THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES:
ACCOUNT FOR RELIGIOUS PRAXIS AND
DE-INSTITUTIONALIZED RELIGION IN
EMPIRICAL THEOLOGY
Anyone looking down on the earth from an imaginary helicopter and discerning the varying density and sparseness of religious populations on the landscape below cannot but ask where these differences come from. Why are European countries’ religious populations sparser than North American ones, and those in North America sparser than in Arab countries? And if one zooms in on individual countries, one cannot help wondering why some religious communities flourish while others are dwindling. Finally, if one acknowledges that all these communities consist of individual members, the question arises: why are some individuals religious and others not? In short, where do religious differences between countries, within countries and between individuals come from? My concern is not with differences between religions (plural), like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as with differences in religion (singular). Hence the question, more specifically, reads: where do differences in religious density between countries, within countries and between individuals come from?

In this article I do not propose offering an empirical answer—in a general sense that would be quite impossible; my answer is theoretical. I shall try to clarify a few paradigms, on the basis of which I shall indicate what routes we could follow to arrive at an empirical answer for a group of countries, for one country and for individual people. To this end I work out a threefold answer to my question. The question about differences in religion between countries is probed on the basis of the secularisation paradigm. The question about differences within countries I examine from the angle of the economic rational choice paradigm. Differences between individuals are explored by way of the cognitive paradigm.

A few comments are called for. When we speak about paradigms, it must be acknowledged that it is not easy to pinpoint what a paradigm is. Thomas Kuhn, originator of modern paradigm thinking, lists 22 different meanings. He also offers a broad definition: “an overall constellation of concepts, values and techniques” (Kuhn 1970). Concepts comprise theories, definitions and models; values include guidelines like