CHAPTER TEN

THE FIELD OF RELIGIONS IN NORWEGIAN PLURALIST SOCIETY

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In societies that have embraced religious pluralism and as a consequence have become religiously diverse, the state has opened a space in which religions can operate more freely than in countries exercising a religious monopoly. As a consequence of this liberalization of the religious space, religions in pluralist societies seem to have increased their potential for change and adaptation. In pluralist societies, religion is not only to be found in traditional religious bodies. As James Beckford (2003) has aptly put it, religions are free-floating phenomena, which are able to change. As a consequence of the mutability and adaptability of religion, the question of how to map the religious field is not unimportant for the study of religion in pluralist and diverse societies. The freedom of religion, or the pluralist strategy of modern states, has given rise to a range of phenomena, as for instance some strands of spirituality and newly organized humanism and atheism, both of which in many ways “behave” and function like religions, while at the same time denying that they are a religion.

Whereas spirituality has been discussed within the sociology of religion for some years (Giordan and Pace 2012), humanism has only recently become an area of sociological attention (Bullivant and Lee 2012, Lanman 2012, Lee 2012). The existence of these phenomena poses an interesting challenge to the sociology of religion, namely whether or not they should be counted as religions, and subsequently as part of the religious landscape. The suggestion put forward here is that these non-religious movements and organizations be regarded as what Jan Assmann (1997) has called “counter-religions.” The term counter-religions is thus proposed as a sub-type of non-religion (Lee 2012). The reason for this choice of terminology is that I wish to stress the fact that counter-religions define themselves as a negation of religion, are engaged in dynamic processes with religion, and serve as a

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1 I thus use the term pluralism as an official regime policy and diversity as the outcome of this policy (see Beckford 2010).
functional equivalent to traditional religious organization. Consequently the argument of this chapter is that counter-religions should be regarded as participants in the field of religions and included in a mapping thereof. This chapter is thus primarily concerned with what Karel Dobbelaere (2002) called religion on the meso-level.

The question of how to define and map religion as well as counter-religions remains, or perhaps the above-mentioned mutability of religion sharpens the question of how the academic study of religion is to deal with these phenomena that have arisen in religiously pluralist and diverse societies, including those that explicitly deny being a religion. In many ways, the simple question of what should count as a religion and a counter-religion is perhaps more pressing than ever.

Borrowing the term *survival unit* from Norbert Elias, this chapter will make the basic suggestion that religions can be understood and analyzed as religious survival units that define and delimit themselves by reference to the significant other religions in their environment. Basically, then, religions can be regarded as part of a field consisting of other religions. This field is a relational field (Bourdieu 1984, 1990). The actors in the field of religions are not individual persons, as in the work of Bourdieu (1989), but collective entities. This is not to imply that religions are without an internal field consisting of individual persons; here the important step, however, is to bring the field, or the relations between the religions as collective units, into the analytical framework. Such an analysis requires an explicit notion of religion including a more or less firm boundary vis-à-vis other religions. Theoretically this is not an easy task, primarily because the academic study of religion, as well as other social and cultural studies, has witnessed a deconstruction of its analytical categories (Asad 1993, Stuckrad 2003). In order to establish a relational category of religion, including counter-religions, I have followed in the steps of the American philosopher John Searle and the German sociologist Norbert Elias. Searle (1995) argues that collective intentionality and collective consciousness are not reducible to the sum of the consciousness of the individuals. Elias (1978, 2008) also argues that an important aspect of his survival unit is that it carries with it what he calls an extended I-We consciousness. Further, I will suggest that the socially constructed We is conceived in a relation to significant others or in what Bourdieu calls a “field.” By doing so I posit that religions in pluralist societies can be treated as religious survival units in a field of religions (Reeh 2012).

These religious survival units may resemble Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (2006), but unlike Anderson, I would argue that they are