) level as men (Davie 1994:118 ff).

With people living longer and role-identification across age being more flexible, age no longer serves to determine behaviour to the same extent that it used to. Being a member of a certain age group no longer implies a relatively constricted number of life style choices. For this reason, participation and consumption patterns are no longer uniform. Age remains a factor in the sense that the older cohorts are expected to have received more religious socialization, which differs from the younger cohorts' socialization. Increased social mobility means that class no longer appears to play a determining role in religious beliefs and behaviour to the same extent that it did previously (Hunt 2005:77). Conversely, proximity to death, disease or other life altering or life threatening encounters, whether due to age or due to experience, might be more instrumental in actualizing thoughts about belief (Hunt 2005:76-77, 85 ff.).

Davie concurs with Hunt's interpretation of the tendencies but is more

197 Supported by EVS findings to a certain extent.

reticent about claiming that classical sociological markers are losing part of their significance.<sup>198</sup>

*Are we, in the late twentieth century, experiencing a marked generational shift with respect to religious behaviour, or are the variations so far indicated simply in accordance with the normal manifestations of the life cycle? (Davie 1994:122).*

As the above discussion has indicated, it is at least debatable whether use of classical sociological categories is a predictable method for catalyzing inherent conflicts or inherent sameness in order to generate a propitious environment for conversation.

## Homogeneity by lifestyle

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Homogeneity may be sought by other means. The informants might form a social group in some other sense: As colleagues, schoolmates, friends or relatives, as politically active, in terms of life style etc. The classical sociological markers no longer necessarily restrict lifestyle choices. Instead we find in contemporary Western society that choices to a considerable – but certainly not full - extent pertain to lifestyle and decisions. Thus, it is quite possible that a male of 56 might be the father of young children and for this reason his lifestyle choices will be overlapping with another father aged 30. Similarly, the electrician and the academic might live next door to each other. The electrician might earn more than the academic, or vice versa, or they might have comparable incomes. Their children might attend the same local school and wear the same brands of clothes and consume the same kinds of culture. Even if they do not live next door to each

198 “Today there is an inclination in sociological theorizing to play down the significance of age categories. The meaning of being ‘young,’ ‘middle-aged’ or ‘retired’ is open to interpretation and negotiation, by way of identity construction, throughout an increasingly varied life course. Furthermore, shifting age categories and lengthening life expectancy mean that these are no longer clearly defined ‘stages’ of life with accompanying norms of behaviour. Rather, such stages are more the subject of choice and negotiation as to how they are lived out in terms of lifestyle options, and are subject to aspects of commodification.” (Hunt 2005:76-77).

“Given cohort experiences, it is probably the younger generation that is more subject to preference in the spiritual marketplace and thereby breaks away from communal and kinship religious affiliation to be subsequently exposed to the freedom to choose some aspects of religiosity or none at all. Evidence suggests that it is the younger cohorts in an increasingly socially and geographically mobile society where the decline of religious socialization will be felt most acutely compared to older generations.” (Hunt 2005:77).

other, they might still consume the same kinds of culture, simply because their lifestyle situation is comparable.

If the objective is to establish a degree of homogeneity within the focus group, it makes sense to establish homogeneity along affective lines. Similar lifestyles encourage mutual recognition. People will pre-understand each other to some extent. However, it is possible that precisely homogeneity according to lifestyle will establish too much similarity at the expense of a dynamic exchange of opinions.

## Homogeneity by association

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The above discussion of lifestyle brings up the question of whether the group should exist in real life or whether it should be brought together for the purpose of the focus group. Whether the group should be artificially constructed or not can be argued both ways. Establishing a group specifically for the purpose of doing research enables the informants to construct themselves without repercussions in their daily lives, which would plausibly allow them to venture further into conversations about beliefs than they might do with people, with whom they have already negotiated a front and a stage (Goffman 1959, 1990). Davie (1994), Hay & Hunt (2005) and Day (2006) all experience that some informants feel reticent about talking about beliefs. Informants report that they have never talked about such beliefs before. Some report that they could never talk to friends about such matters, and that they actually enjoy the possibility of discussing beliefs with the researchers. Some informants even report a certain amount of shame about their beliefs and experiences.

Pre-existing groups need not be very well acquainted for that matter and their outlook on life need not be particularly well aligned or negotiated beyond the boundaries of their specific, purpose-oriented group-ness. They might meet up for football practice, but differ in terms of lifestyle in other respects. Accessing a pre-existing group however shortcuts certain basic negotiations about stage and front. The group is already familiar with one another, and a certain amount of trust and respect has been built in advance. Trust and recognition are fundamental to the ability to talk openly about personal beliefs, and to negotiate meaning about matters of personal importance, at the risk of disagreement with others. However,

as noted, emotional bonds can also work to censor individuals' free expression for fear of ridicule, exclusion or risk of feeling misunderstood by one's peers.

Determining whether to work with pre-existing groups is a judgement call in terms of benefits and obstacles. However, other factors also weigh in on the choice of whether to work with pre-existing groups or not.

## Homogeneity by symmetry

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The objective of a focus group is to make possible group conversations by light handed facilitation by a moderator. In an article on understanding, Bourdieu (1996) discusses the role and background of the interviewer at length. As an experienced conductor of sociological research, Bourdieu is in a position to experiment with uncommon techniques. In one instance, he selected interviewers from a number of walks in life and set them to interviewing people in similar circumstances; interviewer and informant already know one another. An unemployed interviews another, a musician another musician. Trust is already established by way of their previous association. The objective is to experiment with decreasing the asymmetry of power inherent in an interview situation, in order to create the best possible terms for understanding (which in Bourdieu's terms is equivalent to explaining) (Bourdieu 1996:23). A person in the same situation will have knowledge and empathy, both of which are necessary in order to elicit more information. The drawback, as Bourdieu also notes, is that such interviewers find it difficult to ask questions that pertain sufficiently to the sociological project (Bourdieu 1996:23).

Focus groups consisting of people who are already acquainted with each other or consisting of individuals who recognize themselves in the others by association or symmetry have some of the benefits Bourdieu mentions in terms of understanding. Here the moderator serves to reign in the conversations within sociologically pertinent confines.

## Homogeneity in real life

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A pre-existing group increases similarity with real life in the sense that members are already co-participants in real life situations. What they express in a focus group will in all probability not only change them, but change elements of the

group dynamic and how they are perceived by their peers. As discussed this can potentially censor informants' speech and behaviour. The question is; how relevant is approximation to real life situations to this kind of research?

Even if the group itself is found in real life, whatever is expressed there is only a limited spectrum of possible discursive utterances. In constructionist or critical research, the objective of interviews and similar data collection methods is not to gather narratives and read them as literal insights into the particularities of each individual in-situ. Nor is each utterance understood as truth or representation of whatever that individual might think in other situations, while going about their daily lives.

In a discussion of methodologies of understanding, Bourdieu expresses it in this way:

*... conversational analysis reads each discourse not solely in terms of its specific structure of interaction as a transaction, but also in terms of the invisible structures that organize it. (Bourdieu 1996:27)*

And immediately preceding that statement, he notes:

*Contrary to what might be believed ... it is the uncovering of the structures immanent in the precise form of words constituting an individual interaction that alone allows one to grasp the essentials of what makes up the idiosyncrasy of each of these girls [secondary school pupils] and all the singular complexity of their actions and reactions. (Bourdieu 1996:27)*

Expressed differently, the words are not simply articulations of individual proclivities. They build on larger discourses that not only give words to individuals, they give entire meanings to whatever is being said and what can be said under given circumstances. Certainly individuals utter the words, but such individuals represent ways in which meaning can be woven into structures of meaning and, not incidentally, highlight power processes in society.

The social and human nature of beliefs makes the topic accessible to most people. The participants will be actualizing and drawing on as well as constructing meaning about beliefs. From the stand point of constructionist analysis, it is not

paramount that the context in which data is elicited approximates real life, since participants are networked into real life in various individual ways and for that reason participate in the overall culture, and actualize elements of that culture verbally.

## Considerations about group size

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Groups consisting of a small number of individuals allow time for people to talk among themselves. A larger group limits the time per participant. A small group also means that hiding is more difficult and it allows more reticent individuals to express themselves. Larger groups have a tendency to focus on ideas they have in common, which is generally productive in terms of eliciting shared experiences (Fern 2001:11-13, 182). However, as Fern also notes this takes second place to research objective. In this case, the sensitivity and perceived personal and sensitive nature of the subject – at least as experienced by Bailey (1997), Hay & Hunt (2000) and Day (2006) - points to smaller groups.

For the reasons discussed above, the constitution of the group will not be the most important aspect in terms of producing theoretically relevant data. However, as we have also seen there are indications that the data might be more salient if the groups are kept small and are composed of people who are homogenous in terms of symmetry.

All of the above discussions concerning group composition have contributed to establishing one non-negotiable and two negotiable baselines for data collection.

Firstly, participants in a group must be already familiar with each other from some other context. I want them to have a degree of common ground to refer to, a relatively close shared context which might set off reflection. This has been non-negotiable.

Secondly, group size must ideally be 3-4 persons. No group has been allowed to surpass 4 persons for reasons of intimacy of conversation. But there have been instances where the group has been reduced to less than 4, and I have also included a single interview with a woman, who could not enter into a group for various reasons.

Finally, a preferred base-line has been the mixed-gendered groups. However, as

discussed above, I have disregarded this base-line if the alternative has been to say no-thank-you to a focus group.



## Appendix 2:

# Data on religion in Denmark

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The present appendix details the knowledge we have from large scale quantitative studies concerning religion in Denmark. The appendix shows that Danes generally belong to a denomination, but that they do not commonly participate in religious activities and do not believe in the doctrines prescribed by the denomination. The majority maintains that they do believe, and a slightly smaller majority expresses belief in god. But according to the data these beliefs appear to have little significant impact on the daily lives of ordinary Danes. Some of the figures presented here have been referenced in the main part of the book and are included here as background data.

When considering these figures, please keep in mind that most are drawn from the most recent concluded EVS survey (1999).<sup>199</sup>

## Membership

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In 1999, 90% of the surveyed sample reported to the EVS that they belong to a religious denomination.<sup>200</sup>

According to Statbank Denmark, 85% of the total Danish population in 1999 belonged to the Danish State Church. However, by January 1, 2008, this percentage had decreased to 82% of the total population. This is predominantly due to demographic shifts, as members are dying and a decreasing percentage of the newly born are baptized and thereby become members of the church. Statbank Denmark does not register membership of other denominations. Neither does it register people's religion. It may be assumed, based on a Muslim population of 100 - 200.000 and a further population of Hindus, Buddhists, Catholics and Jews,

<sup>199</sup> n=1023.

<sup>200</sup> EVS Q57 "Er De medlem af folkekirken eller et andet trossamfund? When cross tabulated with Q63 "Are you a religious person" 83,6% of those who report not to be a religious person and 66,7% of self-reported atheists are members of the Danish State Church or other similar religious organization. Only 6,9% of religious persons do not belong to the Danish State Church or other similar religious organization. One explanation might be found in the importance of religious services for transitional rites such as birth, marriage and death (Q62). The corresponding figure for the US was 78.5%; for the UK 83.5% and for Italy 82.2% to mention a few examples. In Iceland 95.7% are members of a denomination, the figure for Iran was 98,9% according to data from the World Value Surveys.

as well as other denominations that at least a further percentage of the population belongs to other denominations (Warburg & Jacobsen 2007). Unfortunately we have limited data on the latter groups in terms of membership, participation, beliefs and values. The rest of this section will therefore predominantly refer to the majority of the population which is mainly Christian and to surveys of the general population.

## Participation

A considerable percentage of the Danish population approaches the church for transitional rites. Statbank Denmark reports that 78% of all children born in 1999 were baptized. 80% of children between 14 and 15 years of age were confirmed that year and the church buried 92% according to the same source. Even among people who report not to be religious or report to be atheist, there is a considerable percentage who believe that religious services are significant to birth, marriage and death.<sup>201</sup>

Although they overwhelmingly turn to the church for transition rites, the EVS sample also indicates that 2/3 attend religious service once a year or less (see table 1), affirming the picture that participation in organized religion plays a very small role in the day to day lives of the majority of the population.

Thus, it appears that the majority of Danes does not participate to any wide extent in organizational religious – i.e. primarily church – activities. However, they do belong to church, and use it for special occasions.

TABLE 1: REPORTED ACTIVITY

Attend religious service once a year or less <sup>202</sup>	Take moments of prayer or meditation <sup>203</sup>	Pray to god outside religious service once a week or more <sup>204</sup>
67.1%	51.1%	20.3%

201 EVS Q63 “religious person” / Q62 “religious ceremony”. Birth (not religious 43% / atheist 31%), marriage (not religious 37% / atheist 28%) and death (not religious 59% / atheist 43%). It is possible however that the percentages are off due to people responding to whether they think such rites are important to religious people, rather than to them, personally.

# Role of Church

A fairly large percentage according to EVS feels that religious services are important in respect to transitional events (see table 2).

TABLE 2: IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS SERVICES<sup>205</sup>

Religious service important (birth)	Religious service important (marriage)	Religious service important (death)
65.3 %	63 %	79.9 %

Source: European Value Survey 1999

However, this apparently does not translate into the church having broader significance to daily life. The Danish sample overwhelmingly does not feel that the church gives answers to problems in life (see table 3). Indeed only half the sample would agree that the church answers people’s spiritual needs. EVS indicates that Danes firmly believe that church should have little or no influence on politics. 60% “strongly agree” that religious leaders should not influence government. A further 26% “agrees”.<sup>206</sup>

The church appears to be an institution for special events, rather than a moral support or beacon.

202 EVS Q60 “Hvor ofte går De i kirke?” The framing of the question in Danish uses Church rather than religious service and might therefore skew the results somewhat. 20% of those who report to be Muslim report going to church once a week hinting that their understanding of the question conforms to the English phrasing.

203 EVS Q70 “Hænder det, at De beder en bøn, mediterer eller lignende?”

204 EVS Q71 “Hvor ofte beder De til Gud, bortset fra ved gudstjenester? Hver dag (12,2%); Mere end 1 gang om ugen (4,4%); 1 gang om ugen (3,7%); ... Aldrig (51,8%)” Cross tabulating prayer outside services with Q63 (Are you a religious person) shows that none of the non-religious respondents pray more often than once a month, and only 5% of those that have reported praying once a month are non-religious. However, 56,4% of those who report never to pray has also reported being a religious person.

205 EVS Q62 “Mener De, at det er vigtigt at holde en religiøs ceremoni i forbindelse med følgende begivenheder: Fødsel?; Ægteskab?; Døden?”

206 EVS Q74.

TABLE 3: CHURCH ROLE

<b>Church does not give answers to moral problems<sup>207</sup></b>	<b>Church does not give answers to problems of family life<sup>207</sup></b>
80 %	85 %
<b>Church does not give answers to people's spiritual needs<sup>207</sup></b>	<b>Church does not give answers to the social problems<sup>207</sup></b>
48.9 %	88.5 %

Source: European Value Survey 1999

## Beliefs and values

EVS asks whether the sample believes in god. 69% of the total sample does. Of these, 38% believes in a personal god<sup>208</sup>, 44% in a spirit or life force.

EVS also asks people whether they consider themselves religious (“troende”).<sup>209</sup> Interestingly, slightly more than 3 out of 4 would consider themselves “troende. Only 18% is willing to report that they are not religious”.<sup>210</sup> 34% of the religious believes in a personal god, and 44% believes in a spirit or life force. The remaining either do not believe in god or spirit or life force, or do not know what to believe.

The European Social Survey (ESS) would seem to support this.<sup>211</sup> The ESS asks

207 EVS Q64 “Mener De, at den danske folkekirke giver svar på: Det enkelte menneskes moralske problemer og behov?; Familieproblemer?; Menneskets åndelige behov?; De sociale problemer vort samfund står overfor i dag?” The Danish phrasing elects to ask about the Danish State Church rather than “churches” as in religious institutions or denominations broadly.

208 It must be noted that people may not understand the term personal god as the theological conception of a personal god. They might understand the term to mean a personal god in the sense of private god (my god).

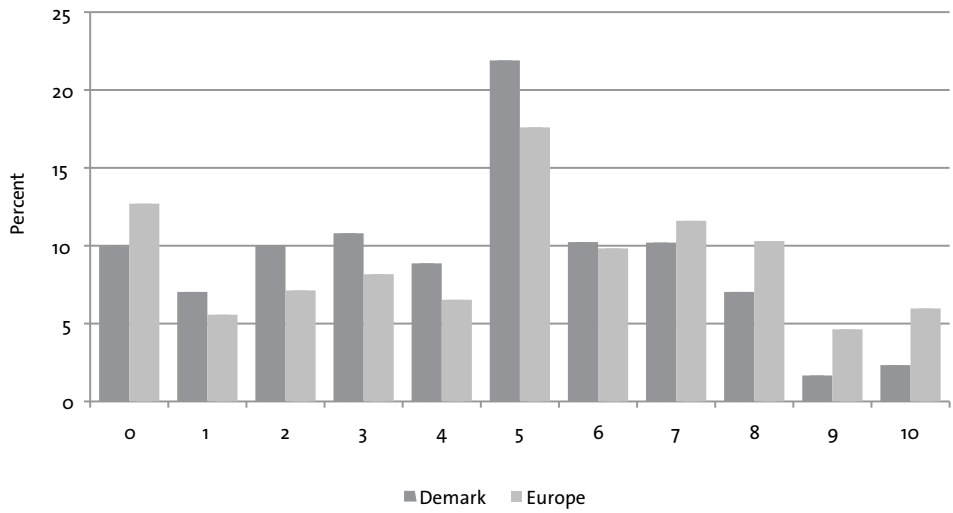
209 “Troende” is the word used in the Danish EVS for religious. Troende literally means believing, to be a believer.

210 EVS Q63 “Uanset af De går i kirke eller ej, vil De da mene, at De er: “Et troende menneske, et ikke troende menneske, Overbevist ateist, Ved ikke. (Regardless of whether you go to church, would you consider yourself to be: A believer, A non-believer, Convinced atheist, Do not know. My translation. Only 5,4% check Convinced atheist, 18,1% are not religious by this measure.

211 The ESS has conducted bi-annual surveys on European values beginning in 2002. According to their website the ESS is “an academically-driven social survey designed to chart and explain the interaction between Europe’s changing institutions and the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of its diverse populations. Now moving into its fourth round, the survey covers over 30 nations and employs the most rigorous methodologies.” <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

people to rate how religious they are.<sup>212</sup> Only 1 in 10 is willing to report “Not at all” (See figure 1). The ESS gives us added information about to which degree people feel religious, which informs us that religiousness may not be considered an either-or question. People can apparently relate to it as a matter of degree. The pattern that emerges shows that most people call themselves moderately religious, more or less so.

FIGURE 1. “HOW RELIGIOUS ARE YOU?”



0 is Not at all and 10 is Very. Average 2002-2006.

Source: European Social Surveys

About 1 in 5 religious person reported believing in a spirit or life force. Similarly, of those who reported *not* to believe in god, a quarter still reported to believe in a spirit or life force. These figures indicate that there is a considerable window for interpretation inherent in these questions.

The above figures show that although most people may not participate in religious services on a regular basis, god and religious *beliefs* are not absent from their lives.

212 EES C21 “Uanset om du tilhører en bestemt religion eller ej, hvor religiøs vil du sige, at du er? ... 0 betyder, at du slet ikke er religiøs, og 10 betyder, at du er meget religiøs.” (Regardless of whether you belong to a certain religion or not, how religious would you say you are? 0 indicates that you are not at all religious, and 10 indicates that you are very religious. My translation) The answer 0 approximates but is not identical to the answer option “Convinced atheist” (EVS Q63).

In spite of this, 2/3 of the sample tells us that they do not draw comfort and strength from religion (see table 4). ¾ feels that god is medium to not at all important in their lives. Only 8% feels that religion is very important in their lives (approximately the same number as report politics to be very important) and a further 19% would say rather important. In comparison 87% find family and 40% find work to be very important (see table 5).

TABLE 4: ROLE OF RELIGION AND GOD IN LIFE

No comfort and strength from religion <sup>213</sup>	God plays medium to not at all important role in life <sup>214</sup>	Religion very important in life <sup>215</sup>
67.40 %	74 %	7.9 %

Source: European Value Survey 1999

TABLE 5: OTHER VALUES

Family very important in life <sup>215</sup>	Work very important in life <sup>215</sup>	Politics very important in life <sup>215</sup>
87.1 %	39.5 %	8 %

Source: European Value Survey 1999

The EVS does not tell us how people understand the term “troende” (believer) nor to any great extent what people associate with their belief in god. However, the survey does tests for a number of more specific tenets of belief. The results reveal that more than half the religious persons do not believe in life after death. 87% of religious people do not believe in Hell, about ¾ of them do not believe in Heaven, and about the same number would say that they do not believe in sin. 8

213 EVS Q69 “Finder De trøst og styrke i religionen?”  
 214 EVS Q68 “Hvor stor rolle spiller Gud i Deres liv?” The question emphasizes God as an active player in life, rather than an important element to life. The phrasing might skew the findings to the negative.  
 215 EVS Q36 “Hvor vigtige er hver af de følgende områder i Deres liv ... Arbejde? Familie? Venner og bekendte? Fritid? Politik? Religion?” The question is found in the block concerning perceptions of life, rather than in the block concerning religion.

out of 10 religious people do not believe in re-incarnation, and 59% do not believe in telepathy.

The primary conclusion that we can draw from the above is that there is some unclarity as to why people respond as they do in ways that seem incoherent. In the main it appears that the answers they give appear not to relate to religion as if it were “one”, but rather as if each question gives rise to new reflections that are not necessarily related to the preceding question.

## Appendix 3:

### Letter to Focus Groups

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I dagens samfund er livssyn og værdier sjældent givne. Vi vælger langt hen ad vejen selv, hvordan vi ønsker at leve livet. Etiske spørgsmål er noget, hver enkelt selv må forholde sig til. For at begynde at nå en forståelse af, hvordan mennesker i dag håndterer denne situation, har undertegnede igangsat en undersøgelse af livssyn og værdier. Resultaterne af undersøgelsen vil blive en del af en Ph.D. afhandling ved Lunds Universitet.

Din deltagelse er frivillig, og du kan når som helst afbryde din deltagelse i undersøgelsen. En samtale vil gennemsnitligt vare 1- 1,5 time og foregår sammen med ca 3 andre, du kender. Vores samtale vil blive optaget digitalt. Efter samtalen vil ordlyden blive skrevet ud. Din identitet vil blive beskyttet. Undertegnede vil have kendskab til din identitet, men alle udkommer af undersøgelsen vil anonymisere deltagerne. Du vil blive omtalt med et tilfældigt valgt kaldenavn. Vi bevarer alene kendskabet til din rigtige identitet for at kunne vende tilbage med eventuelt opklarende spørgsmål og for at kunne fremsende udskriftet af samtalen.

Med dette brev følger en kopi af samme brev vedhæftet en samtykkeerklæring, som du skal underskrive før vores samtale. Her erklærer du, at du har læst dette brev, samt at du accepterer at deltage i undersøgelsen. Hvis du har spørgsmål, er du velkommen til at henvende dig til nedennævnte.

Tak! Din deltagelse betyder meget for vores fortsatte arbejde. Derfor er vi meget taknemmelige for din deltagelse.

Mvh

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## Appendix 4:

### Background data form and count

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**1. Er De:**

*(Udfyldes uden at spørge)*

Mand ..... ☐ 1

Kvinde ..... ☐ 2

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**2. Hvilket år er De født?**

Skriv årstal ..... 19 

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**12. Hvilken skoleuddannelse har De nu?**

Går i skole ..... ☐ 01

7. klasse eller mindre ..... ☐ 02

8. klasse + mellemskole uden eksamen ..... ☐ 03

9. klasse statskontrolleret prøve og folkeskolens  
afgangsprøver ..... ☐ 04

Teknisk forberedelseseksamen ..... ☐ 05

10. klasses statskontrolleret prøve og folkeskolens  
udvidede afgangsprøver ..... ☐ 06

Udvidet teknisk forberedelseseksamen ..... ☐ 07

1. real ..... ☐ 08

2. real ..... ☐ 09

3. real uden eksamen ..... ☐ 10

Realkurser uden eksamen ..... ☐ 11

Mellemskoleeksamen ..... ☐ 12

Real-, pigeskole- og præliminæreksamen ..... ☐ 13

Gymnasium eller HF uden eksamen ..... ☐ 14

Studerter- eller HF-eksamen ..... ☐ 15

Andet (herunder udenlandsk skole) ..... ☐ 16

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**13. Har De/er De i gang med en erhvervsmæssig uddannelse?**

Ja, har én eller flere ..... ☐ 1

Ja, er i gang med at få én ..... ☐ 2

Nej ..... ☐ 3 → Spm 15

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**14. Hvilken erhvervsuddannelse har De gennemført/er De i gang med?**

- Specialarbejderkursus ..... ☐ 01
- Faglig uddannelse (*lærling, EFG f.eks. kontorassistent, typograf, snedker, frisør*) ..... ☐ 02
- 1-årig handelseksamen, højere handelseksamen (HH), 1-2 årig EDB-uddannelse ..... ☐ 03
- Handelshøjskole (*korrespondent, HA, HD*) eller bankuddannelse ..... ☐ 04
- 2-3 årig teknisk uddannelse (*f.eks. laborant, teknisk assistent, apoteksassistent, tandpleje*) ..... ☐ 05
- Videregående teknisk uddannelse, evt. efter gennemført faglig uddannelse (*f.eks. maskin eller byggetekniker, bygningskonstruktør, maskinmester, teknikumingeniør*) ..... ☐ 06
- 1-årig uddannelse indenfor social- eller sundhedsvæsenet (*f.eks. sygehjælper, beskæftigelsesvejleder*) ..... ☐ 07
- 3-4 årig uddannelse indenfor social- og sundhedsvæsenet (*f.eks. sygeplejerske, plejeassistent*) ..... ☐ 08
- 3-4 årig uddannelse indenfor undervisning og oplysning (*f.eks. børnehave-/fritidspædagog, folkeskolelærer, bibliotekar, journalist*) ..... ☐ 09
- Kandidat fra universitetet eller højere læreanstalt (*f.eks. gymnasielærer, civilingeniør, tandlæge, advokat*) ..... ☐ 10
- Uddannet indenfor forsvar, politi, postvæsenet, Toldvæsenet mv. .... ☐ 11
- Anden uddannelse, hvilken: ..... ☐ 12

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**19. Er De for tiden erhvervsmæssigt beskæftiget, udover bijob?**

- Ja, lønmodtager 30 timer om ugen eller mere ..... ☐ 01 → Spm 21
- Ja, lønmodtager mindre end 30 timer om ugen ..... ☐ 02 → Spm 21
- Ja, selvstændig ..... ☐ 03 → Spm 24
- Nej, efterløønner/førtidspensionist/pensionist ..... ☐ 04 → Spm 25
- Nej, hjemmegående ..... ☐ 05 → Spm 29
- Nej, studerende ..... ☐ 06 → Spm 29
- Nej, arbejdsløs ..... ☐ 07
- Nej, andet, hvilket: ..... ☐ 08 → Spm 29

**12 groups. Total: 17 male/24 female**

Born in:	80s:	9	Employed:	+30 hours/week:	22
	70s:	16		-30 hours/week:	2
	60s:	5		Self-employed:	2
	50s:	6		Pensioner:	4
	40s:	2		Student:	7
	30s:	2		Unemployed:	1
	NA:	1		NA:	3
Education level:	Academic:	13			
	3 years:	12			
	1 year:	9			
	Other:	3			
	NA:	4			

## Appendix 5 – List of focus groups

Date	Name	M / F
o8o227	Humanitarian aid organization, youth dept.	4 / 0
o8o228	Sociology Students, University	0 / 3
o8o310	Hairdressers	1 / 3
o8o326	Marketing & Financial staff, International Bijouterie design company	2 / 2
o8o330	Participants, First aid course	2 / 1
o8o407	Volunteers, Organization for the elderly	1 / 3
o8o408	IT-professionals, International consultancy company	0 / 3
o8o415 /1	Sanitation staff, Psychiatric institution	1 / 3
o8o415 /2	Caregivers, Psychiatric institution (medium education)	2 / 1
o8o415 /3	Caregivers, Psychiatric institution (medium education)	2 / 2
o8o415 /4	Caregivers, Psychiatric institution (short & medium education)	0 / 2
o8o416	Financial & marketing mid-management, Financial institution	2 / 1











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