

## Popular Spirituality, or: Where is Hape Kerkeling?

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### *I'll Be Gone a While*—secularization or spirituality?

A scholarly text on religion that begins with a reference to a popular book written by a German television comedian is sure to raise a few eyebrows. Yet Hape Kerkeling's "Ich bin dann mal weg," ("I'll Be Gone a While") published in 2006, deserves attention not just because, with over 2.7 million copies sold in 2006 and 2007, it is the bestselling non-fiction book ever published in Germany. As a document in diary form of Kerkeling's pilgrimage from the Pyrenees to Santiago de Compostela, where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared, the book is "religious" in the broadest sense of the term (as is its American "role model," Shirley MacLaine's "A Journey of the Spirit"). I place here the adjective "religious" in quotation marks because Kerkeling eschews the behavior of a traditional Catholic pilgrim, repeatedly and expressly distancing himself from the conventional notions of what it means to be a pilgrim. Nevertheless, there is something religious about his book. The religious overtones in Kerkeling's narrative derive, on the one hand, from the symbolism of the pilgrim's journey to a holy place and, on the other hand, from the intense kind of experiences he describes: The author provides an account of his own near-death experience as well as of a reincarnation seminar in which he experiences a vision of his former life in a monastery.

Kerkeling's pilgrimage exemplifies contemporary religiosity. Modern man feels adrift, as if he were on a journey to somewhere else, an unreachable goal that finds expression in contemporary religiosity (Hervieu-Léger 2004: 75 f.). To be more exact, one could say that Kerkeling captures remarkably well what people describe today as spirituality. Even Kerkeling's sense of humor fits, tinged as it is by a slightly ironic distance to ecclesiastical religiosity.

As contemporary as this spirituality—this new form of religion—may seem, research shows that it is also capricious. Even though Thomas Luckmann predicted the proliferation of spirituality decades ago, many researchers continue to

argue that as a phenomenon, spirituality is statistically insignificant. Indeed, the British sociologist Steve Bruce (2002) has stressed in several articles that the so-called new spirituality is a marginal phenomenon yet to find its place in religious practice. In the German-speaking world, sociologist Detlef Pollack (2003) has repeatedly argued that non-ecclesiastical forms of religion are not a substitute for diminishing ecclesiasticism and that, despite all pretense to the contrary, secularization is inevitable. Does this make Hape Kerkeling an exotic maverick among the masses?

The attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the election of a German pope are just two salient examples disproving the secularization thesis that the role of religion in public life and discourse is increasingly “invisible.” As Casanova has showed (2004), in many societies, religion has become a “public religion.” However, religion is not simply a public collective actor that takes the forms of churches or sects. On various occasions, I have pointed out how popular religions unfold alongside traditional social forms (Knoblauch 2000 and 2008). This means not only that churches adapt forms and substance of popular culture, it also means that religious themes—such as belief in the afterlife—become part of the currency used in media- and market-dominated popular culture. Above all, this includes the major themes affecting this culture’s subjectivized participants—themes that are subsumed under the title of spirituality (Knoblauch 2006 and 2008).

Hape Kerkeling is therefore in no way a maverick. Rather, I would argue that his book is much more an expression of popular spirituality, and that he embodies the attitudes of his readers.

Whereas those arguing that secularization is on the rise have been able to draw on large quantitative data sets (about qualitatively limited topics), studies on spirituality and popular religion have long been limited to qualitative evidence and thematically limited quantitative data. As a result, they have been unable to fend off macrosociological arguments about the phenomenon’s marginality. In recent years, this situation has changed significantly. For example, Eileen Barker (2004) writes on how an international survey on the question of spirituality could be conducted against the interests of traditional church-oriented research. The Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Religion Monitor encompasses a broader set of aims, part of which includes exploring the territory of spirituality in a unique way. This article therefore focuses on the results related to issues of spirituality.

## The concept of spirituality

Spirituality first emerged as a neologism in the 5th century, was employed in the 20th century in French Catholic theology and, in this context, entered the German language in a first wave in the 1940s (Bochinger 1994: 377 ff.). Starting in the 1960s, at a time when theology appeared to have abandoned all interest in spirituality, the term resonated strongly among those in the Anglo-Saxon world advocating religious humanism. This so-called second wave facilitated the broad dissemination of the idea and substance of spirituality. Today, spirituality is often used as a form of self-description that refers to the experiences of those who use the term. Spirituality has spread through the “New Age” movement, which is characterized by its small “cultic milieu,” although it strives for a very broad effect through its activities. In fact, one can speak of a third wave in which the substance of New Age permeated everyday culture. In the wake of this wave, the term spirituality has also been widely distributed. The fact that religious scholars such as Hanegraaff (1996) have re-introduced the concept of the “New Age” into scholarly discourse does not reflect the language of the field, which prefers “spirituality” instead of “New Age.”

Just like New Age, spirituality is an ethnocategory. I use the term ethnocategory to refer to the designations to any subject matter of social science research that is used by the subjects themselves or originates with them (Knoblauch 2003). The notion of “spirituality” is so omnipresent that it also became used by scholars to denote a unique social form of religion.

In the following discussion, I explore the analytical features of this social form that do not necessarily coincide with those of the actors. Given the semantic overlap with the ethnocategory itself, the term spirituality seems appropriate to me, but I do not mean to claim that this is a new social form. In determining the features of spirituality, I draw upon Ernst Troeltsch’s concept of mysticism. Troeltsch defines mysticism—next to churches and sects—as a distinct social form of religion (1965: 848 ff.). In doing so, Troeltsch radically changed the categorical paradigm of religious social forms. The criteria for the category of spirituality I use are adapted from Troeltsch’s description of mysticism, although they do not adopt his terminology, which is strongly associated with medieval Catholic mysticism.

As Christoph Bochinger (1994: 386 f.) emphasizes, “[A]ready at the end of the last century, ‘spirituality’ described an inwardly oriented mode of experience, a powerful and free spiritual attitude toward religious questions that is conceived in *opposition* to the ‘dogmatic religion’ of traditional Christianity.” This distance

from what Thomas Luckmann once called the “official model of religion” is the first feature of spirituality, entailing two different aspects. First, it means the distance from established dogmas and their representatives within the prevailing religion; second, it relates to the distance from the large institutional forms of religious organizations such as churches or denominations.

However, this distance should not be understood as opposition. Indeed, whereas the cultic milieu of the 1960s and 1970s was initially characterized by its anti-establishment orientation (Knoblauch 1989), it grew somewhat indifferent toward the hegemonic forms of religion as the movement spread.

Drawing on Weber’s classical understanding of religious social forms (Weber 1980), we can distinguish systematically between virtuosi and amateurs, or religious experts and laity. Troeltsch’s concept of mysticism avoids this distinction entirely. In this sense, the singularity of spirituality as a social form originates not in the “charismatic” experience of experts and virtuosi, but rather in the experiences of the representatives of the movements’ members themselves—as well as in the fact that they assume that anyone who is open to these experiences can have them. If we equate the experience of transcendence with Weberian charisma, then we must also view the *generalization of charisma* as a second feature of spirituality.

The sociological generalization of charisma presumes yet another distinctive characteristic of spirituality, namely that there are extraordinary types of experience. This diversity in the types of experience found within the new spirituality demand the use of a comprehensive term. This is why I speak here of the “*experiences of (great) transcendence*.” Whenever I use the term transcendence, I am referring to the life-world analysis of Schütz and Luckmann (1984). Because this term is often misunderstood, a few remarks are necessary here.

First, it should be emphasized that not every experience of transcendence is religious in nature. Whereas the ability to transcend one’s biological environment forms the foundation of religiosity according to Luckmann (1991), experiences of transcendence can be differentiated along phenomenological lines. In other words, we can seek the religious at a level that is described as great transcendences (Knoblauch 2004). These experiences of great transcendence thus include all of those experiences that refer to a reality other than the ordinary reality of daily life (Schütz and Luckmann 1979).

Second, when speaking of experiences, we should avoid focusing exclusively on passive experiences. In phenomenological terms, actions also constitute a form—albeit a specific kind—of experience. Rituals, for example, are also considered to be experiences of transcendence because we can understand them as

a symbolic form of action (Luckmann 1980). Clearly, the term “experience” also includes emotions and religious feelings.

Third, the phenomenological concept of transcendence is not defined vis-à-vis immanence. Transcendence refers to the capacity of human consciousness and, indeed, the communicative human being to transcend the immediacy of his or her biological context of experience. However, this does not require the premise that that which lies beyond our immediate experience “exists” or prompts the experience of transcendence. It should be noted that the possibility of a reality beyond our immediate experience cannot be disproved. The position taken here is one of agnosticism because I refer sociologically to the experiences of others, which are not directly accessible to us. That which is transcendent can be God or it can be “nothing,” as is the case of some forms of meditation. The self may also be a referential point of transcendence. Heelas and Woodhead’s concept of “self spirituality,” however, does not in any way encompass the overall breadth of spirituality (2005). Although the “inner man” is a motif that appears in the Bible (or as “Inner God” in Jungian psychology), it is not the only thing that can fill the position of what is thought of as transcendent. The self as an object of transcendence is one possible, yet not necessary, feature of spirituality. The self as the subject of transcendence is much more crucial for spirituality.

Hans Joas (2004), along with Luckmann (1991), emphasizes that the experience of transcendence can also refer to other people. However, one must stress that what is experienced as transcendence must not necessarily be a deification of the “Other” (or one of the rather secularized glorifications of “Otherness”). It is essential to the concept of the experience of transcendence that whatever is taken to be the substance of transcendence may vary—depending on cultures, religions and worldviews. Nevertheless, the example of Kerkeling makes it clear just how useful such a notion of experience of great transcendence (and its active, ritual form) is, and they illustrate how diverse even the experiences of one person may be, ranging from near-death experiences to reincarnation and the encounter with God. This diversity necessitates an inclusive term such as experience of (great) transcendence that includes the notion of transcending, escapes ethnocentrism, and leaves the part about “how to” transcend open to cultural input.

## Religious and popular spirituality

Having defined the concept of transcendence, we can now explore this feature of spirituality on which I would like to focus in the following argument: namely, the fact that spirituality strives—not exclusively, but always—for direct, immediate and personal experiences of transcendence. This clearly includes so-called religious experiences. The concept of spirituality should contribute to our understanding of religious—and especially Christian—movements that feature a strong emphasis on the experiential dimension. In so doing, we can show that—for all of their theological differences—there are clear similarities between Christian and non-Christian movements (Knoblauch 2002).

These movements are significant, and we can attribute a considerable share of contemporary religious growth to these movements.

1. Especially in Christian circles, we encounter movements that show very clear notions of the transcendent in their experiences.
2. Alternative religious movements spawned by what was once the New Age movement place just as much emphasis on experiences of great transcendence.

If we consider the obvious differences in the substance of these experiences—from mystical experiences to conversion or contact with the dead—the concept of the experience of transcendence is justified. However, I would like to distinguish popular spirituality from these two extreme forms. This means that spirituality not only appears in a more or less religiously demarcated space (e.g., religious media, buildings and experts, etc.), but that it is also an important component part of popular culture.

On point 1: On the one hand, we find a distinctive, strong experiential orientation in Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic groups. Indeed, at the beginning of the twentieth century, American Pentecostalism attempted to revive Christianity by attesting to the possibility of experiencing the Holy Spirit. For contemporary neo-Pentecostalism, an individual is also—in principle—open to the experience of transcendence, whether this is a conversion, speaking in tongues, miracle healing or prophetic inspiration (within the “prophetic movement”). The Charismatic movement, which has been moving away from traditional churches and denominations since the 1960s, also places a great deal of value on “extraordinary” religious experiences and other states of consciousness. Here, glossolalia again plays a role, as well as quieting the spirit, automatic speech, inner listening, prophecy and miracle healing.

We should emphasize here—and especially for European readers—that these movements have spread around the world. Exact figures are highly debatable. At the global level, estimates suggest that there are between 200 to 300 million Pentecostals and between 250 to 500 million Charismatics. The Charismatic movement also has a strong wing within Catholicism, which includes 95 million people. Given the current strength of these movements, many believe that they will constitute a majority of Christians in a few years (Barrett 2000; Brouwer, Gifford and Rose 1996).

On point 2: While these movements are negligible in Germany, the country has witnessed experientially oriented forms of alternative religious movements including the revival of Celtic or Germanic rituals, the assimilation of Indian shamanistic techniques or the appropriation of Asian meditation techniques. Quasi-psychological traditions of knowledge established in the Western world, which are not traditionally viewed as religious, can be reinterpreted as religious in these movements, as, for example, in the “human potential” movement.

Medico-religious techniques, such as yoga or ayurveda, play a particularly important role here. Long-suppressed forms of local superstitions are being adapted to modern demands. The same applies for the intersections of occultism, magic and esotericism that have found widespread acceptance here. In their 2003 study on communities of belief and congregations, Heelas and Woodhead have shown that despite its marketing-friendly form, alternative spirituality can operate on par with organized religion.

This broad acceptance can in part be attributed to the proliferation of movements, which have been profoundly efficient in disseminating their ideas through a wide variety of media. Their books are reviewed on television and in magazines, and the film industry has embraced themes ranging from spirits and ghosts to Buddhism, near-death experiences, divination, magic cures and miracle healings—all to great success. This popular mixture of media may be one of the reasons why these subjects have not been perceived as being at all religious. By being dissociated from religion, they have unrestricted access to new, and apparently stronger, worldview-neutral currents. One example of this is the wellness movement, which adopted and then further developed a good part of formerly New Age magic practices.

My aim here is not to reconstruct the taxonomy of popular religious movements or, in this case, the qualitative features of contemporary spirituality (Knoblauch 2006). Instead, I would like to focus on the quantitative aspects of contemporary spirituality, which represent an essential characteristic of its popularity and proliferation. How many people can be considered to be spiritual in terms

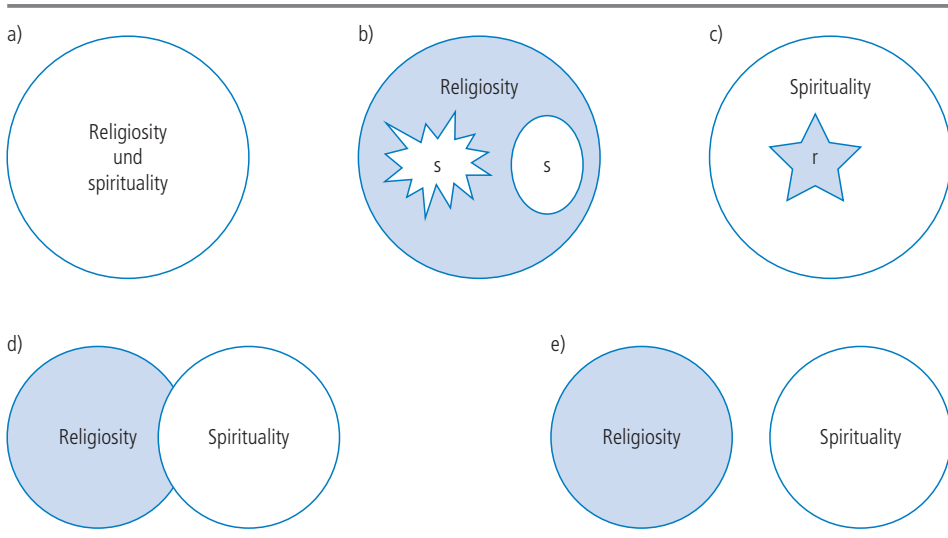
of the features mentioned? And how many consider themselves to be spiritual in ethnocategorical terms? And what would they consider spiritual?

### Religion and the concept of spirituality

Before addressing the empirical data on spirituality, let us first clarify a few things, as the term has long been understood in two ways in the quantitative research. On the one hand (as in the second part of this article), the use of detached scientific nomenclature implies a disposition toward the phenomenon that emphasizes the empirical scientific tradition in research. On the other hand, researchers employ a concept of spirituality in line with that used by those who are the subject of research. In doing so, researchers have noted that spirituality and religion are, for many people, closely linked. However, this relationship is fraught with ambiguities.

As Barker (2004) points out, many people differentiate between spirituality and religiosity. For some, both concepts are more or less the same thing, while some view religion, and others spirituality, as the more inclusive or exhaustive of the categories. Figure 1 illustrates the various connotations of religion and spirituality.

**Figure 1: Religiosity and spirituality: semantic relationships**



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Source: Barker 2004

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This overview underscores how strongly the semantics of the term spirituality vary in everyday language. Since the use of a term with so many meanings can lead to ambiguity, I suggest instead the sociological term of spirituality sketched above that draws upon these semantics but nevertheless includes clearly defined features.

At the same time, though, I will explore spirituality not only in terms of its linguistic meaning or as a semantic phenomenon. As was shown in the study called RAMP (Religious and Moral Pluralism), which was conducted between 1997 and 1999 in eight European countries and included 11,000 participants, many people describe themselves as spiritual. The study's main relevance for the purpose of this investigation is the fact that it contains a question regarding self-assessment in terms of spirituality or religiosity.

**Table 1: Religiosity and spirituality in Europe**

Country	Number of respondents	Neither religious nor spiritual	Religious, but not spiritual	Spiritual, but not religious	Religious and spiritual	Total
Belgium	940	45	14	12	28	100
Denmark	388	42	18	13	27	100
Finland	470	33	10	13	44	100
United Kingdom	970	44	11	13	32	100
Italy	1,374	18	16	8	59	100
Netherlands	694	41	19	12	28	100
Norway	310	50	8	22	20	100
Poland	548	13	34	2	51	100
Portugal	523	25	20	8	47	100
Sweden	649	53	5	24	18	100
Hungary	526	40	13	15	33	100
Total	7,392	35	15	12	37	100

\* Only those that answered the question were included. Rounding discrepancies are possible.

Source: Barker 2004

One portion of the respondents described themselves as neither religious nor spiritual; they are presumably atheists or agnostics. Others—at least 37 percent of the respondents—view themselves as religious and spiritual. It is worth noting that 12 percent described themselves as spiritual, but not religious. For all of

the societies surveyed here, this group comprises on average more than a tenth of the population, with a variance of 2 percent to 22 percent. Overall, the values are very constant if we ignore the deviations in the Catholic countries, in which a disproportionately large number of people describe themselves as both spiritual and religious. In contrast to the “cultic milieu” or the alternative spirituality scene with its comparatively fewer, primarily female activists (Woodhead 2007), few differences appeared between men and women in this broadly distributed spirituality. Without delving too far into the details of the data, and although age differences make relatively little difference in the results, it can be said that younger people tend to describe themselves as spiritual.

This juxtaposition of religiosity and spirituality is not exclusive to Europe. In a survey for the United States, between 14.5 percent and 22.6 percent (depending on age) described themselves as “only spiritual” (Marler and Hadaway 2002), and the results for Australia fall within a similar range (Hugues et al. 2004). These findings point to a growing significance of spirituality. They also show that a significant number of people who identify with spirituality understand it as something different from religion, as defined in ecclesiastical terms. Furthermore, it must also be noted here that this development is growing internationally and relatively independently of the institutional state of the church and specific confessional setting. Thus, we are dealing here with a shift in terminology that suggests that the meanings associated with these concepts have also changed. Unlike past etymological developments in which new terminological aspects often remained subsumed under the concept of religion (Hölscher 1999), there is a new branch of meaning being built under the title of spirituality.

### **Spirituality, experience and the Religion Monitor**

While the ethnocategory of spirituality thrives partly from its opposition to the church—an aspect that is encompassed by the sociological concept of spirituality—I would like to concentrate here on a feature that is rarely addressed in such surveys: the religious experience or, better, the experience of (great) transcendence as delineated above. This means that I will classify those who attribute a decisive significance to religious experience as spiritual, whether or not they call themselves spiritual.

Although there have been some smaller surveys conducted from the perspective of the psychology of religion, surveys on religious experience that have been conducted for an entire population are rare. David Hay (1982) writes about a sur-

vey conducted in the United Kingdom that revealed vast differences in terms of social class. In another study, a representative survey conducted throughout Germany on near-death experiences, at least 4.3 percent of more than 4,000 respondents reported that they had had such an experience (Knoblauch, Schmied and Schnettler 2001). Note that only a small number of respondents viewed these experiences as tied to Christian or religious experience. These findings support the relevance of a category broader than “religious experience.” It therefore makes sense for sociological studies on contemporary religiosity and spirituality to include other experiences of great transcendence, such as visions of the future and channeling. In a national survey on “paranormal experiences” that was also conducted in Germany, 75 percent of the 1,500 respondents reported that they had had such an experience (Schmied-Kettel and Schetsche 2003).

The data from the Religion Monitor, which was collected in 2007, are more comprehensive and detailed than the RAMP data. The cultural scope of the survey is impressive, for it includes Catholic, Protestant, mixed-Christian and former socialist societies in Europe and the United States, as well as Islamic societies in Africa and Asia, South American states, Buddhist Thailand and Hindu India. For our purposes, it is in two more ways of particular significance that spirituality plays a key role in this survey. First, respondents were asked to assess themselves as spiritual or religious, thus addressing the ethnocategory of the spiritual. Second, they were asked about their religious experience, that is, one aspect of our sociological notion of the spiritual. “The core dimension of religious experience refers to the social expectation that transcendence is, at some level, perceptible to religious persons” (Huber 2007: 24). As these suggestions indicate, this expectation is confirmed not only for those individuals describing themselves as religious.

Incorporating the dimension of experience, Stefan Huber (who played a key role in designing the survey) employs a concept of transcendence that draws upon two experiential poles. On the one side, there are theistic modes of perception and experience, which Huber also describes as a “one-to-one experience.” On the other, there are pantheistic modes of perception and experience, which are understood in terms of a mystic model of an all-inclusive unity, or “being at one.” Since acts are also regarded as part of experience, and since the acts of prayer and meditation can involve the experience of transcendence, I consider both forms of activity here.

As unique as this approach is, it should be noted that the distinction made between the two types of experience is problematic. The qualitative survey on near-death experiences mentioned above (Knoblauch 1999), for example,

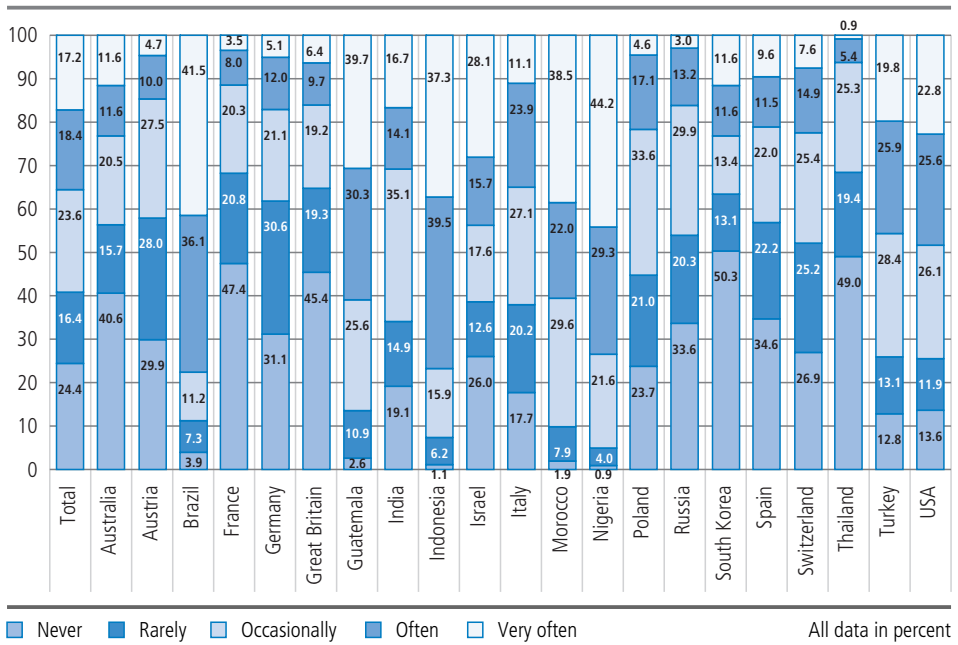
showed a broad spectrum of types of religious experience, including mystical experiences of fusion. Near-death experiences described in non-religious terms resulted in completely different models in which encounters with personal others (such as spirit beings or dead relatives) was possible for self-described “spirituals” in a state of transcendence. A glance at the phenomenology of religious experience for Evangelicals, Charismatics, Spiritists or Occultists shows that the proposed typology follows a slightly evolutionist theological model from pantheism to monotheism but is ill-suited to serve as an empirical or ideal-type typology. In some cultures, the associative aspects of the question about pantheism (in other words, “feeling that you are at one with all”) may not be understood at all.

Nevertheless, this is not reason enough to call the entire typology into question. When asking about these kinds of experiences in an interview regarding religion, the respondent can be assumed to be sufficiently clear about the contextual meaning. Here, the contrast between the two types of experience is linguistically clear enough to permit a basic understanding of the difference. At the same time, though, the qualitative problems behind the quantitative data should not be underestimated. The quantitative results can surely be viewed as suggesting the complexity of such experiences, even if they are less exact than they were thought to be (Figure 2).

With these methodological problems in mind, let us turn to the results. Theistic experiences were solicited with the question of whether (and how often) the respondent has the feeling that God or something divine intervenes in his or her life. On average, almost 75 percent of those surveyed reported that they had had at least one such an experience. The results for European countries—especially in France, Russia and the United Kingdom—are strikingly low in comparison to those for the United States, India or Morocco. There is also a strong correlation between those who claim to have had a theistic experience of transcendence and those who can be described as religious.

Overall, however, we can identify a close connection between identification with a(n) (organized) religion and the quite significant number of theistic experiences. Moreover, the experience of God is not at all widespread in many societies. At the same time, there are obviously methodological problems that need to be borne in mind. The results for Turkey and India, for example, certainly require explanation, not only owing to the religious background of these two countries, but also with regard to the methodological implementation and the translation of the questions. Nevertheless, the results clearly show that these experiences are in no way rare.

Figure 2: Theistic experiences

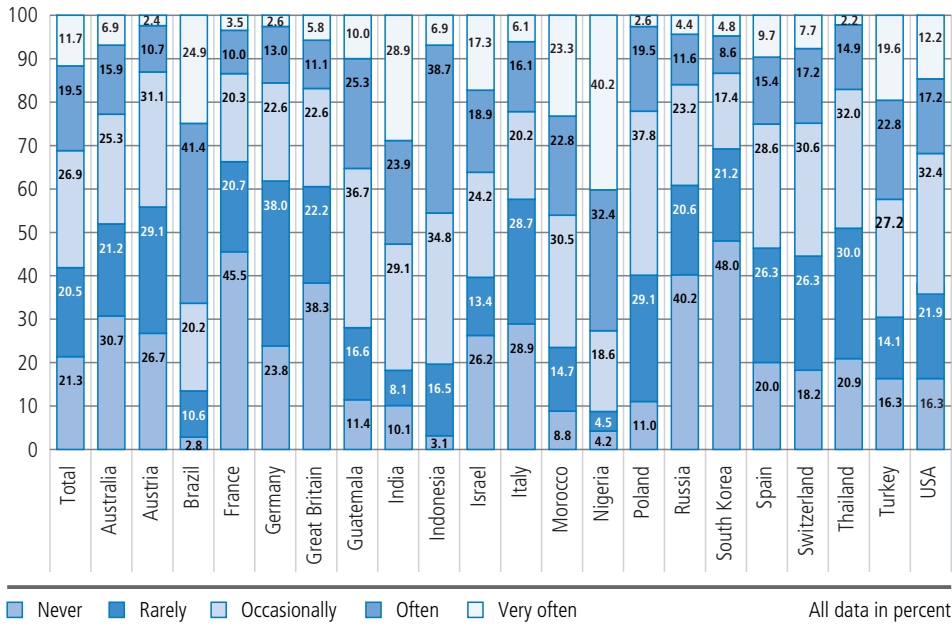


In the English-language questionnaire, the question regarding pantheistic experiences was phrased as follows: “How often do you experience situations in which you have the feeling that you are at one with all?”

If we follow the assumption that the intensity of pantheistic experiences corresponds to their frequency, then non-European societies prove to be especially experience-intensive. In addition to Indonesia and Nigeria, which is deeply divided between Muslims (45 %) and Christians (45 %), Maliki-Muslim Morocco, Hindu India and Brazil are especially striking in terms of respondents reporting pantheistic experiences (Schäfer 2007). Theravada-Buddhist Thailand, again, shows a particularly low number of individuals reporting many pantheistic experiences, which corresponds to the differentiation between expert religiosity (monks) and lay religiosity (von Brück 2007).

In any case, one can question whether the intensity of religious experience correlates with its frequency. Indeed, this does not appear to be obvious when examining experiences of God. The religious conversions in evangelical Protestantism, for example, are primarily one-time events, but, as we see in the case of the U.S. President George Bush, all the more crucial. With regard to pantheistic experiences, we must also ask whether intensity actually depends on frequency.

Figure 3: Pantheistic experiences

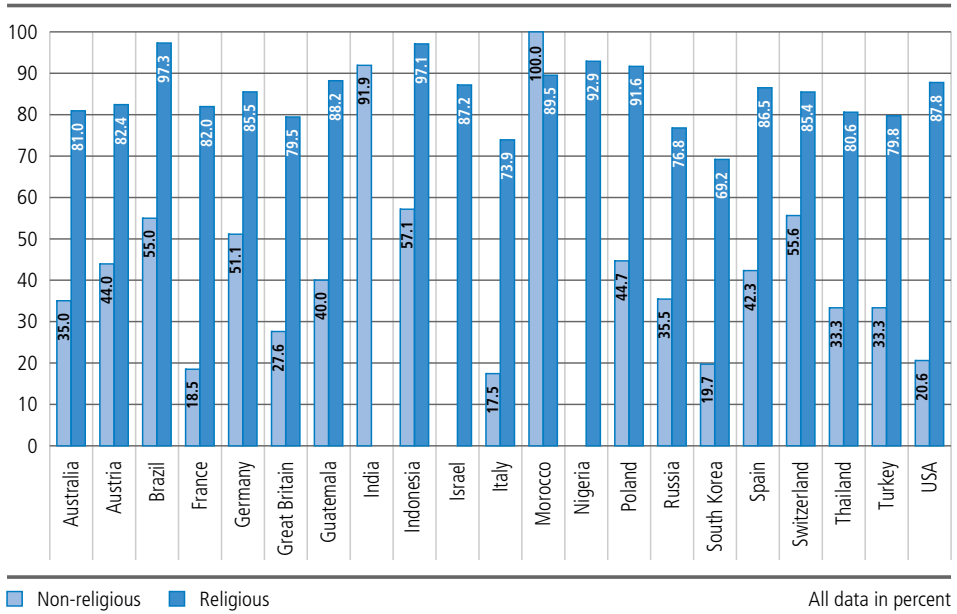


We need only think of Hape Kerkeling, who has had only two noteworthy experiences that presumably would have to be described as being more pantheistic than theistic: a near-death experience and a reincarnation experience. Although neither event results in conversion, both events appear to be crucial for his religious—or in our case, to be more exact, spiritual—self-understanding.

As Schnettler (2004) has shown with the example of vision experiences, the frequency with which an individual experiences a vision is less an expression of personal “religious fervor” or intensity of belief than an indicator of how much an individual has focused on these religious skills or has begun to professionalize them within a specific “cultic milieu” that draws upon the visionary experience.

It therefore seems fair to disregard the frequency of pantheistic experience in order to draw a clearer picture of things: How many persons did have a pantheistic experience at all? An important qualification to this question is how self-identification as non-religious relates to experiences of transcendence. In fact, few of the non-religious respondents reported having theistic experiences of transcendence. Things look quite different, however, when it comes to pantheistic experiences (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Pantheistic experiences of religious and non-religious persons



If the results for theistic experiences are high (on average, almost one-fifth of respondents reported having such an experience), then the following figures may be described as sensational: In most of the Christian (i.e., theistic) societies surveyed, an average of about 80 percent of the religious respondents in each reported having such a pantheistic experience. A second observation is just as spectacular: Many non-religious people also report having such an experience. There are vast differences, reaching from 100 percent in Morocco to around 18.9 percent in France and Italy. In Germany, over 50 percent of non-religious respondents answered this question in the affirmative—and this is by no means an exception. With regard to the question exploring the proliferation of spirituality as a measure of its popularity, it should be noted that a considerable percentage, in many cases the majority of those who identify themselves as non-religious, reported having had at least one pantheistic experience.

The questionnaire, which differentiates between theistic and pantheistic experiences, is based upon a typology of religious phenomenology that certainly begs explanation. Nevertheless, the sheer volume of positive responses suggests what previous research has overlooked: Many—and even a majority—of individuals in so-called secular societies show a strong orientation toward “extraordinary” experiences. Even in German-speaking countries, a majority of non-religious

gious individuals report such experiences. It should be borne in mind that the number of those who describe themselves as spiritual does not equal the number of those that have had such an experience. In Germany, 30.5 percent of the respondents reported that they are more (“very”) or less (“moderately”) spiritual. Moreover, the degree of spirituality does not correspond to the experience. In Germany, those who are “very spiritual” have clearly had pantheistic experiences less frequently than those who are “not at all spiritual.”

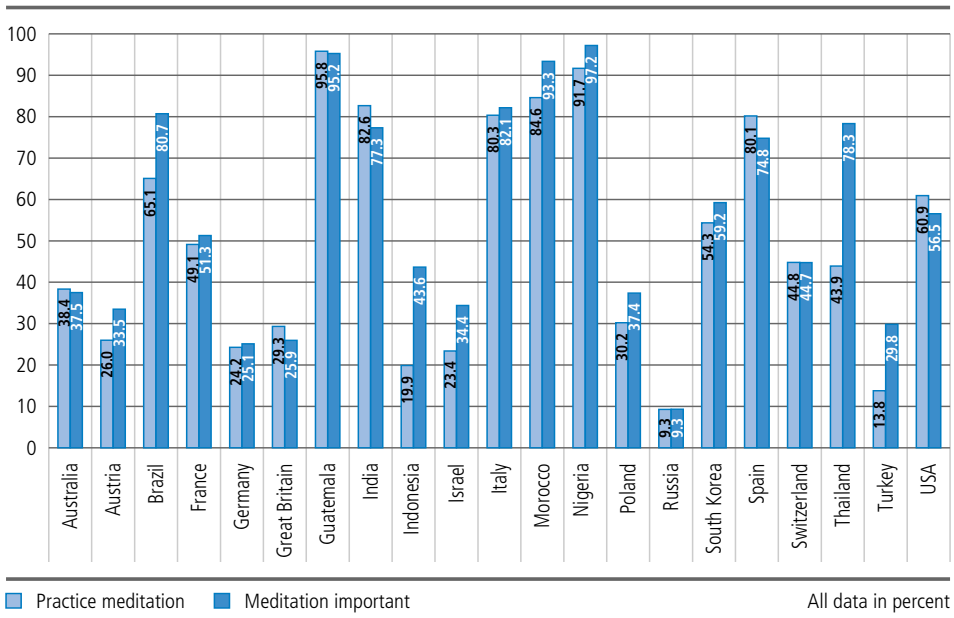
Thus the sociological concept of spirituality does not coincide but only overlaps with the ethnocategory of spirituality. The concept, however, cannot be restricted to pantheistic experiences, which are difficult to define clearly. I conceive of this more as an experiential orientation toward great transcendences, as they are alluded to in the aforementioned questions. Whether these experiences are “passive” in the sense implied by a substantialist concept of religious experience can be explored if we turn to another question dealing with the aspect of action. The survey addresses religious action, and it does so in two ways: as public and private (ritual) practice. For the purposes of this essay, we will focus on private religious practice, which was divided between the questions on “prayer” and “meditation.” There is an obvious parallelism here between the twin concepts of theism and pantheism (of experience). At least in Western culture, prayer is associated with a one-to-one experience involving God, and meditation is associated rather with the experience of nothingness or non-personal beings.

If we look at the results of the question on prayer, we find that they correlate very strongly with the self-designation of religious and negatively with the non-religious. The only exceptions here are Thailand, India and the United States, where at least 5 percent of the non-religious report that they pray. Things are somewhat different when it comes to meditation (Figure 5). The survey solicited an array of possible responses regarding the frequency of meditation. For the purposes of interpretive clarity, I have grouped the range of responses from “a few times a year” to “several times a day” as “positive” responses. Another question is included in order to be able to appraise the significance of meditation: “How important is meditation to you?” Here, too, responses ranging from “quite important” to “very important” were aggregated to suggest the salience of meditation, while “not very important” and “not at all important” were considered negative responses.

In Figure 5, we see an across-the-board relevance for the practice of meditation. The quantitative pattern observed here is not sufficiently detailed to determine whether or not this relevance manifests itself in moral practices beyond meditation.



Figure 5: Frequency and relevance of meditation

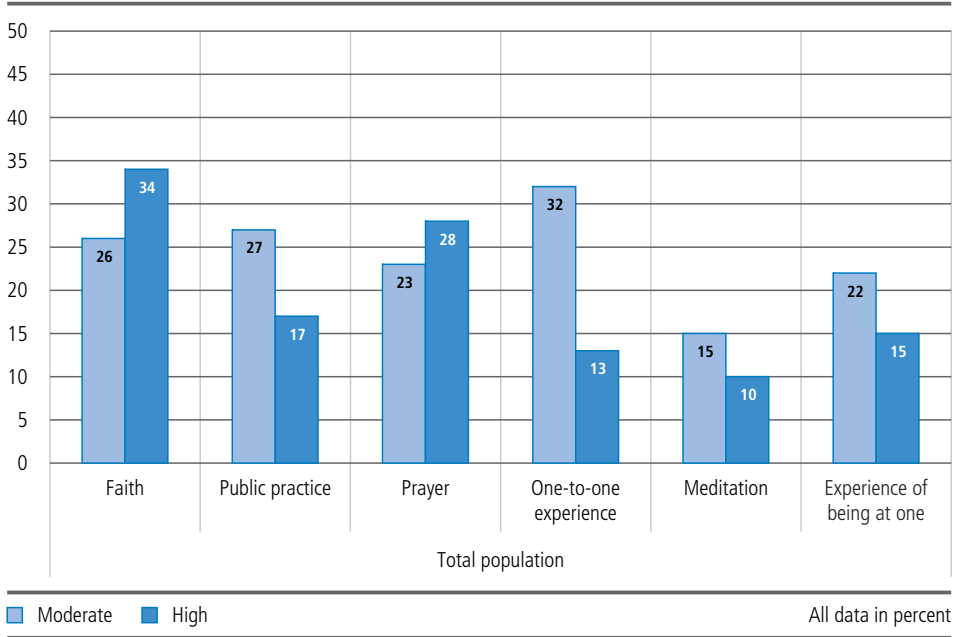


Yet the overall results are quite remarkable: There is a significant high number of individuals who report practicing meditation. In Germany, they number over 24 percent; in Switzerland, more than 44 percent; and in Italy and Spain, the respective numbers are roughly 80 percent. The dominance of Hinduism in India accounts for the large numbers observed there (von Brück 2007). Large numbers for meditation in Guatemala, Brazil, Nigeria and Morocco, however, raise the question of what is understood by the term in each country as well as across the various languages and cultures.

Irrespective of such differences in meaning, the mere fact that meditation is widely prevalent as a practice cannot be overlooked. The fact remains that—across the board—meditation is practiced by a large portion, and in some cases a majority, of the population in all of the aforementioned countries. Yet the number of those who meditate is in no way congruent with the number of those describing themselves as spiritual. The same is true for the number of individuals who pray and the number of those describing themselves as religious in an institutional sense.

In conclusion, let us look more closely at Religion Monitor findings that relate specifically to Germany and highlight dimensions of religiosity that have not been discussed in this chapter.

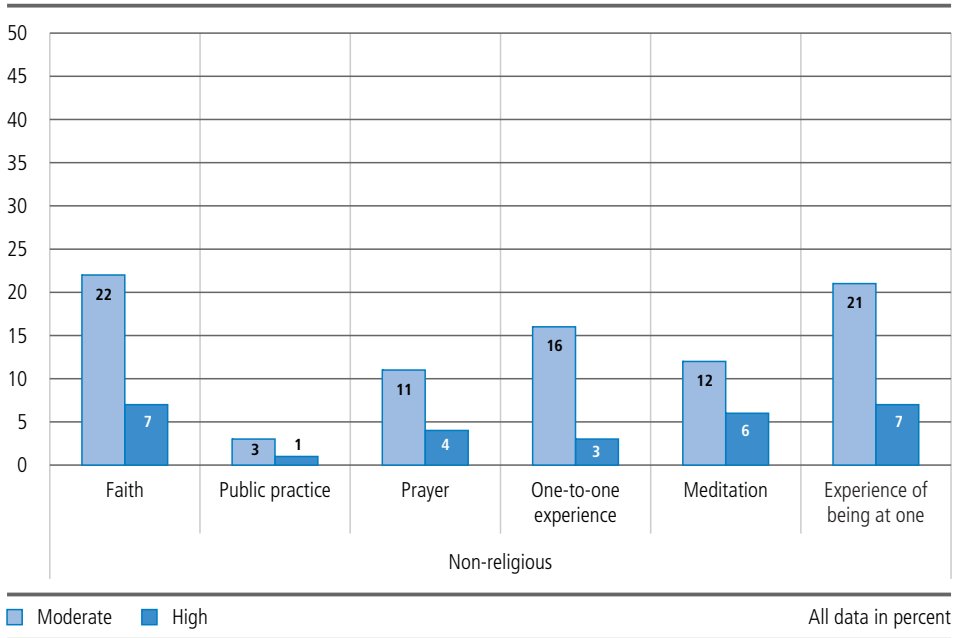
**Figure 6a: Dimensions of religiosity in Germany (total population)**



In Germany, individuals who describe themselves as non-religious express experiences and behaviors that do not categorically differ from those of the more religious total population. Fifteen percent of those who do not describe themselves as religious pray with the same frequency as the total population, and 19 percent of the non-religious reported having theistic “one-to-one” experiences with God or something divine. About 25 percent of the religious population (most of which is affiliated with a particular confession) meditate, and 27 percent of them have had a pantheistic or “being at one with all” experience.

**Popular spirituality**

The scope of this paper has been limited to only one aspect of religious diversity and the features included in the survey. However, given the dearth of quantitative studies on the phenomenon of contemporary spirituality, a discussion thereof is more than justified. If we consider spirituality to be a form of religiosity centering on the experience of great transcendence—which can vary in substance—we see an astoundingly large number of people in so-called secular

**Figure 6b: Dimensions of religiosity in Germany (non-religious)**

Western societies with a profound affinity for these experiences. The proliferation of experiences of transcendence, together with the respondents' willingness to report having them in a survey, is a quantitative feature of spirituality's popularity. It is worth noting that, in earlier survey research, a sizable number of individuals who did not describe themselves as religious (or spiritual) reported having such experiences.

In addition to the wide distribution in which experiences of transcendence are reported, the data suggest another feature of popularization. Whereas the widespread proliferation of these experiences correlates to a growing number of self-proclaimed spiritual individuals, their respective growth patterns are not parallel to each other. Instead, we have found that these experiences proliferate in theistic—and especially in pantheistic—forms among the religious and spiritual as well as among those individuals who consider themselves to be neither. It is worth noting, however, as an earlier qualitative study established, that religious individuals with confessional affiliation are not limited to theistic experiences of transcendence (Gebhard, Engelbrecht und Bochinger 2005).

This overlap between the two general kinds of experiences suggests that the conceptual boundaries of religion or of the religious field are dissipating. In

short, we are witnessing the popularization of religion (Knoblauch 2008). This in no way means that religion as an institutional form will disappear. It does mean, however, that there are other forms establishing themselves in addition to traditional religious forms that require other terms to describe them. As these terms and concepts make their way through popular culture, we are witnessing an ongoing delimitation that—in the academic world, at least—is associated with the dispersal of the concept of religion and manifested more generally in the use of the concept of spirituality.

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