MEASURING MUSLIMS: THE PROBLEMS OF RELIGIOSITY AND INTRA-RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Dobroslawa Wiktor-Mach

Introduction

Since the 1990s many sociologists dealing with religious phenomena have been turning towards quantitative research methods. There has been a significant rise in cross-cultural social surveys on religion which aim at gathering comparable data from around the world. More and more general social surveys of public opinion include items dealing with religious beliefs, attendance, trust in religious institutions, levels of orthodoxy, etc. Examples include both national surveys, such as the American General Social Surveys (GSS) or the National Election Studies (NES), Eurobarometer and global studies, e.g., the World Values Survey (WVS), the Pew Research Center that has a section “The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.” However, emergent pictures and diagnosis of religious communities turn out to be inconsistent or, in many cases, contradictory. Even the most sophisticated statistical techniques cannot compensate for the low quality of data. Therefore, the recent wave of research shows signs of sensitivity to methodological problems. It is being underlined that alongside progress in theoretical thinking and in data analysis, more attention should be paid to the way religion is conceptualized and operationalized (Finke, Bader, Polson 2009).

The need for improved measures is especially visible in the social study of Christianity, which constitutes most of research inside this field. While a general classification of believers as Christians is not very problematic, the issue of intra-religious pluralism, i.e., divisions inside a given religion, cause lots of doubts. For example, as Hackett and Lindsay (2008) show, published studies of modern American evangelicalism result in dramatically different pictures of this religious branch and its social and political characteristics. The problem actually begins with defining the evangelical group. There are at least three different methods employed by researchers to identify evangelical respondents: (1) An arbitrary classification of believers into one of the
categories: “evangelical,” “fundamentalist,” or “conservative Protestant”,
(2) Respondents’ self-classification, (3) Making distinctions on the basis of the respondent’s declared beliefs on some relevant subjects. Scientists’ choices of different methods affect the ultimate picture of characteristics of a particular religion. Thus, special caution is needed in each step of the measurement process.

The last decade has also brought new challenges in regard to the variety of religions being studied. The so-called “global sociology of religion” focuses not only on Christian traditions developing all over the world, but also on non-Christian religions and on some forms of spirituality that can hardly be called religion. In order to ensure comparability of studies between diverse religions, one of the solutions is to use simple and similar measures of beliefs, behavior or belonging. Such a strategy does not take into consideration the influence of political, economic, and social contexts on people’s theological ideas and the variety of meanings people attach to religious concepts.

In this paper I shall discuss measurement challenges with regard to Islamic religion. I came across this problem during my Ph.D. project on Islam in contemporary Azerbaijan (Wiktor-Mach, 2010). While I was analyzing quantitative data from a few available social surveys, I noticed serious discrepancies between that kind of data and the data I gathered in the field research. Social scientists using survey methods in evaluating the religious situation and the level of religiousness tend to simplify research questions and therefore the socio-religious reality. My aim here is to narrow the methodological discussion to two crucial concepts in the current scholarship on religion: religiosity and plurality. My focus will be on the quantitative research on Islam conducted in the last decade in Azerbaijan—a secular, Muslim-majority country which has been experiencing religious revival for over a decade. It constitutes an interesting example of what in the American case is called a “religious market”, i.e., the situation where divergent religious groups coexist and compete for the souls and minds of believers. Azeri experience can shed some light on the problem of religious identification and the dynamics of a religious situation.

Three main research questions will be addressed: (1) To what extent does the concept of religiosity used in quantitative projects reflect the empirical sphere of religious expressions? (2) How is the concept of

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1 For an overview of the history of religion in Azerbaijan see, e.g., Yunusov (2004).