



**Open Competitie MAGW/Open MAGW Program  
Application Form 2007**

## **Details of applicant**

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## **Title of research proposal (NL and UK)**

NL: Religie en secularisering in Europa. Een *case study* van het combineren van een interpretatieve en positivistische benadering.

UK: Religion and secularization in Europe. A case study in combining an interpretative and positivistic approach.

## **Abstract**

This research proposal aims at suggesting a study in which two historically distinct paradigms are welded together. Prior research arrived at diverging conclusions as to whether or not religion is declining in Europe. Often, quantitative and positivistic studies find evidence supporting the conventional secularization theory, while many qualitative and interpretative scholars have found that religion is changing form instead of disappearing altogether. By combining the strengths of both approaches, this case study investigation of religion and secularization in Europe, the author suggests, could form an important advancement of method and theory in social science.

## **Research Proposal**

**Number of words: 2321**

## **Research topic**

There are few areas of research in the social sciences that are as abstract as the study of religion. Along with analytical concepts like 'culture' and 'identity', 'religion' often remains a vaguely defined aspect of social life. Yet, if we as social scientists truly wish to understand human social and cultural life, then a detailed description and analysis of exactly these aspects may well be the essence of what this objective constitutes. The topic of the research that I propose in this paper concerns what many scholars have presumed to be the most advanced state yet in the 'evolution of religion'; secularization. More specifically, I will focus on secularization in Europe. When compared to other areas in the world, the religious situation in Europe seems to be an exception. Whereas many other regions seem to have witnessed a more or less stable number of religious followers or even a "renaissance of religion" (Knoblauch, 2003, p. 267), in Europe, religions appear to be in recession. From this perspective, Europe deserves special attention in the sociology of religion. The research question that will be addressed by this study is therefore formulated as followed:

***What is the nature and diversity of religion in contemporary Europe, which dynamics and trends underlie and influence it, and to what extent is religion at all present?***

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An investigation of religion and secularization in Europe in itself is not new. The apparent decline of religion in Europe has been the subject of a vast body of research. Interestingly, however, these studies regularly reach very different conclusions regarding the nature of this decline. When comparing studies like these, it seems that empirical, quantitative studies more often than not find that religion in Europe is indeed declining (cf. Bruce, 2003; Dekker, 2007; de Graaf & te Grotenhuis, 2005; Wilson, 2003), while many interpretative, qualitative investigations tend to conclude that religion is merely changing instead of disappearing (cf. Heelas & Steel, 2003; Hunt, 2003)<sup>1</sup>. This difference in overall conclusions drawn on the basis of varying approaches has been noted by other authors before (Bruce, 2002; Dekker, 2007; Palmer, 2007). Of course, the above observation does not provide an iron law as to which research method or epistemological approach yields what kind of results, but it does give us a some important clues where to look for an explanation for Europe's religious position compared to other areas in the world. Although the central research question formulated above has a rather theoretical nature, this research proposal intends to address two distinct research goals:

- 1) To advance scientific knowledge on the function, form and evolution of religion in general, and of secularization and religion in Europe specifically.*

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- 2) To methodologically integrate an interpretative qualitative approach with a positivistic quantitative approach, thereby shedding light on how to interpret seemingly contradictory results from prior secularization studies.*

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As the above goals should indicate, the proposed research would be scientifically relevant with regard to two aspects. These are explicated in the section "Scientific Relevance" below.

### **Approach**

First, I will outline the central point of the proposed research, which is welding together two epistemological approaches, after which a further theoretical frame will be provided to illustrate the scientific relevance of the proposed study. Then, I will elaborate on the intended execution of the investigation.

### **Epistemological grounds: rivalling or complementing?**

A major challenge posed in this proposal is to employ a methodology that allows for an integration of both quantitative / positivistic and qualitative / interpretative results, because prior studies from these approaches arrived at (seemingly) opposite conclusions. Since both paradigms have distinct historical developments and epistemological grounds, it seems wise to dedicate a paragraph of this proposal, as well as a section of the actual research, to the integration of these trains of thought. As we will see, the real challenge in integrating these approaches lies not in merely combining quantitative and qualitative findings, but rather in asking the same questions and searching for the same kinds of answers. The classical difference between positivistic and interpretative approaches is

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<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, also studies that arrive at more diversified conclusions (see van Tubergen & Ruiter, forthcoming)

often characterized by the terms *erklären* and *verstehen*, which were first introduced by the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (cf. Makkreel, 1992). Applied to the social sciences<sup>2</sup>, the first term refers to *explaining* aspects of social cultural life, while the latter implies trying to *understand* and *interpret* these aspects. Empirical, positivistic and quantitative sociology is often aimed at *explaining* relations, while interpretative, qualitative research<sup>3</sup> aims at *understanding*. The difficulty in this respect is therefore posing questions that can be productively investigated from both epistemological approaches.

Such an approach would, however, be at least as *promising* as it is challenging. No matter how difficult it may be to fruitfully integrate both approaches, such a pursuit should yield interesting results. In my view, an interpretative investigation of what religion actually *is*, and what it means to be religious (or not) in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe, would fill considerable gaps found in conclusions drawn by earlier quantitative, positivistic research. By the same token, a thorough quantitative empiricist addition to any interpretative approach of the study of religion in Europe would put these findings in perspective. In order to truly explain and understand the *nature* and *dynamics* as well as the *scale* and *diversity* of these social developments on this continent, our investigation cannot go without retrieving and analyzing both quantitative *and* qualitative data, using positivistic *and* interpretative approaches. My view is that only in this way a substantive contribution to general theory concerning religion and secularization can be made.

### **Theoretical grounds**

Besides the methodological challenge of combining two distinct ways of scientific ‘knowing’, it should be mentioned that theoretically, too, exciting possibilities lay before us. Potentially the whole of theoretical literature from both traditions is at our disposal. I will brush over some of these opportunities in the following paragraph.

### **Defining religion**

An important question that should be addressed to improve upon prior studies involves the question as to what we are actually looking for. In order to retrieve comparable<sup>4</sup> findings, it is very important to explicate a suitable *definition* of what constitutes religion. This may seem like a trivial question, but when considering the many scientific approaches to the study of religion, and the rapid changes in recent decades in the *form* of what is traditionally referred to with the term ‘religion’, this question may not be that simple to answer. Scholars doing research based on a rather traditional (Christian, Muslims, Buddhist, etc.) view of what religion actually is, may find a stronger decline of religion than scholars studying the same people based on a broader definition, which often includes ‘spiritualistic’, New Age movements and the like (cf. Hunt, 2003). From this perspective, the definition of what it is that we are looking for when we refer to ‘religion’, may well turn out to be a functional one based on the ‘function’ that religion fulfils socially (cf. P.L. Berger, 1983, 1998; P. L. Berger & Luckmann, 1973; Durkheim, 2001, pp. 25-46; Knoblauch, 2003).

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<sup>2</sup> Dilthey used both terms to indicate the difference between natural and human science. Max Weber is often seen to be responsible for introducing these concepts to social science.

<sup>3</sup> Often employed in contemporary anthropology.

<sup>4</sup> Between different epistemological approaches.

Central to this question may be whether or not we should only define social acts as religious activity only when our respondents do the same<sup>5</sup>. Differently put: if the people we interview or observe do not call their activities, feelings or opinions 'religion', then should we? Postmodernism suggests we should not. After all, why should 'scientific truth', i.e. our researcher's *etic* perspective be placed above that of our respondent's *emic* representation? As Steve Bruce (2002, p. 227) amusingly phrases it: "[postmodernism] is the intellectual equivalent of velcro: everything sticks to it". For this research, I therefore suggest that the postmodern approach is not incorporated to such extremes. If we abandon the pursuit of knowledge that is as 'objective' as the researcher can sincerely accomplish, then we may risk abandoning the pursuit of science as we know it altogether (see also Harris, 1999; Spiro, 1996). It therefore is the explicit goal of this research to not only describe what respondents tell us, but also to analyze this data and paint a more theoretical and abstract picture of religion and secularization in Europe. Neither of both epistemological grounds, interpretative and positivistic, prevents us from doing so.

### *Theoretical heritage*

Although I intend to leave room for the researcher to perform an investigation of which theories should be used to study religion and secularization in Europe (see the paragraph 'Implementation'), it seems wise to suggest a few leading theories from both epistemological backgrounds. I will not, however, go deeply into the subject matter of these theories, since that would be beyond the scope of this proposal. Such an elaboration would also unnecessarily limit the researcher's options when conducting this investigation.

First, several sociological theories should be taken into account. Obviously, no study of religion and secularization can be undertaken without discussing and taking into account the secularization theory, which conventionally states that religion will eventually lose relevance in modernising societies (Bruce, 2002, 2003; Norris & Inglehart, 2004). However, as Bruce (2002, p. 241) indicates: "... noting in the secularization paradigm requires that this be the fate of all societies". According to him, there are certain societal preconditions that induce secularization. Nevertheless, one might suspect that as societies are increasingly connected by the advancement of globalization, these cultural and social preconditions converge as well (but see Ritzer, 2003).

Other theories that should be considered are specifically relevant to Europe, since they discuss the influence of religion in religiously plural societies. This includes the religious market theory (cf. Norris & Inglehart, 2004), but also more general theories such as the principle of identification versus disidentification (de Swaan, 1993, 1997, 2003). These are especially important when considering the religious and cultural influence of, for instance, Islam and global events (Oster, 1998; see also Geertz, in Pals, 1996, pp. 233-267). Classical anthropological literature includes of course the writings of Fredrik Barth on (ethnic) groups and boundaries (Barth, 1969).

Last but not least, it should prove worthwhile to examine more closely theories concerning the dynamic character of culture and religion. Religion "is often reified and essentialized as if it were the one thing beyond change" (Baumann, 1999, p. 69). If we continue to measure religion as if it

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<sup>5</sup> This discussion is often referred to with the terms *etic* (the view and interpretation of the observer) and *emic* (the view and interpretation of the respondent).



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were still the Christian set of norms and beliefs that constituted it in the previous centuries or according to the bible, we may be measuring the wrong thing. A more dynamic approach is therefore needed, and important publications in this field of theorizing include contributions from Anderson, Hobsbawm and Keesing (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1983; Keesing, 1989). Linked to these theories are discussions concerning modernity versus tradition (Eriksen, 2002, 2004).

### Implementation

In this paragraph, I will outline the intended approach of the proposed research and the main components of the study will be explicated. The timespan for the proposed research is four years. The table on the next page is included to clarify the following text, and shows a roughly defined, preliminary time frame. The research proposal at hand is divided into several parts. First, I have chosen to explicitly include a portion of the research to examine possibilities for welding together an interpretative / qualitative and positivistic / quantitative approach. Although a rough outset of the methodological procedure is provided for in this proposal, the eventual analysis should include a reflection on the epistemological consequences of the combination of both paradigms. Only by explicitly mentioning this aspect of the study, can the second goal of research (see page 2) be satisfied. The entire process of research should involve methodological, theoretical, and epistemological reflection, but explicit parts have been included in the beginning of the first year, and in the final year.

The research design consists of two distinct methodologies: one quantitative and one qualitative. Both approaches are, however, intertwined from the first stage of research. Before conducting qualitative observations and interviews, the researcher will examine existing quantitative datasets (year 1, quarter 2 and 3) in which items were included that refer to religion, 'religious sentiments', and secularization. He or she will then select several of these items based on existing literature (both quantitative and qualitative). These selected items will subsequently be included in qualitative observations and interviews which will take place between the fourth quarter of the first year and the second quarter of the fourth year. In the first observations (Y1Q4<sup>6</sup> and Y2Q1), the researcher will then determine which items show most potential for qualitative elaboration, and select these items accordingly.

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<sup>6</sup> These abbreviations refer to table 1, in which Y1 means 'year one' and Q4 means 'fourth quarter.'



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<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Product</b>
<i>Year 1</i>		
Q 1	Reflection on epistemological grounds / literature study	
Q 2	Formulating observable questions and relating them to existing data and literature	Detailed plan for data collection and analysis / Dissemination plan
Q 3	Devise plan for observation and interviews / write and submit article / find relevant contacts (abroad)	Methodological journal article on combining approaches
Q 4	Find relevant contacts (abroad) / preliminary observations / literature study	
<i>Year 2</i>		
Q 1	Observations and interviews (case study 1)	
Q 2	Observations and interviews (case study 1)	
Q 3	Analysis of case study 1 (both quantitative and qualitative data)	
Q 4	Observations and interviews (case study 2)	Theoretical journal article on religion and secularization
<i>Year 3</i>		
Q 1	Observations and interviews (case study 2) / writing article	
Q 2	Analysis of case study 2 (both quantitative and qualitative data) / writing article	
Q 3	Observations and interviews (case study 3) / writing article	
Q 4	Observations and interviews (case study 3) / writing article	Two methodological journal articles or one to a high ranking journal (quantitative and qualitative)
<i>Year 4</i>		
Q 1	Analysis of case study 3 (both quantitative and qualitative data)	
Q 2	Synthesis of analyses / writing thesis	
Q 3	Writing thesis	
Q 4	Writing thesis / preparing conference presentation	Thesis / Presentation at ISSR conference <sup>7</sup>

The qualitative part of the study includes the comparison of several (probably three) distinct and relevant case studies (to be selected in Y1Q2/3), in which extensive quantitative data is available as well. At the end of the first year of the project, the researcher is required to find relevant contacts abroad, which is crucial to a thorough qualitative investigation. Through these contacts – who most likely are scholars at other European universities – the researcher is also required to assemble quantitative datasets that were not yet previously found in the preliminary investigation.

The following period (Y2Q1 through Y3Q4) consists of three in-depth case studies using qualitative techniques and employing an interpretative approach, consuming about two quarters each. After every half year period of data-collection, the researcher has one quarter at his or her disposal to analyze the retrieved qualitative as well as quantitative data. Both forms of analysis should be integrated from the first stage of research, in order to develop a certain progressing insight of the matter. In other words: experiences from the earlier case studies can be used to gather data more efficiently in later case studies or analyses.

<sup>7</sup> ISSR: International Society for the Sociology of Religion, conferences in July in every odd year (2007, 2009, 2011, etc.). The researcher is required to submit an application to at least one conference.



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In the final period of analysis (Y4Q1 through Y4Q4), the researcher should try to formulate more general theory based on distinct characteristics of the regions that were closely examined, and the general features found in all three case studies. In order to do so, quantitative multilevel analysis will be indispensable. Even though this final stage of analysis may be executed without, the use of structural equation modelling (SEM) seems an interesting option as well, since it lends itself for confirmatory analysis of the formulated theory. This technique would also enable the researcher to implement the qualitative findings in a quantitative model more flexibly, since SEM allows the construction of latent variables, which are not measured directly (such as religion). In conclusion, the quantitative data assembled by the researcher allows for estimating trends based on historical data more accurately. Now that the systematic qualitative enrichment of the data gives an added depth to the items in these existing datasets, their indicators can be interpreted more accurately.

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### Output

See time planning table (page 6) for reference. The researcher is required to produce three or four journal articles, as well as a thesis and a presentation on a relevant theoretical or methodological conference. The journal article in the first year represents the research design that the researcher has formulated. Since not many investigators have undertaken an interpretative-positivistic study in the past, it should be interesting for readers to find out about the reflections on this process. Furthermore, by publishing these reflections, the academic community is given the opportunity to comment on these ideas. This way the design may be improved even further. The second journal article, submitted in year two, reflects the theoretical, literary study that was undertaken by the researcher. This article is intended to elicit comments from other scholars of religion and secularization, in order to improve upon the theoretical and thematic framework. By the end of the third year, the researcher is required to report on the progressing insight into the methodological aspects of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. This can either be submitted as two articles to two distinct journals (of which one quantitative and the other qualitative), or as one article in which both methods are explained to a high ranking (methodological) journal.

The feedback received to these final articles should subsequently be included in the final analyses, which ultimately culminates in a thesis on religion and secularization in Europe as a case study for methodologically combining the interpretative and positivistic paradigms. The researcher's findings are also presented on an important conference on religion and secularization and / or a



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methodological conference. The conference by the ISSR is mentioned in the table, but other conferences can and should be considered as well.

### Scientific Relevance

The proposed research would be scientifically relevant with regard to two aspects. Firstly, general theory concerning religion and secularization can be improved by closely investigating the acme of religious evolution, as supposed by the secularization theory (Bruce, 2002, pp. 1-5), since no other region in the world shows such an advanced state of religious decline<sup>8</sup> as Europe. Secondly, undertaking this study could potentially advance approaches employed in the social sciences methodologically. There are few authors that subscribe to both a positivistic, quantitative paradigm, as well as an interpretative, qualitative one. As stated above, prior studies from both ends of this spectrum have reached varying, often contradictory conclusions. Employing a combined epistemological approach to the investigation of religion therefore has the potential of shedding new light on previously conducted research as well. This study also offers an interesting case study of how we can apply the advantages of either methodological / epistemological approach to compensate for the weaknesses in the other. Such an approach could then be used to advance future studies in many fields including history, human geography, political science, mass communication studies, and of course sociology and (social/cultural) anthropology. See the description of the proposed research above for more details.

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<sup>8</sup> Or, at least, *change*.