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The Problem with Numbers in Study of Religions: Introduction

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My recent research project in Brazil has led me to a closer look at the national census figures for this vast country because the 2010 census highlights major shifts in the religious landscape of Brazil. Perhaps the most important one is the raise in the number of so-called *Evangélicas*. Roman Catholicism used to be the dominant religion in Brazil. Four decades ago 90% of Brazilians still declared belonging to the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil. However, the number has declined ever since and the Catholic Church starts to worry about the future. As in all other industrialised and urbanised countries, the religious landscape of Brazil is no longer monolithic but diverse.

However, how far can we trust this statistics? Religion is a highly personal issue and people are often reluctant to acknowledge customs outside the mainstream belief. In Brazil we can find figures about religious self-identification since 1940 as the question “Qual é a sua religião ou culto?” (“What is your religion or cult?”) is part of the general data everyone has to answer. Though officially there are no restrictions about the kind of religion one can add, the handbook for census collectors (IBGE, 2010 and 2009) gives clear instructions. It is not allowed to state only generic expression of interest. The census data collectors are advised that the record must identify the branch of the religion, for instance Roman Catholic, Brazilian Catholic, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Baptist, or Assembly of God. (IBGE, 2009, p. 194 and 195). NRM and even new churches have it therefore difficult to make it onto the list of religions, despite a growing list of possible categories (e.g., the list contains now a growing number of Pentecostal churches among its 150 categories in 2010).

Despite its growing list of possible religious categories one sector is still underrepresented: popular traditions, also called vernacular religions. The census data states that less than 3% of Brazilian declares to practise a tradition listed under the category Espirita or Afro-Brazilian. However, Andrew Chesnut estimates that 15-20% of Brazilians practise regularly Umbanda or one of the other Afro-Brazilian religions (Chesnut 2003, pp. 106-107). Chesnut even insists that the number of people practising an Afro-Brazilian religion is as high as the number of Protestant Brazilians, and explains that the very

different figure in the national census is the result of the enduring stigma attached to African-derived religions. While I cannot confirm Chesnut's figures, it is evident that the national census data does not manage to capture the daily customs of the people. To declare officially to which religion one belongs tend to lead people to officially acceptable traditions such as churches, even when practising daily rituals from a very different tradition. It is also very common in Brazil to follow more than one tradition. As a colleague with a life-long experience of doing research in Brazil once told me, if it would be possible to tick more than one box under religious affiliation in the national census in Brazil, the data would be very different indeed. It is not seen as a paradox in Brazil, to practise two or more traditions at the same time. Census data does not prove that the person has any knowledge about the religious belief or that he/she practise it more or less regularly. The Christian self-identification remains in Brazil a strong denominator for national identity that outshines the popular religions, which are often regarded as part of the personal spirituality of an individual, but not as the foundation for religious self-identification. Brazilians distinguish between religion and everyday practice, between Christianity on one side and the veneration of *orixás* (African deities) and the communication with spirits of the dead on the other side. It might even seem that Afro-Brazilian rituals are not acknowledged as religious but as secular technique, a mode of communication with the afterlife. For the vast majority of people involved in Spiritism or one of the many Afro-Brazilian traditions it would be unimaginable to declare their practice to the census collector. And Brazil is not an exception. Vernacular religions are difficult to capture in any survey as they belong to the private sphere of society.

Nonetheless, data from national census and other surveys remains important for researchers. With census data going back decades one can trace the arrival of new religious traditions, in particular ethnic religions that arrive with immigrants groups. For Brazil, for instance we can trace back the arrival of Islam via the arrival of immigrants of Islamic background. And it is also possible to relate important features to religion, for instance, it is possible to look at religion and education or religion and work when analysing the Brazilian data. While we cannot get a clear picture about the religious belonging from national census data, we can find out trends about important shifts in the religious landscape.

And this is exactly what the articles in this special issue show. The idea for this issue derived from a panel on census and surveys I organised together with Abby Day for the annual conference of the European Association for Study of Religions at Liverpool Hope in 2013. We asked for contributions that discusses the usefulness of self-identification on instruments such as surveys and censuses. While we had originally the 2011 census for the UK in mind, we expanded the call for papers to all larger surveys such as the World Values Survey and others. We asked contributors to consider the question how does a faith in surveys and censuses manifest itself by discipline, and what impact does this have on our understanding of research methodology and outcomes? I want to thank all presenters at the panel for their contribution and the lively discussion we had. My particular thanks go to Abby Day who

initiated the idea for this panel and showed me with her enthusiasm the importance of statistics for study of religions (see also Day/Lee 2014). However, the issue is not the proceedings of the panel but part of the conference. While several of the speakers at the panel contributed an article to this special issue, I found in addition several other papers at the EASR 2013 conference which also looked at the usefulness of surveys and numbers. I decided therefore to invite speakers from other panels to contribute to this issue of DISKUS which therefore presents not only papers from the panel but papers from the conference. The result is a fascinating insight into the problems study of religion scholars have with numbers and statistics but also the value of the data for our research.

This special issue of DISKUS highlights two aspects in particular, first, a growing interest of scholars in study of religions to look at people declaring to be not religious, and second, the ongoing methodological problems with using quantitative data in study of religions. In this issue three articles study this group of people in the UK, Australia and the Czech Republic while other articles also include this group in their discussion of the census data (e.g. Brice). The outcome is an increasingly diverse picture of the group of “nones” which if not contradicts but clarifies earlier findings about secularisation. The articles also highlight the significance of qualitative data that extend quantitative data from the national census. For instance, Wallis (for the UK) as well as Cox and Possamai (for Australia) have included data in their articles that they collected via interviews and additional questionnaires and Serikow links in his article statistical information with quantitative research on the Islamic community in Frankfurt. This way their articles present not only interesting data about this group of people but make also useful contribution to the methodological debate on working with numbers which leads me to my second point. Scholars in study of religions come, of course, from various academic backgrounds, including sociology. However, there is a general tendency to rely more on qualitative data instead of quantitative. We tend to tell stories and look at the intrinsic meaning of case studies. This is not only true for anthropologists such as I and phenomenologists such as Cox but scholars in study of religions more general. However, data from surveys can highlight important trends and point us to crucial developments as for instance Thorvaldsen, Brice and Václavík show in their articles. It is therefore important for the study of religions to develop a firm understanding of the methodological framework when working with surveys and other quantitative data as, for instance, Stringer and Serikow show in their articles. In particular Stringer’s case study about ethnicity and religion demonstrates very well how data from surveys can further the interpretation of qualitative data. Bringing both together will provide us with a more detailed understanding of the place of religion in society and, in the end, of the meaning of religion for people, whether they identify themselves as religious, spiritual or none.

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