Lars Ahlin

BACK TO THE CLASSICS – THE RELATION BETWEEN SOCIAL EXPERIENCES AND RELIGIOSITY

Abstract

The thesis of this article is that changes in religious views are causally related to changes in social realities. In arguing for this, references are made to the classics; the main inspiration, though, is Mary Douglas and her grid/group-model. She explicitly intends to reveal the importance of social experience for the individual’s religiosity. Douglas’ model has further been the starting point for the formulation of formal hypotheses to be tested. To accomplish this task a questionnaire was designed and sent out to a sample of the Swedish population. The hypotheses were to a great extent confirmed. The original thesis, though, had to be altered since it was found necessary to take the individual’s primary role in society as producer or consumer into account.

Key words: social experiences, religiosity, the sociological classics, Mary Douglas, grid/group-model, popular religion, individualism, New Age, survey, Sweden

Introduction

During modernity, Western societies have gone through revolutionary changes affecting all aspects of society and hence all aspects of the individual’s life. As Anthony Giddens (1982) expresses it, these changes have almost dissolved the forms of social organisation under which man existed for thousands of years.

This period, though, did not see a steady and unbroken line of change. In modernity as an «axial period», it is possible to discern four different «axial moments». Modernity begins in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries with the growth of science, capitalism and the bourgeoisie and thereafter comes the second axial moment, that is, the Enlightenment followed by the American, French and industrial revolution. The third of these stretches from the nineteenth century to the 1950s. During this period, the industrial society and capitalism triumphed, socialism developed, the national state evolved and so on (Lambert 1999:306). Marx, Weber and Durkheim were all active in this period, and the fierce societal changes they experienced in their own life-time, as well as those which occurred in the near past, were the basis for their theorising. One aspect of their
thinking evolved around the issue of man’s thinking, including religious thinking, related to man’s experience of the social reality in which s/he lived. This interest naturally included the issue of how man’s religious views changed due to societal changes.

From the 1960s and onwards, the West entered a new axial moment characterised by societal changes at an accelerating pace. In my view, this fact ought to function as a direct exhortation for sociologists of religion to follow-up on the issue which – at least to some extent – occupied the classic sociologists, namely the issue of how individuals are affected by the ongoing social changes they are experiencing. This is hence the issue I will address in this article: Is it possible to discern changes in religious views which are causally related to changes in social realities?

A historical outline from the 1960s and onwards

Changes on the structural level

The focus of this article is on the societal changes that have occurred in Sweden during the last 25 years – considered in the wider context of similar changes in the West as a whole. To illustrate this, it is necessary to look at the societal situation that was the basis for these changes; it would be natural to start in the early 1960s, which is the beginning of a new axial moment. At that time, the welfare state was introduced, the public sphere expanded, gender roles changed, women left their roles as housewives, people in general became more affluent, the educational system almost exploded, the consumer culture became more evident etc. These changes hardly left anyone untouched, but the new generations were affected in a more fundamental way compared to the older generations (Inglehart 1977, 1990).

The period up to the beginning of the 1980s can also be described from another perspective: During these years, a dominating fraction of the Swedish population lived in a social situation in which everyone was aware of her/his position in the social hierarchy. Concurrently, they were protected by strong groups (e.g. unions) as well as encircled and restricted by these. This is one way to describe the Swedish welfare state, which was based on a strong and politically dominating Social Democracy; in consensus and collaboration with the dominating exporting business corporations, it laid the basis for the growing economic affluence and was simultaneously the guarantee of the social safety net.

From around 1980 and onwards, it is possible to discern even more radical societal changes, primarily due to new social phenomena. At this time, the electronic revolution took off with new kinds of communications and exchanges of information; globalisation got into a new phase making every individual more and more dependent on what happened globally: economically, politically, culturally and religiously. During the last years of the 1980s, we also experienced the disintegration of the Soviet Communist system and its final breakdown.

These structural changes, along with inspiration from President Reagan’s United States and Prime Minister Thatcher’s United Kingdom, gave space for domestic neoliberal economic and political forces with the intention of weakening the collectively
organised welfare state and to «set free» the market forces. The ultimate goal was to «move» the society into a situation where all its aspects were determined by the market forces. This, to a certain extent, came out to be a successful strategy, and lots of people got the opportunity to benefit from the wealth created by the structural changes. An unintended result of the neo-liberal strategy, though, was that others who did not have the required capacity to establish themselves on the market were marginalised. Hence, there seems to have been a bifurcation of people, and this is what is meant by the rise of «two-thirds societies», that is societies in which two-thirds of the population enjoys the benefits of affluence while one-third are locked into poverty or near-poverty. A German study from the 1990s indicates the existence of a 75–15–10 society: 75% not poor, 15% occasionally poor but with generally adequate incomes, and 10% frequently poor or near-poor with incomes that may be considered inadequate (Headey et al. 1994). Independent of the actual distribution of the two groups, it is a fact that the population has been split into two parts living under very different social conditions. A preliminary conclusion is therefore that the societal changes from the 1980s up to now have had an immense impact on many individuals and in a radical way changed the life situations of many. These changes can be described in structural societal terms as above, but they can also be described in terms of changes on the individual level.

Changes on the individual level

In his book Varieties of religion today (2002), Charley Taylor describes what happened in the 1960s as nothing less than a cultural revolution. Already before this time, he says, the Western societies were based on individualism, but then a radicalisation took place whereby the expressive individualism became a mass phenomenon. This individualism was thus no longer something reserved for the elite but something that pervaded broader social strata.

As a result, therapies of all kinds sprung up like mushrooms, therapies that offered to help people to realise themselves, to free their authentic self, and so on (Taylor 2002:84). The expressive individualism naturally also had an effect on the religiosity of the individual. Now it was not considered essential to get into contact with an external source, for example God, to get the experience of being a complete human being. Quite the contrary, the source one strived to get into contact with was lying deeply inside oneself (Taylor 1994:28–29). An effect of all this was the rise of New Age, which, according to Taylor, means attitudes that build bridges between the human and the spiritual and practices that link spirituality and therapy (2002:107). What Taylor describes is the effects of, in his own terminology, «the subjective turn» – the growing numbers in the West of expressive individualists (see also Bellah et al. 1985). This trend was naturally heavily enhanced by the structural changes described earlier, and the expressive individualism was the dominating form of individualism until the beginning of the 1980s.

New Age, this diffuse phenomenon considered to be a radicalised and spiritualised version of a general social trend (Heelas 1996), shifted focus during the 1980s. Due to the structural changes, many New Agers left the counter culture for the cultural main-
stream. And they did so without problems since, as Kyle (1995) says, the dominating values in society during the 1980s actually fitted very well with the values of the New Age. Therefore, the shift was not tantamount to abandon the views of the New Age but to adjust them to the dominating social conventions (Kyle 1995:53). In other words, during the 1980s, there was a steady growth of a utilitarian individualism in New Age circles as well as in the culture as a whole due to the efforts from the neo-liberal forces. The underlying basis of utilitarian individualism is, according to Heelas (1996), three assumptions that actually fit well with the views in New Age: the individual has something powerful inside, this can be unfolded and improved, and eventually it can be used with the purpose to become more successful in the material world.

Changes in the religious field
During this period of time, we have also experienced radical changes on the religious map. The most obvious change in this regard is the decline in the importance of traditional religiosity; that is the type of religiosity closely associated with the institutional Christian churches. Nevertheless, it has concurrently been possible to observe a steady growth of a new kind of individualistic and self-centered religiosity or spirituality. This indicates a possible causal relation between, on the one hand, the change in social conditions of the individual and, on the other hand, changes in her/his religiosity. My thesis is that the social experience of the individual has a direct connection with her/his religiosity. Such a thesis is far from novel but in line with arguments of the sociological classics: Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Before I continue with testing formal hypotheses based on my thesis, I will present some aspects of the thinking of the classics on this matter. Then I will give a short introduction to the British anthropologist Mary Douglas, an heir of the Durkheimian legacy in this respect as well as my principle source of inspiration in formulating my hypotheses.

The classics
The problem concerning the impact of social experiences on individuals’ thinking, including religious thinking, was an issue for Marx and Weber, as well as for Durkheim. In general terms, these classic sociologists (of religion) all hold the view that a connection of this kind existed, though they differed in regard to apprehending the conditions decisive for it. In the following, I will briefly and primarily by means of some telling quotations, give an outline of their view on this matter. My aim here is not to give a comprehensive and «objective» description of their views on religion but to draw attention to their view on the relation between the social experiences of the individual and her/his religiosity.

Karl Marx
Karl Marx’ view in this regard is very clearly stated in the preface to Critique of Political Economy (2001/1859): «It is not the consciousness of men that determines their
Lars Ahlin: Back to the classics – the relation between social experiences and religiosity

existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. He further emphasises the role of class in saying that, in each mode of production, there will be at least two separate ideologies corresponding to the class positions of the dominant respectively dominated classes. Similar thoughts are present in other parts of Marx’s writings, e.g. in A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right (1844) and The German Ideology (1845).

The foremost relevant point is that, to a large extent, it is the individual’s social experiences that determine the consciousness of the individual. Another point is that the most important aspect of «social existence» is the individual’s location in the class structure because class experience is the experience that is decisive for shaping interests, attitudes and expectations (Turner 1983:79).

Though Marx stands out as the ultimate proponent for Marxism, it is better to turn to Engels if one wants to get an accurate understanding of the Marxist view on religion as such (Turner 1983:65). Together, Marx and Engels wrote Manifesto of the Communist Party, and it says:

Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man’s ideas, views, and conception, in one word, man’s consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life? (Marx and Engels 2001/1848:35).

In Socialism – utopian and scientific (1880), Engels addresses the same issue in saying that a change in the mode of production will lead to a change in ideology and religious practise (Turner 1983:75), and in Anti-Dühring, Engels explicitly discusses the relation between social experiences and religious views: «All religion, ..., is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men’s minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces» (Engels 2001/1878:401).

The views of Marx and Engels in this regard are fully natural due to their basic theoretical approach, the historical materialism. Furthermore, this is probably well known to most sociologists of religion though it has not functioned as an inspiration in the discipline. Nor has any other aspects of Marx’ sociological thinking, in contrast to both Weber’s and Durkheim’s.

Max Weber

A natural point of departure for describing Max Weber’s view on this matter can be the first lines of Sociology of religion. Weber here discards the intention to find the essence of religion but says that

We make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social behavior. The external courses of religious behavior are so diverse that an understanding of this behavior can only be achieved from the viewpoint of the subjective experiences, ideas, and purposes of the individuals concerned - in short, from the viewpoint of the religious behavior’s ‘meaning’ (Weber 1993/1923:1).
The individual has certain social experiences that bring out certain ideas which in turn result in certain kinds of behaviour or actions. Religious action, according to Weber, as well as other kinds of action, is a fairly rational action though not necessarily a means-ends rationality. Another similarity with actions of everyday life is that «the most elementary forms of behaviour motivated by religious or magical factors», as well as other actions, are orientated to this world (Weber 1993/1923:1).

This reasoning is exemplified and elaborated in the section that deals with the religion and different social strata. Here Weber demonstrates the relation between the social experiences of different social strata and specific corresponding traits in the religion of these strata.

Weber also discusses something else highly relevant in this context. He discusses the notion «sense of honour» and its connection with different social strata. The disprivileged strata feel a need of salvation from a distress with its origin in social or economic oppression. The privileged strata do not feel such a need. Quite the contrary, Weber says, «they assign to religion the primary function of legitimising their own life pattern and situation in the world». They have a need to feel that they «deserve» to be fortunate or privileged and, on the other hand, that the disprivileged «deserve» their misfortune. Further he states that there exists such a psychological need for reassurance as to the legitimacy or deservedness of one’s happiness, whether this involves political success, superior economic situation, bodily health, success in the game of love, or anything else. What the privileged require of religion, if anything at all, is this psychological reassurance of legitimacy (Weber 1993/1923:107).

The disprivileged, as mentioned above, have a need for salvation from suffering. This salvation does not always take a religious form, and if it does, it may take diverse forms, but it always involves a need for just «compensation». As Turner formulates it, religion, according to Weber, can be reduced to «a reflection of more basic social processes or simply the expression of economic interests or a rationalization of psychological needs» (Turner 1983:2). The substance of this is that the individual has a need «to possess a system of basic beliefs by and through which he can understand and make sense of the social situation in which he typically finds himself» (Robertson 1970:15).

**Weber in relation to Marx**

In the introduction to *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen* (Sociology of World Religions) Weber stresses that it is a basic misunderstanding to interpret his thesis as if «the specific nature of a religion is a simple ‘function’ of the social situation of the stratum which appears as its characteristic bearer, or that it represents the stratum’s ‘ideology’, or that it is a ‘reflection’ of a stratum’s material or ideal interest-situation» (Weber 1947/1920:240). This does not mean that he denounces the importance of the social influence on a religious ethic, but underlines that the stamp of such an ethic primarily comes from religious sources. Other types of interests only have secondary influence but «often, however, such influence is very obvious and sometimes it is decisive». This is obviously an attempt to distance himself from Marx, and this becomes
even clearer when he says that many have tried, wrongly, «to interpret the connection
between religious ethics and interest-situations in such a way that the former appear as
mere ‘functions’ of the latter. Such interpretation occurs in so-called historical materialism» (Weber 1947/1920:241). In spite of this effort of distancing, it is obvious that
there is an overlap between the views of Marx and Weber on this matter (Turner 1966:109, 1983:82).

Émile Durkheim

Émile Durkheim is very direct in his view on the connection between thinking, includ-
ing religious thinking, and the social life. In *Primitive classification* Durkheim (and
Mauss) analyse the general preconditions for thinking. The point of departure for their
reasoning is the basic categories such as space, time, numbers, which they consider
products of the social life. As it is formulated in the Conclusion of the book: «It was its
(society’s) own divisions which served as divisions for the system of classification»
(Durkheim 1963/1903:82).

Durkheim goes further with this reasoning in *The Elementary Forms of Religious
Life*. In the Introduction, he states that there are no false religions since every specific
religion corresponds to its specific human conditions. Further, he states that religious
views are collective views that express collective realities (Durkheim 2001/1912:4–
11). A consequence of this ought to be that if the collective realities change, then the
religious views change accordingly. This is also his conclusion. He states that religion
seems to be something eternal and something necessary for a society, but when society
changes, religion changes too. As he formulates it: «The ancient gods grow old or die,
and others are not yet born» and «there are no immortal gospels, and there is no reason
to believe that humanity is henceforth incapable of conceiving new ones» (Durkheim
2001/1912:322–323). Therefore it is a fact that «the categories of human thought are
never fixed in a definite form. They are made, unmade, and remade incessantly; they
vary according to time and place (Durkheim 2001/1912:16). To summarise, a certain
kind of religion is a reflection of specific human experiences from a specific human
reality; when the human reality changes, religion changes accordingly.

**Durkheim in relation to Marx**

Durkheim, like Weber, makes an effort to distance himself from Marx and the historic
materialism. In the Conclusion of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim
explicitly warns against interpreting his theory

as a simple revival of historic materialism … By showing something essentially social in religion,
we do not in the least mean that it is confined to expressing the material forms of society and its
immediately vital necessities in another language. Of course, we take it as obvious that social life,
depends on and bears the mark of its material substrate … But collective consciousness is some-
thing different from a simple epiphenomenon of its morphological base (Durkheim 2001/
1912:318).
He does so, in spite of, or thanks to, the actual similarities between the two perspectives. What Durkheim and Marx have in common is that «in principle the structure of particular religious belief systems as well as the perpetuation of religion could be accounted for in reference to social structure» (Robertson 1970:20). But still there are differences. Marx does not, unlike Durkheim, see the actual religious structure as a direct reflection of social structure but as mediated by specific class relations.

Mary Douglas

In the Introduction to Natural Symbols Mary Douglas explicitly expresses that her main inspiration is Durkheim and that she tries to bring the legacy of him forward. She refers to Primitive Classification (1903) by Durkheim and Mauss saying that «the centre of the first scheme of nature is not the individual; it is society». The seeking for natural symbols, because of this argument, becomes a seeking for natural symbol systems. Therefore, she says, «we will look for tendencies and correlations between the character of the symbolic system and that of the social system» (Douglas 1996/1970:xxxii).

She has developed a model, or typology, the grid/group-model, which is an enhancement of Durkheim’s sociology of knowledge; the object of the model is to explain the origin of knowledge and cosmologies from societal factors (Castro 1992:22–23). Heap and Ross express themselves in a similar way in their introduction to Understanding the Enterprise Culture: Douglas has completed the Durkheimian project in the sense that she wants to reveal the hidden social influence on thought. Her central thesis is that the way we think is a function of our social experience (Heap and Ross 1992:1).

Mary Douglas’ grid-group model

Mary Douglas has presented different versions of her model (Spickard 1989). I will base the following discussion on the one presented in Cultural Bias (1982b). The basic idea in this model is that well-defined values and beliefs have a definite relationship to well-defined social contexts. The most important aspect of the individual’s experience of social context is her/his experience of freedom, or lack of freedom, in a situation of choice. This experience is ultimately determined by her/his location on two social dimensions called grid and group. Grid is «a dimension on which the social environment can be rated according to how much it classifies the individual person, leaving minimum scope for personal choice» and group is defined «in terms of the claims it makes over its constituent members, the boundary it draws around them, the rights it confers on them to use its name and other protectives, and the lives (sic!) and constraints it applies» (Douglas 1982b:191). Each social experience, each combination of grid and group needs an explanation and/or legitimising, which manifests itself in a worldview, a religion or a cosmology, as Mary Douglas calls it.
Out of the two dimensions, grid and group, it is theoretically possible to construct a typology with four different contexts which are all supposedly possible to find in every society. The context characterised by weak grid and strong group is, however, hard to discern in the actual social reality. Probably this is due to the fact that this context is of minor societal importance and inhabits fairly few individuals. For these reasons, this context will be excluded from the following discussion. The designation used for the context characterised by weak group and strong grid, the context of powerlessness, is mine while the remaining two, the context of hierarchies and the context of market, are used by Douglas as well (see Figure 2).

The basic assumption in Douglas’ model is hence that it is more probable that people located in one specific context have one specific worldview rather than another. It is therefore not a deterministic but rather a probabilistic model, and consequently it is still possible to take into account other factors having an influence on the specific individual’s worldview than the location in a specific social context.

During the post-war era up till the late 1970s, the Swedish society was dominated by the Social Democratic welfare-state, and this was a period in which the power in the society as well as the majority of the people were located in the context of hierarchies. After that a successively weaker group comes to characterise the Swedish society, which was due to structural changes in the international economy as well as to a new economic-political focus. The neo-liberally inspired policies, in Sweden as well in other countries in the West, aimed at minimising the context of hierarchies and bringing people to the context of market. An unintended effect of this policy, however, was
that quite a lot of people found themselves forced out of the context of the hierarchies and into the context of powerlessness (Thompson 1992). Many probably did not make such drastic movements but moved inside the hierarchical context, either in the direction of the context of powerlessness or the context of market. These are the main movements during the last 20–25 years, and this development has led to dramatic changes in the life situation of many in the Swedish society. (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. Movements inside and away from the context of hierarchies

As a result of the societal movements described above, a smaller portion of the Swedish population today – compared to 25 years ago – live under social conditions found within the context of hierarchies. A natural consequence of this is the earlier mentioned decline in adherence to the traditional Christian religiosity, a kind of religiosity well adapted to such social conditions.

On the other hand, a greater portion of the population, probably a majority, live under – or close to – social conditions found within the context of market. The ideal figure here is the free individual creating her/his own life and future all alone (weak grid). Seen from an opposite angle, this is a social situation in which the individual is not and must not be restricted by collectives and their demands (weak group).

Among the majority of the population who are today part of – or close to – the context of market, there are two reasons to presume that New Age has got more adherents. First, according to Heelas, one of the most fundamental assumptions in New Age, and therefore among expressive individualists as well as among utilitarian individualists, is that the final authority is to be found inside man himself. If an external authority plays too dominant a role, it is no longer about New Age (Heelas 1996:35). Since the dominating values in this context share important features with New Age, it is reasonable that techniques/views in New Age are here seen as useful tools. Secondly, the basic ideas in New Age can function as a legitimation and/or justification for the individuals’ own social experiences. For the case is that, in New Age, man is considered to be an active subject determining her/his own destiny, and this is also the dominant view in the context of market.

The situation is radically different for another part of the population, in reality consisting of at least two different groups. One group consists of those who have been expelled from the context of hierarchies without the necessary capacity to establish
themselves in the context of market. Another group consists of those who, initially, were able to find a place in the context of market but for various reasons have been excluded, or who are in acute danger of getting excluded without having the option to take shelter in the context of hierarchies. As a whole, those people are forced into, or in acute danger of being forced into, the context of powerlessness. As opposed to the context of hierarchies, characterised by strong collectives, the individual is now left on her/his own (weak group), but in this context, in parallel with that of hierarchies, the individual is also subjected to hard restrictions and classifications (strong grid).

In the context of powerlessness, the individual experiences her/his life situation as determined by external powers – for example in the form of decisions made by parliament lowering the social benefits, or in the form of decisions made by far-off boards of directors to move production to low-wage countries and thus to close down the workplace. In such a situation, you have no need for the view of man found in New Age. This view cannot legitimise or justify your experience of being a passive object of external powers. What is needed in such a situation can be found in another worldview, also designated as «New Age», e.g. techniques/views like astrology, tarot, crystals, healing and belief in UFOs. This worldview presupposes external authorities, though, and should therefore not be labelled «New Age» but something else (see Heelas 1996 above); I have chosen to designate it «popular belief». The reason for choosing this term is that these techniques/views have the same characteristics as popular belief has always had: that the individual is regarded as a passive object whose destiny is determined by external forces impossible to affect. Such a view can function as a legitimation or a justification on a transcendent level for the social experiences in the context of powerlessness. In this regard, popular belief is the opposite of New Age, characterised by expressive and utilitarian individualism, where the individual is looked upon as an active subject controlling her/his own destiny (see Ahlin 2001).

The empirical investigation

To move the above discussion, which is largely theoretical, based on Mary Douglas’ grid/group-model, to a more concrete level, we need some empirical data. In 2000, I had the opportunity to design and administer a questionnaire sent to a representative sample of the post-war generations in Sweden. The return rate was 55%, and the sample in total consisted of 1044 individuals. In the design of the questions for the survey, the two following hypotheses, summarising the earlier discussion, functioned as the starting point:

1. In the context of market, the New Age worldview, both in the form of expressive and utilitarian individualism, can function as a legitimation and/or justification of the social experiences. An individual located in this context is therefore likely to prefer this kind of worldview to another. In the context of powerlessness, the worldview found in New Age cannot fulfil such a function; on the contrary, the individual can be expected to refute it since it expresses a view of man that is contradictory to her/his own experience.

2. In the context of powerlessness, popular belief can be used in order to legitimise or justify the social experiences of the individual, and hence an individual located in this
context is likely to prefer a worldview having the characteristics of popular belief to another. In the context of market, popular belief is a kind of belief that the individual can rather be expected to turn down since its underlying assumptions regarding man do not correspond to, but stand in sharp opposition to, the individual’s own social experiences.

The purpose was thus to investigate to what extent there is a causal relation between the social experiences characteristic of individuals located in specific societal contexts on the one hand and, on the other hand, their attitudes towards different worldviews. Therefore, it is necessary to operationalise the two worldviews as well as the social experiences that are of interest in this connection.

Two worldviews

In order to operationalise the worldview in which «the individual is seen as an active subject with power to govern her/his own destiny», that is the New Age worldview; a number of statements were used. All of them were expected to express different aspects of a New Age worldview. However, a factor analysis indicated, not surprisingly in the view of the earlier discussion, that the statements actually consisted of two different components, designated by me as «expressive individualism» and «utilitarian individualism» (see Table 1).

Table 1. Statements indicating either «expressive individualism» or «utilitarian individualism». (The percentage ratios refer to the respondents that agreed with the statement either in full or in part):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Expressive individualism</th>
<th>Utilitarian individualism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Self-realisation is something everyone ought to try to achieve (76%)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Today most people are too dependent on the society (67%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) If you think positively, your life will be like you want it to be (76%)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) It is solely the individual who basically has the responsibility and possibility to change her/his own life (77%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) You may be religious without attending mass or believing in certain dogmas (81%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f) You should not try to take responsibility for others since every single individual must take responsibility for her/his own life (40%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(g) Everyone has the possibility to be successful and rich (24%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(h) Traditions are an obstacle to development of the individual’s full potential (49%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reactions to the statements constituting the two components were computed, and two new variables were created: expressive and utilitarian individualism. Both of these variables were given three values: Affirming, rejecting and neither/nor.
It is necessary to emphasise that there are decisive differences between the two components of the New Age worldview on the one hand and popular belief on the other. First of all, all the statements, with one exception, constituting the two kinds of individualism, were agreed upon by a considerable proportion of the respondents (see Table 1), and secondly there were no differences between the sexes or the age groups in regard to their reactions to the statements (Ahlin 2005:132–140). In the case of popular belief the pattern was quite another. A relatively small minority agreed on these statements constituting this worldview, and women and the younger age groups were overrepresented (Ahlin 2005:175). This indicates that it might be questionable to designate the former worldview as a New Age worldview since it obviously is a worldview widely and evenly spread in the population. However I will continue to use this designation for the sake of simplicity since the spread of this worldview is the precondition for New Age. As Paul Heelas (1996) says: New Age is a radicalised and spiritualised version of a general individualising trend in Western contemporary society. In a later work Heelas and Woodhead (2005) emphasise that this general trend make up the constituency for a growing New Age, or as they denote it here «Spiritualities of Life». (In the book *Spiritualities of Life* (2008) Heelas definitely distances himself from his earlier use of «New Age» in favour of the new concept «Spiritualities of Life»).

In order to operationalise the worldview in which «the individual is seen as a passive object, subject to impersonal powers that determine the patterns of each individual life», that is popular belief, the following statements were used (The percentage ratios refer to the respondents that agreed with the statement either in full or in part):

a. Through soothsaying, it is possible to acquire knowledge about one’s future (12%)  
b. A person’s personality is heavily dependent on the astrological sign under which he or she is born (21%)  
c. There are paranormal phenomena, for example telepathy and clairvoyance, which are impossible to understand (44%)  
d. It occurs that dead persons materialise in physical form (there are ghosts) (21%)  

Also the reactions to these statements were computed, and from this the new variable «popular belief» was created with three values: Affirming, rejecting and neither/nor.

**Two different social contexts**

The next step was to operationalise the social experiences of the respondents in order to determine their belonging to either of the two different social contexts of interest, «the context of market» and «the context of powerlessness». Hence, five variables were created to measure the individual’s social experiences in terms of being a passive object, having a low degree of freedom of choice and, alternatively, being an active subject, having a high degree of freedom of choice, in relation to the way their lives...
unfolded. The underlying idea was that a certain value on the variable was an indication of an association with one of the two contexts.

All the five variables, with exception of income, are no absolute measures but subjective evaluations of the factual situation. This is an advantage compared to strictly objective criteria since it is the individual’s experience of freedom (or lack of freedom) in regard to making free choices that is essential in this perspective. The individual’s subjective social experiences are namely the basis for the supposed urge to get these experiences legitimised and justified with the help of a worldview of a specific type. Furthermore it is most probable that the subjective evaluation of the social situation basically is a fair reflexion of the factual situation. Another advantage is that the subjective basis also makes it possible to take into consideration those individuals who objectively are a part of the market context but for various reasons do not experience their position to be fully secure. They might instead have the impression that it is threatened by forces impossible to control.

The first variable «Possibilities to influence one’s own life situation as a whole» was created from the reactions to the following statements (The percentage ratios refer to the respondents that agreed with the statement either in full or in part):

a. I am powerless in relation to the technical and economic development (29%)
b. My life is without coherence and a result of pure chance (9%)
c. My life has become what it is as a result of my own decisions and choices (75%)
d. I have always had a feeling that forces beyond my control have decided what my life looks like (12%)
e. It is destiny that in general has decided what my life looks like (12%)

The reactions to the statements were computed and the variable was assigned with the values: Sense of powerlessness, sense of power and neither/nor. In the first case, the individual has experiences that are to be expected in, or near, the context of powerlessness, that is a situation in which the individual experiences her/himself as a passive object. In the second case, the individual has experiences that are to be expected in, or near, the context of market, that is a situation in which the individual experiences her/himself as an active object.

The other variables for measuring the social experiences were «Individualistic self-image»4, «Influence at work»5, «Shortage of money» and «Income». (In order to see how these are constructed, see Ahlin 2005). In the table below, the indicators of the two social contexts are assembled.
Lars Ahlin: Back to the classics – the relation between social experiences and religiosity

Some results

The five indicators of «freedom of choice» (see above) together with the three world-views open the way for no less than 15 different analyses. Due to limited space it is impossible to present them all in detail. Since the hypotheses regarding impact of the social experiences on the attitudes to popular belief are confirmed most univocally, more space will be given to these analyses.

Table 2. Indications of belonging to either the context of market or to the context of powerlessness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables measuring the degree of freedom of choice.</th>
<th>Context of powerlessness</th>
<th>Context of market</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possibilities to influence one’s own life situation as a whole</td>
<td>Sense of powerlessness</td>
<td>Sense of powerfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic self-image</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence at work</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shortage of money</td>
<td>Always</td>
<td>Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some results

Comment: Pearson Chi-Square; 58, 4, 0.000

Table 3 clearly shows that there are statistically significant differences in the attitude to popular belief depending on whether the individual experiences powerlessness or powerfulness. If you experience powerlessness, you are more than twice as likely to affirm popular belief than if you experience powerfulness. In the opposite case, if you experience yourself as powerful, you are three times more likely to reject popular belief than if you have a sense of powerlessness. This means that the hypotheses are fully confirmed in this case.

The supply of money both in absolute terms, the actual size of income, and in relative terms, the experience of shortage of money, also have a direct effect on the attitudes to popular belief.
You are four times more likely to affirm popular belief if you have a low income than if you have a high income, and there is also a distinct difference between those who always have a shortage of money compared to those who never lacks money, and the opposite way round. There is namely a much stronger tendency to reject popular belief if you are well-off than if you are relatively poor. The hypotheses are confirmed also in regard to individualistic self-image, though the relations are not as clear-cut as above. Eventually there is no statistical significant difference between different degrees of «influence over work» and the attitude towards popular belief.

It is possible though that the shown relations are spurious due to other variables affecting the results. For example, it is possible the results reflect the fact that women are more positive to popular belief than men, and that women have a stronger sense of powerlessness than men. Therefore it is natural to suspect that the results given in the tables above are derived from a difference between men and women. Nevertheless, when controlling for gender, the same pattern appears, both for men and women. The same also occurred when controlling for age and educational level. As a whole, all of the discussed relations showed up to be valid.

The pattern in regard to the New Age worldview is not as clear and unequivocal as in the case of popular belief. This might be a result of the earlier discussed problem in regard to this worldview that indicated that it is not as clear-cut and delimited as popular belief. The hypotheses, though, are to a high degree also confirmed here. The results of these analyses are summarised in Table 6.
Lars Ahlin: Back to the classics – the relation between social experiences and religiosity

Table 6. Summary of the relations between the indicators of «freedom of choice» and the two forms of individualism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Expressive individualism</th>
<th>Utilitarian individualism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possibilities to influence one’s own life situation as a whole</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>(**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic self-image</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence at work</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shortage of money</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment: * = Expected relation p<0.10, ** = Expected relation p<0.01, - = No significant relation, (**) = Opposite to expected relation p<0.01

Statistically, individuals with a strong «individualistic self-image» are significantly more positive to expressive individualism than others, whereas those who have a non-strong «individualistic self-image» are more negative than others. The same pattern appears in relation to utilitarian individualism.

In these cases, it seems as if it is relevant only to talk about strong and non-strong «individualistic self-image». What can be deducted so far is that individuals who have a strong «individualistic self-image», and therefore supposedly live in the context of market, are more inclined to be positive to both kinds of new individualism than others. On the other hand, those who have a weak «individualistic self-image», and therefore supposedly live in the context of powerlessness, do not seem to be more negative to the new individualism than those in the middle position. Therefore, a weak sense of «individualistic self-image» does not appear to give a good indication of whether the individual lives in or near the context of powerlessness. One reason for this result might be that, as have been discussed earlier, both kinds of individualism are widely spread in the population.

Similar relationships as those shown above appear between the variable «Influence at work» and the two kinds of individualism. What «Individualistic self-image» and «Influence at work» have in common in comparison with the other three variables is that they are more closely related to the work situation. And for the three remaining indicators, that is «Possibilities to influence one’s own life situation as a whole», «Income» and «Shortage of money», the impact on both expressive and utilitarian individualism is either smaller or totally absent.

Discussion

In one respect, the hypotheses were fully confirmed. All the variables aimed at measuring the individual’s social experiences had a significant relation either to New Age (expressive and utilitarian individualism) or to popular belief. But in another respect, they were not fully confirmed. On one hand the attitudes to popular belief only had the expected relation with «Possibilities to influence one’s own life situation as a whole», «income» and «shortage of money». On the other hand, the expressive and utilitarian...
individualism only had the expected relationship with «individualistic self-image» and «influence at work».

One possible explanation of this result is that there are two different groups of individuals in the context of market as well as in the context of powerlessness. In fact, taking a closer look at the five variables supposed to measure the individual’s social experiences, it is possible to discern two different categories. The first category holds «individualistic self-image» and «influence at work», which are primarily to be considered measures of experiences that the individual has in the role of producer. The second category contains the remaining three variables, which can be regarded as measures of experiences that the individual has in his or her role of consumer. Therefore, both contexts apparently involve two groups of individuals. On the one hand, the individuals for whom their role as producer is of greater importance than their role as consumer, and on the other hand, the individuals for whom the role as consumer is of greater importance than their role as producer.

This reasoning has its background in Zygmunt Bauman’s discussion in *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, where he distinguishes our contemporary consumer society from an earlier producer society. Earlier, the society «engaged its members primarily as producers... In its present late-modern, second modern or post-modern stage, society engages its members – again primarily – in their capacity as consumers». It is not a question of a total shift but «the difference is one of emphasis, that shift of emphasis does make an enormous difference to virtually every aspect of society, culture and individual life» (Bauman 1998:24).

The former group, for whom the role as producer is the most important, and especially those living in the context of market, is highly affected by their «individualistic self-image» and their perceived «influence at work» in their attitudes to both expressive and utilitarian individualism. This influence tends to make these individuals more positive to both kinds of individualism than other individuals. For the latter group, for which the role as consumer is most important, there are other social experiences at stake, especially in relation to their attitudes towards popular belief. These are «experienced possibilities to influence one’s own life situation as a whole», «income» and «shortage of money». If an individual lives in the context of market and if the role as a consumer is the primary role, it is an obvious tendency that the individual is more likely than others to refute popular belief. But if an individual lives in the context of powerlessness and if the role as consumer is the primary role, the individual tends to be more positive towards popular belief than others.

All the statements underlying both popular belief and expressive/utilitarian individualism are statements associated with New Age in a wide sense. Neither the views contained in popular belief, nor in the two types of individualism, however, are by any means confined to a New Age milieu. Quite the contrary, they are widely spread in our society today, not least the two types of individualism.

It has been shown that both popular belief and the new forms of individualism seem more probable in a certain context than in another. Popular belief, in which man is seen as a passive object, seems more probable in the context of powerlessness, in those cases where the role as consumer is the primary one for the individual. The two types of indi-
individualism, in which man is seen as an active subject, seem more probable in the context of market in those cases where the role as producer is the most important for the individual.

According to my analysis, there are indications that both the context of powerlessness and the context of market have grown during the last 25 years. Therefore, it is fully probable that both kinds of worldviews appeal to a larger amount of people today than earlier. Furthermore, if this socio-economic development continues, it is probable that both popular belief and a New Age worldview will find an even greater audience in the future.

Concluding remarks
As shown earlier, the classic sociologists did not approach the relation between social experiences and religious views in exactly the same way. Despite of this, it is possible to discern a common denominator, namely that the social realities under which an individual lives, and the social experiences he or she acquires as an effect of this, have an impact on the individual’s religiosity.

Both Weber and Durkheim have had an immense influence on the sociology of religion while Marx’s influence indeed has been of a more limited scope. In spite of the importance of the two former, the issue discussed here has been of very limited interest for the scholars of the discipline. Naturally, sociologists of religion have undertaken many surveys demonstrating statistical correlations between certain societal conditions and religious expressions, but to my knowledge, none has made a serious effort to work in line with the classics on this issue in order to explain the factual sociological causes for the observed correlations.

The main purpose of this article has been to argue for a certain approach in the sociology of religion. An important part of this argumentation has been to demonstrate how the classic sociologists in different ways support this approach. What, then, is the view of leading contemporary sociologists? To what extent is it possible to find support from scholars such as Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman and Pierre Bourdieu?

In regard to Anthony Giddens it seems, at a first glance, to be quite impossible to find such support, due to the relatively strong emphasis the approach puts on the influence the societal structures have on the individual and his or her thoughts and behaviour. However, Giddens does not totally disregard the importance of the societal structures, but it is essential for Giddens that structure is not looked upon as an external constraint which determines and thereby limits the individual, but that structure is both enabling and constraining (Kaspersen 2000:42). A point of departure for his view in this regard is that the individuals (the agents) are «both knowledgeable and reflexive and therefore always can change their behaviour» (Kaspersen 2000:159). This emphasis on the agent’s free will has, according to Kaspersen, resulted in several scholars criticising Giddens for putting «too much emphasis on the actor aspect and (giving) too much leeway to the agents’ possibilities for action at the cost of action-constraining aspect, the structural framework» (Kaspersen 2000:161).
In regard to the notion «lifestyle» such a critique is fully relevant as he explicitly says that «for all groups which have become freed from the hold of traditional contexts of activity, a plurality of lifestyle choices exist». This would indicate that a vast majority in contemporary society have the possibility of making their own free choice of lifestyle, but there are limits, since, as he expresses it, «the selection or creation of lifestyles is influenced by group pressures and visibility of role models, as well as by socioeconomic circumstances» (Giddens 1991:82). Already in the Introduction to *Modernity and self-identity*, he also makes some reservations in regard to this statement. On the one hand, he admits that «class divisions … can be partly defined in terms of differential access to forms of selfactualisation and empowerment …. Modernity, one should not forget, produces difference, exclusion and marginalisation». On the other hand, he nevertheless ends by stating: «Yet it would be a major error to suppose that the phenomena analysed in the book are confined in their impact to those in more privileged material circumstances» (Giddens 1991:6).

In the discussion about lifestyles Giddens also says that «someone who is committed to a given lifestyle would necessarily see various options as 'out of character' with it» (Giddens 1991:82). This can be viewed as support for the presented approach since the statement is parallel to one of the earlier formulated hypotheses, which can easily be rephrased as: It is probable than an individual in the context of market will reject popular belief since this is a belief 'out of character' with beliefs 'saleable' in this context.

In relation to the presented approach, it is therefore possible to consider Giddens as a support in some respects but obviously not in others. It seems quite plausible that the more affluent and socioeconomically advantaged segments of the population do choose a certain lifestyle because such a choice can improve their possibilities in the competitive world they live in (the context of the market). On the other hand it does not seem plausible that marginalised individuals (in the context of powerlessness) choose a lifestyle; rather they are forced into a certain kind of lifestyle due to their lack of resources.

It is possible to get a more direct support for the approach from Zygmunt Bauman. He explicitly discusses the situation for those living, in my vocabulary, in or near the context of powerlessness (the inadequate consumers). He stresses that awareness of being an inadequate consumer has great importance for the individual and his/her self image. The lack of consumer capacity will be transformed to «bitterness at being left behind, disinherted or degraded, shut off or excluded from the social feast to which others gained entry» (Bauman 1998:38). Neither do the individual have any possibility of changing the situation since «the assessment of one’s own adequacy as a consumer is remotely controlled and the verdict cannot be protested in the court of home-grown opinion» (Bauman 1998:40). The individual, in this case the individual inadequate consumer, has no possibility of complaining over the actions taken by external powers. The only one to blame is oneself. But, Bauman says, «far from bearing responsibility for their own sorry fate, the excluded might be at the receiving end of forces they have be given no chance of resisting, let alone controlling» (Bauman 1998:85). This description of the situation of the inadequate consumer is close to the earlier description of the
Lars Ahlin: Back to the classics – the relation between social experiences and religiosity

experiences of a lonely individual in the context of powerlessness. Further, it is fully probable that a description of adequate consumers to a large extent will come close to a description of those living in the context of market.

There are also fairly obvious parallels between Pierre Bourdieu’s way of thinking and the one expressed in the present approach. This is true not least in regard to ‘habitus’, a central concept for Bourdieu. This concept can be regarded as a number of dispositions that decide how the individual thinks, acts and values in certain social contexts (Broady 1989:20). Habitus is determined by the social circumstances, but the relation is dialectic rather than one-sided. Bourdieu expresses this by saying that the dispositions constituting the habitus of the individual are both structured structures and structuring structures (Bourdieu 1991a:72).

In regard to «class» Bourdieu is inspired by Marx but is more elaborated. In their class analyses the point of departure is the distribution of capital. For Bourdieu, though, capital is more than just economic capital (financial resources) but also symbolic capital (education and titles) and social capital (social networks). If one has got a large capital in total, one belongs to the dominating class, and if one lacks capital, one belongs to the dominated class. Between those two we find the middle-class. In each of the different classes there also are different fractions depending on what kind of capital is dominating (Bourdieu 1991b).

Every individual has its individual habitus, but simultaneously individuals from the same class have a similar habitus, class habitus, since they are products of the same objective conditions (Johansson and Miegel 1996:205), that is, they are products of similar conditions of existence. This is the reason why an individual’s practice is coinciding with the practises of other individuals belonging to the same class (Bourdieu 1991a:86). Further, these dispositions have a tendency to lead to specific patterns of thought and/or specific patterns of behaviour in specific social contexts. This is because habitus is a determinant in making certain ways of thinking or acting seem possible, necessary, suitable or valuable and making others seem directly impossible, unsuitable or worthless (Broady 1989:25). In this way habitus is the source of meaningful practises for the individual and of viewpoints that give meaning to the same practices (Bourdieu 1991b:298). This kind of thinking in regard to habitus can be considered as a support for the approach presented earlier, since the habitus of the individual in part is determined by the social standing (class) and since the habitus results in specific actions and specific ways of thinking.

A conclusion from the discussion above is that the three leading contemporary sociologists would not totally refute the present approach but on the contrary in some instances support it. So, why the reluctance among sociologists of religion to apply the classic approaches to religion? It might be because a materialistic approach is the actual basis for all of the three classic sociologists. Such an approach has probably been equated with Marxism and, in extension of this, socialistic/communistic views. Furthermore, such an approach stands in direct opposition to the conventional understanding of religion in the academic discipline of sociology of religion, that is, religion as an autonomous cultural phenomenon impossible to reduce to its material basis, and religion as a human interpretation of existential conditions of the individuals (Turner
Roland Robertson explains the reluctance in a similar way. According to him, among the sociologists of religion, there has been a tendency to consciously ignore the problem with variations in religious beliefs as a consequence of variations in the social structure and instead to focus on the consequences for the social system of religious beliefs and practices. Many sociologists of religion feared, according to Robertson, that «if particular beliefs could be seen as the result of social characteristics then sociology would be claiming that there was no validity in the beliefs themselves». Furthermore, he emphasises that a large proportion of the sociologists of religion have been religious themselves, and this fact can also have had an effect in this respect (Robertson 1970:23–24).

Hence, it is probably fear of reductionism that explains the reluctance to work along the lines presented by the classics. But as Turner emphasises, a materialistic interpretation of religion does not necessarily consider religiosity as epiphenomena of more fundamental social processes, but «on the contrary, it locates religion at the centre of social production and reproduction». Moreover, a materialistic perspective, according to Turner, «does not treat religious beliefs and practices as inconsequential and trivial. On the contrary, it situates religion in our experience of physical and physiological reality». Further, he states that there is never an absolute relation between the material base and the superstructure. The economy is dominating only in «the last analysis» and many features of cultures «enjoy a relative autonomy from the economic base» (Turner 1983:2–12).

Another critic of the sociology of religion in this respect has been Mary Douglas. As early as 1982 in Daedalus, she criticises the discipline for not taking into account a model of thinking that considers the relation between the social experiences of the individual and his or her religious view. In the conclusion of the article, she says that her hope is that «when religious sociology modernizes, it will … develop some systematic methods of asking how different moral principles become acceptable and different versions of reality plausible» (Douglas 1982:18). Twenty years later, nothing seems to have happened in this respect. In the introduction to the new edition of Natural Symbols, she says that the precondition for the sociology of religion to regain its earlier position in the general sociology is that the discipline begins to work from a theory with the intention of investigating the connection between the social reality in which individuals live and the view of life they regard as reasonable (Douglas 1996/1970: xxvii).

This is, not surprisingly, also my expectation. What I have presented here, though, is not more than a very preliminary attempt to do what Mary Douglas suggested. The methods and techniques of investigation have to be elaborated in several respects for the flaws apparent in my analysis to be overcome. In my opinion it is of importance to do this since such analyses are necessary if the sociology of religion has the ambition to provide sociologically based explanations for and understanding of the changes in the religious field in the future.
Lars Ahlin: Back to the classics – the relation between social experiences and religiosity

Notes

1 The translations of this quotation and the following are taken from «Weberian Sociology of Religion» available at http://www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/index.htm.

2 In such a fourfold typology, it is not uncommon to realise that one, or even two, of the categories is hard to use in the actual analysis (Repstad 2007:128). One social phenomenon possible to place in such a context is the New Religious Movements, but these must be considered to be of limited societal importance and of decreasing societal influence from the 1980s and up till now.

3 The factor analysis revealed that one of the statements, «If you think positively, your life will be like you want it», was included in both components. With the objective of making the components more clear-cut, this statement was excluded when the two new variables were created by computing the single statements in each of the components.

4 This variable was constructed from the responses to the following statements: a) I am prepared to make great efforts to achieve, b) I like to take great responsibility, c) I am reluctant to take any risks, and d) I am more autonomous and independent than most others.

5 This variable was constructed from the responses to the following statements: a) What influence do you have in regard to when your work is to be done?, b) What influence do you have in regard to how your work is to be done?, and c) What influence do you have in regard to the working environment at your workplace?

6 In this and the following tables percentages deviating from the total population with five percentage point or more (or with more than 20%) will be marked in a special way. With bold if the deviation is upward in relation to the total population and with italics if the deviation is downward.

References


Nordic Journal of Religion and Society 23:1


**Lars Ahlin: Back to the classics – the relation between social experiences and religiosity**


