Some reflections on the Sociological Understanding of Religion

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends of the SISR/ISSR,

It is an honour and a pleasure for me to inaugurate this initiative of the counsel of the SISR/ISSR in setting aside time during our biennial conference for a presidential address. By launching this initiative, I hope this innovation will give the ISSR the desire to pursue and thus create a tradition worthy of interest. Although this presidential address is not obliged to deal with the theme of this conference, Religion and Economics, I intend nevertheless to start with this subject in order to present to you next some reflections on the sociological understanding of religion as a singular social phenomenon.

Let me first mention two facts showing the relevance of the theme "Religion and Economics."

1) I have just learned that the First International Forum of the mauve economy on the theme "Growth and cultural environment." will be held in Paris on 11-13 October next under the patronage of UNESCO. This initiative is presented thus:

"If, in the context of globalization, the rise of exchanges allows the cultures to foster each other, the risk of uniformity threatens both the foundation of identity and creative diversity. The mauve economy proposes to the organizations – through their goods and services or their management of human resources ...- a better account of cultural issues. This economy raises two major challenges:

- To make economy a vector of cultural variety and wealth;
- To make the cultural environment an issue of economic growth"

Therefore, here is an economy concerned with cultural variety that its promoters have chosen to qualify as "mauve".
Will we someday see the emergence of a saffron, violet, white, green or multicoloured economy promoting the spiritual and religious diversity? I leave the question with you.

2) The Buddhist monk Sulak Sivaraksa, twice nominated for the Nobel peace Prize, argues in his book *The Wisdom of Sustainability: Buddhist Economics for the 21st Century*, that "globalization is a demonic religion that imposes materialistic values" and "a new form of colonialism". According to Sulak Sivaraksa, it is necessary to pass from cogito ergo sum ("I think therefore I am") to "I breathe therefore I am" and to get rid of "the obsession of success". The conviction of this Buddhist monk is that "once we have learned to breathe properly, to respect the air we inspire, to cultivate inner peace, then Gross National Happiness - this is the concept that he promotes - will therefore follow".

This is one belief among others and, as sociologists, our task is to study how this type of belief emerges and which social effects it produces. I observe that Sulak Sivaraksa does not fail to apply his idea to real events (especially nuclear disasters in recent years) and to a considered critique of Western values. He founded a journal of social sciences in Thailand: *Sangkhomsaat Paritat*. I do not know if this author goes as far as to question the sociology of religions as Western science. In any case, he invites us to remain particularly vigilant in our work of objectification of representations and orientations of life (the famous *Lebensführung* of Max Weber) implemented by various religious leaders.

The current theme of "Religion and Economics" is also an invitation to think in a critical way about the sociological approach to religious phenomena.

I) Religion and economics

Many aspects and dimensions of the interrelation between economics and religion are discussed in the plenary and thematic sessions of this conference. Let me just note here, right from the start, several lines of research on this topic which have particularly mobilized the sociology of religions, as each of these lines gave rise to differences of interpretation and fruitful debates: the capitalism and religion survey, with the famous thesis of Weber on "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," the religion and development survey, with the data and surveys establishing correlations between the levels of development and the dominant religion or religions, the religion and wealth survey, with the study of religious depictions relating to poverty and wealth and their consequences on the behaviour of individuals, and more recently, the very approach, through the
theories of rational choice of an economy of salvation goods subject to the preference of consumers. In these investigations on "religion and economics", we owe a great debt to the classics, especially to Marx, Weber and Simmel.

In the investigations on "Religion and Economics", the discussion on and around the Marxist theses was fundamental. Precisely because these analyses made the economical factors the most determining variables of the life of societies and of their evolution, including in the religious domain, they had a strong impact on sociology of religions as on general sociology. According to classical Marxism, religions are ideological superstructures dependent on methods and relations of economical production; so, religious representations and practices vary according to the position occupied by individuals in the class structures. This analytical framework has been much discussed and disputed and I note that nowadays, we hardly talk of social classes. Yet, beyond the view that one can have on the relevance of the Marxist model, in my opinion, two elements of this analysis are essential and must remain so.

1) The study of the links between, on one hand, the social positions occupied by the actors and their economical income and, on the other hand, their religious representations and practices, including the type of their relationship to religion. Not only the place occupied in the hierarchy of social positions and in the scale of income, but also in the domain of activities in which you operate: agricultural, industrial, technical, scientific, educational, social, medical, artistic… From Marx but also from Weber, we will have learned to pay serious attention to these distinctions. I am not sure that nowadays, we have retained as much attention to these fine analyses of the differentiations of our relationship to religious matters and religious expressions in accordance with the social and economic positions occupied. Nowadays, does not this attention tend to be relegated to the background, in favour of the attention given to cultural and ethnic differentiations? As legitimate and necessary as this is, the fact remains that the considerable inequality in the access to all kinds of material resources, in other words, the considerable inequality in the access to wealth, continues to form differentiated relationships to religious matters.

2) Another aspect of the Marxist contribution was the emphasis on the global economic structure of society in the analysis and interpretation of religion, the fact of studying religious phenomena as part of a comprehensive theory of society and its evolution. This concern was doubtlessly more maintained in research through the attention paid to the effects of economical globalization on the evolution of religious matter in various cultural areas and societies. However, did not a significant reversal occur between economic and cultural fields, in the more or less implicit paradigms of interpretation of religious phenomena? I mean, a cognitive framing fostered by the discussion on a
supposed "clash of civilizations" rather than on the effects of the widespread global market economy? Although many works deal with the latter and pay particular attention to the transnationalization of religious matter, do we always pay sufficient attention to the economic aspects of these migrations and to the socio-economic situation of migrants?

But it is also true that this second dimension of the Marxist analysis has been rightly discussed, precisely because it tended to reduce religious phenomena to ideological superstructures with hardly any appropriate autonomy of development. When I worked on one of my first researches into the sociology of religion, I had been led to develop a critical approach to the Marxist schema infrastructure / superstructure¹. And by extending this critical approach, I maintained the concept that the importance gained by economics, far from being an invariant of societies, should be studied and explained within its historical genesis, i.e. that we had to provide ourselves with the necessary means to analyse the emergence of the determination of societies as a historical and cultural fact, as the forms and the intensity of the determination by the economic aspect vary during the course of history and according to societies. One can also wonder whether nowadays, we are not entering a post economic era with all the environmental alerts and issues it raises, which seeks to limit the influence of the logics of the market.

With regard to religions, I have been led to talk about symbolic infrastructures to emphasize that, even in highly secularized forms, representations of religious origin could continue, despite appearances, to structure ways of representing man, the world, life in society, economy, social relationships of filiation and alliance. As well known by François-André Isambert, a French sociologist who devoted crucial works to the notion of the sacred in Durkheim before devoting himself to the sociology of ethics, any way to represent God or any divine figure is always a way to represent mankind and the world. Whatever the supernatural and transcending claims of religious expressions may be, it is necessary to bring them back down to earth, if I may say so: more exactly, it is necessary to consider carefully the way they speak to us about man here below, in the reality of his life and of his relations. In the words of Max Weber, "The most basic forms of behaviour motivated by religious or magical factors are oriented to this world of here below"². I think that all the sociology of religions can retain Weber's remark: even through references to one or another form of hereafter or invisible entities, religion concerns the here below and the task of sociology is to study all the

determinants and effects of these ways of understanding life and navigating through existence in relation with invisible entities. As for Emile Poulat, the sociologist of Catholicism, I hold his term of "christianitude" to mean that, whatever may be the Christian adherences and practices of each one in the societies marked by this religious culture, representations and behaviours of individuals, as well as the institutional life itself of these societies may continue to be influenced by this religion which has permeated the long duration of the Territories. In other words, religions are not they, too, beyond the institutions that manage them and the individuals related to them, more or less structuring cultural matrices? Speaking of symbolic infrastructures, this is, in any case, my hypothesis. A hypothesis that can, of course, apply to societies marked by various religious systems, that is, not only Christianity, but also, for example, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism…

II) Reductive views the sociological approach could foster

Far from being a marginal aspect of the classical thinkers in sociology, the sociology of religions was on the contrary, an essential dimension of their work, it is especially true in Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Given the fundamental role of representations and religious practices in the previous life of societies, does the emergence of modern societies mean a deep restructuring of the place and role of religion and even, of its inevitable loss of influence? This is the whole problem of the relationship between religion and modernity that was then raised, as Western modernity is often seen as the opposite of religion, as if more modernity necessarily meant less religious matter. Influenced by this paradigm of the loss of social influence of religious matter in Western modernity, the constitution of religion as an object of science, was often marked by reductionist approaches which tend to consider the religious matter only as a dependent variable that can be explained by a number of other variables, as if religions did not have their own symbolic consistency. These approaches often combined the scientific study of religions with an ideological review based on a project of social reform, or even a real alternative conception of man and the world. The influence of Marxism reinforced this trend, which led some sociologists to consider religion as an epiphenomenon, an ideological superstructure having a quite secondary social significance which was bound to eventually disappear. The rationalist critics of religion and the influence of Marxism contributed to give credence to the idea of a decay of the religious phenomenon in the name of the light of reason and of social progress.

Yet secularization, as a transfer of skills and sovereignty from the religious sector to the secular, cannot be reduced to a phenomenon that would affect religious matter from the outside and gradually reduce its position.
Secularization is as much an internal relocation to religions and there are religious geneses of Western modernity as of other forms of modernity. If sociologists of religion have come to think, during the years of triumphant modernity (the "Thirty Glorious Years" that followed World War II), that religion belonged to the past, today's sociological analyses, which are more autonomous with regard to linear philosophies of history, seek to show how modernity, which is particularly focused on by non-Western modernities, is not less religious but religious in another way, another way of socially living religion, and another way of referring to religious traditions and statements (i.e., another way of claiming a religious truth). Nowadays, the sociology of religions reoccupies, and we can only rejoice, a top position in general sociology, as if we were rediscovering that understanding religious mutations was essential to the intelligence of societies and of their evolution. In doing so, the sociology of religion has increasingly learned to overcome the reductionist tendencies it may have had at the time of its underlying philosophical affinities with Western secularizing modernity. These reductionist tendencies that in various ways, all amounted to reducing religious matter to that which it is not, to not taking into account the specificities of this singular social fact, mainly presented themselves in four directions:

1) First of all, the one that consists in thinking that the sociology of religions should be limited to studying the non religious factors of religious matter. By choosing the religious variable as the dependent variable, it is therefore about exploring all the social determinations of individual religious behaviour and religious institutional positions. A first reduction is to focus unilaterally on social determinations of religious matter compared to its social effects, as if religious matter, in its various dimensions, could not also influence social behaviour and institutions. But, even if the study includes the social effects of religious matter itself, the consequences of religious adherences on the behaviour of individuals and on social life, the reductionist inclination is not necessarily abandoned. The sociological study of religions cannot be reduced either to the analysis of their social determinations, or to the study of their social effects. Although this analysis of the social consequences and determinations undoubtedly constitutes an important dimension of the sociological approach to religion, it is not just a sociology of "and": religion and economics, religion and politics, religion and education, religion and art, religion and sexuality, religion and society ... even though shortened headings makes us use the conjunction "and" (the same goes for the title of this conference "Religion and Economics"). Sociology of "and" can make us blind to the economical aspects of religion and to the religious dimensions of economy. As for religious expressions themselves, we cannot pretend
that they are always linked to specific historical and geographical contexts and conclude that religion has neither consistency nor specific history. The sociology of religions cannot be reduced either to the study of the social functions of religion or to the analysis of its determinations and social consequences. If it is true that the sociology of religions especially focuses "upstream, on the study of the social factors that explain the religious phenomenon and, downstream, on the political or cultural and social effects that derive from them\(^3\)\), it is necessary to take into account the fact that, from the standpoint of this discipline, the study of these aspects is both necessary and clarifying. This is an essential part of its academic duty. But the fact that it is traditionally occupied by the study of these aspects does not mean that the sociology of religions is reduced to it in fact, or should be reduced to it in right (in the name of its epistemology).

2) The second tendency or reductionist inclination consists in reducing the sociological study of religions to that of social participations which express it, e.g. the various forms of religious worship. Now, the sociology of religions cannot be reduced to the analysis of the participations of individuals to religious organizations labelled as such. Of course, the fact of going to a place of worship on a regular basis, in order to devote oneself to individual and collective practices such as prayers, praises, speeches and songs, to participate in a particular rite, constitutes an important social gesture by which religions are manifested. But, reducing religious facts to the individual and collective participations they induce, is reductive if one does not take into account the fact that the religious phenomenon overwhelms the individual participations and implications which are induced. Through texts and patterns of transmission and interpretations, religious expressions are symbolic materials that have an intrinsic density and an historical profundity that should be taken into account by sociological analysis. What would one say about a political sociology which reduced itself to a sociology of political participation or to an electoral sociology?

3) The third reductionist inclination consists in considering religious matter as an opinion on questions relating to the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the meaning of life and death… and other existential questions of this kind. Based, in an actually biased way with

\(^3\) By characterizing the sociological study of religions, Albert Piette in La Religion de près. The religious activity in the process of being done (Paris, Métailié, 1999, p. 23), strongly reproaches him with missing its target by bypassing it.
regard to the meaning of this formula in the 18th century, on Article 10 of the Declaration of Human and Citizen Rights of 26 August 1789: "No one should be troubled for his opinions, even religious, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by Law", some tend to reduce the religious phenomenon to an individual *opinion* on metaphysical matters, forgetting that Religion is a collective practice, that it also manifests itself through rituals and that the opinion that anyone can have on their own religion and that of others is one thing, the religious phenomenon in its multiple dimensions is another thing. A religious phenomenon cannot be reduced to the average *opinions* of those who claim it in a variable way. Neither its symbolic corpus, nor its institutional dimensions, nor the individual religious experience are honoured in such an approach in terms of *opinions*. This approach suffers from a social process of privatization and individualization of religion which some would like to be stronger. Another version of this type of reduction consists in considering that religion is first and foremost a phenomenon of *belief*. Besides the fact that the ritual and legal dimensions can, in some expressions of religious belief, prevail over belief, even where the dimensions of belief are present, this is not so simple. Indeed, what is believing? Philosophers and anthropologists have made us attentive to the linguistic reality and the practical experience of belief. "Every belief is a phenomenon of language" recalls Henri Rey-Flaud and "we do not always believe what we believe to believe," Henri Major emphasized⁴. To me, agnosticism is not the prerogative of unbelievers and the posture of the "believer" who bows to the mysteries of God and the world is as agnostic as the classic reserve shown by agnostic atheists. The fact is that a believing agnosticism and an unbelieving agnosticism both exist, and religion may perhaps be better comprehended through registers such as trust and hope than through the register of belief. I was often struck by the simplistic imputation of beliefs that analysts could attribute to people just because they declined a religious identity. Some went so far as to disqualify the authenticity of people identifying with a religion even though they expressed their disbelief over some of its dogmas. Would not thus be Catholics, or false Catholics, people who, while claiming to be Catholic, would not subscribe or rather, would seem not to subscribe in a canonical way, to fundamental dogmas of this Church. By adopting this position, the sociologist takes the place of the minister and that of the theologian. To me, it is not up to the sociologist to decree what is the level of belief required for anyone to declare himself as belonging

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⁴ In *Croyance et communauté* (sous la direction de Jean-Daniel Causse et Henri Rey-Flaud), Paris, Bayard, 2010, pages 8 and 21 respectively.
to such or such a religion. "Only non-believers believe that believers
believe" anthropologists say. Marc Augé is right when he asserts that
"in practice, religion puts up with well-tempered disbelief and that a
sociology of religious practice could, and probably should, ignore the
problem of the reality of faith."  

4) Another form of reductionism of religion consists in considering
religious matter as an illusion, a false consciousness or a fabrication.
Even if certain Marxist revised or attenuated the dogma of the
reduction of religion to an alienation bound to disappear with the
victory of "progressive" forces, this pattern nevertheless strongly
influenced much of sociology. This is the sociological point of view
which remains pledged, in the name of "emancipation" to a critique of
religion, to an anti-clericalism in principle. Such an approach to
religion cannot rid itself of a disqualification of its object while having
the purpose of its study, which creates an undeniable bias in the
analysis. Unlike other domains of investigation in sociology (the city,
work, health, education, politics, sports ...), it is striking, as noted by
Jim Beckford, to observe how the very question of the decline or the
eclipse of the phenomenon: the religious matter was meaningful in
the sociological approach to religion. The presupposition being: since
in Western modernity, one should no longer be religious, what can
explain that individuals still are? How to explain this "remnant" of
tradition incomprehensible from the perspective of a triumphant
modernity? A variant of this form of reductionism consists in seeing
the religious matter as nothing but a form of power. While, like any
social activity, religion also manifests itself in relations of power,
merely seeing in it the exercise of a spiritual dominion or a
"monopolization of salvation goods" by a class, the clergy, faced with
competitive aspirations of the "secularists" is a very reductive
approach. In the sociology of religions as in general sociology, my
objection to Pierre Bourdieu is the following: if the relations of
domination and logics of interests are present in any social activity, the
social cannot be reduced either to relations of domination or to logics
of interest.

5 Cf. John Pouillon, "Notice on the verb "to believe"", in La fonction symbolique. Essais d'anthropologie (M.
Designating these reductionist inclinations that the sociological objectification of religious phenomena can have, helps to clarify the characteristics of this approach, its value and its interest.

III) **The sociological approach to religious facts: an empirical basis for objectifying understanding**

The empirical basis of the sociological approach to religion should first be recalled. The sociological approach shares this characteristic with ethnology and history: these three disciplines, even though their methodologies differ, base their comments on the review of sources (documents, images, observations, surveys). Indeed, it is firstly a matter of carefully describing the representations and practices and report on how men and women implement them, interpret them, interacting with each other on this occasion. These practices and representations involve the presence absence of an elsewhere, of an invisible entity, that, in my opinion, are important to take into account in the observation and the analysis of this social phenomenon that imposes itself first of all on the apprehension as a fact, a collective, material, symbolic and sensitive fact.

If the approach to religious facts through the historical and social objectification that it represents, has indisputable critical effects in comparison with any anhistorical perception of the religions, it does not mean in any case, either any philosophical invalidation, or any social and cultural disqualification of these ways to put in symbolic forms its existence in relation with invisible entities that are the religious expressions. I totally agree with Albert Piette when he considers that, in the socio-anthropological study of religious matter, "there is no reason to truncate the religious fact from its " invisible " interacting factors, as they are considered important by the actors themselves ".

In other words, the social sciences of religions cannot be reduced to the study of the non-religious aspects in religion, they must also integrate "invisible entities" in their approach and not be satisfied with some curious division of the work that would leave God to theology. The economical, social, political, cultural determinations that act on the religious fact as on other social realities do not exhaust it and, if there is no essence of the religious fact, I think there is a social reality sui generis of the religious fact that it is important to grasp. Religion is therefore a symbolic activity that has its own consistency, that is to say that, as socially determined as it is – and it is in a thousand ways –, it enjoys relative

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10 "The theological reasoning protects God and eliminates the social factor. The anthropological social reasoning aims at the social factor and eliminates God", remarks Albert Piette (*op.cit.*, p. 55).
autonomy in comparison with all these determinations. It is precisely because religions constitute cultures, that is to say complex worlds of signs and meanings that were in line with history and passed down from generation to generation, that they have a relative autonomy in comparison with all the social determinations that they inform them. Of course a religious culture cannot exist without regulating organizations and individuals who express it, but this not is a reason to reduce the analysis of a religion to that of its organizations or to that of its actors: a religious universe, this is also a permanent work of reinterpretation and of reinvention based on an inherited symbolic material. In religion, there is therefore symbolic consistency and historic depth.

For sociological analysis, the challenge therefore consists in reporting an unique social activity that creates unique social links and that is manifested by specific forms of authorities. Indeed, if there is a specific social phenomenon of religion, the proper task of sociology is to report this specificity from its own point of view, namely, a point of view that pays special attention to social links, forms of sociability and modes of legitimation. That is why I say that religions are manifested 1) through "singular social links" and 2) "specific forms of authorities." From a sociological perspective, religion can be approached, in my opinion, as a regular social and symbolic activity related to representations and practices that, while referring to invisible entities, gives a meaning to life and death, to happiness and unhappiness, guides behaviour, generates a filiation and a sense of community, allows one to be situated in temporality. In this activity, religion involves the three meanings of the word meaning: the meaning, the direction, and sensitivity. The four dimensions of the previously mentioned religious fact are the empirical manifestation of this social activity.

1) singular social links: a religious system produces a social link not only by creating particular networks and groups (institutions, communities), but also by defining a mental world through which individuals and groups express and live a certain conception of man and the world in a particular society. Religion creates social links in time and space, in time with what we said previously about foundation, filiation and transmission, in space with the various forms of solidarity and adherence generated by religions, as the different forms of religious sociability are not unrelated to the preferred mode of filiation implemented by such or such religion. Religions act as a society in their own different way, both on institutional and community levels, and the forms of sociability that are manifested there, are different. You only have to do a bit of ethnographic observation to realize it. How do the different religions act as a society in their own way, what kinds of social links do they generate? Is the social religious Buddhist, Moslem, Christian, Jewish link...of the same nature, does it take on the same forms? And, within each of these religious worlds, is not there a great diversity? Religion is a social link, not only longitudinally in
its dimensions of filiation and transmission but also horizontally in its dimensions of sociability and of solidarity. In each of these dimensions, it is necessary to report the religious part of the religious matter, if one can say so, that is to say, to introduce a way to deal with the sociological specificity of religious matter: the fact that in religion, one fits in a special way into filiation and transmission (while referring to publicized foundation by holders of charisma) and one can also form society in an equally special way (religious sociability is irreducible to other types of sociability).

2) Specific forms of authority. I have always attached great importance to this other assertion of Max Weber, that the religious qualification of men is unequally distributed, that some claim, more or less successfully, to be more qualified than others to communicate with invisible entities (whether they be: shamans, soothsayers, witches, priests, spiritual advisers, sages, monks ...). Anyway, from a sociological point of view, what is striking are, indeed, the various forms taken by a division of religious labour between the most skilled and less skilled, a division of labour that induces constant discussion and negotiation. This report allows me to underline two things: 1) the relation to the invisible entities that the religious phenomena implement shows itself, socially speaking, by varied social reports between specialists and other people. 2) if the question of the origin remains debatable and the process by which the foundation is effected is often an enigma, there is foundation when charisma emerges, in one way or another, onto a transmission. Religion therefore involves both foundation and transmission.

One could sum up by saying that religion acts as a society (by creating link) and acts as truth (builds legitimacy) in its own way and that these historical processes are still evolving. What I particularly value is the attempt, but within a sociological framework, to account for the singularity of the social activity that cannot be reduced to other registers of activity, even if, like any other social activity, it meets with most of the other registers of activity (economic, aesthetic, social, political, intellectual, ...). These symbolic layouts of the human condition through representations and rites referring to invisible entities are fully historical phenomena, that is to say that they should be comprehended regardless of any essentialism and should always be situated within space and time. A way to stress that these are, of course, evolving realities even if they are part of traditions and claim loyalty to different heritages. The sociological approach to religious matter should distrust any epistemological presentism as if, on the grounds that sociology focuses on the analysis of the present time and analyses contemporary behaviours, it should forget the historical depth of what it studies and the symbolic density of religious figures and rites. In this way, I think that the anthropologist Elisabeth Claverie has a very relevant approach, since in her book *The Wars of the Virgin*. 
An anthropology of the apparitions\(^{11}\), she articulates the observation and the meticulous analysis of a field (the apparitions of the Virgin to "seers " at Medjugorje in Bosnia Herzegovina in 1981) and a historic investigation into the making of the figure of the Virgin dating back to the Christian antiquity, an articulation that then allows the author to identify "a grammar of apparitions that can be mobilized in scores of intimate and political positions\(^{12}\).

**Conclusion**

The contemporary mutations of religious matter in Western societies represent a challenge to the sociological approach. Indeed, the relative de-institutionalization of religious matter, that is to say, the weakening of the social power of cultural and institutional supervision of religion by the major religious institutions (especially, but not only, by Christian Churches), makes the sociological objectification of the phenomenon more delicate. This is more particularly the case with quantitative surveys. Whether it is about the famous question "do you believe in God?" or about the measurement of the cultual worship or adherence, vigilance is required. In the word "God" are hidden very different representations of divinity (ranging from a personal God to an impersonal cosmic force) and under identification such as "Catholic," "Protestant," "Jew" or "Muslim" are hidden much diversified attitudes and orientations. Though it is not exactly new, the fact remains that the nominal religious identifications now carry less information on believing adherence and practice. This also applies to the famous self-designation as "no religion" which reveals that there are many ways to assert oneself as "irreligious" and that one can make a difference between "believers without religion" «and" unbelievers without religion". Between Catholics who claim to be "believing doubters" and «persons without religions" who claim to be «doubting-believers », harsh classifications should be put into perspective. Between "believing without belonging" and "belonging without believing", the positions of everyone may become more delicate to comprehend. One thinks one can avoid these difficulties by having the spiritual matter overflow the religious one, some claim "secular spiritualities".

Moreover, the recurrent debates inviting us to settle the insoluble question of whether a particular sign or practice falls within the "religious" or "cultural" field remind us that even the definition of "religious field" is an important social and political issue. Sociology has not waited until now to promote a fruitful relationship between quantitative and qualitative approaches, but the fact is that, in recent years, points of contact between the sociology and the anthropology of


religion did increase, and for the benefit of a detailed analysis of religious matter, respectful of its subject. With the old and also very productive interlacing of history and sociology (both thanks to a sociologizing history and to a historic sociology), one can say that this multidisciplinary opening helped sociology to leave the reducing patterns that we have mentioned above. In particular, the sociological approach to religion detached itself from it thanks to more critical problematizations of theories of secularization, of an interpretative paradigm presupposing the eventual disappearance of its object. In addition, a more sustained attention to the experience and to the speech of the actors has permitted a detachment from a perspective that consists in telling religious individuals, in the name of a critique of its object, "you are not what you claim to be", which amounted to considering that the" lights "of sociological analysis would help to disperse the" false consciousness "of actors who would be alienated in obsolete representations. The secularization of Western modernity itself and of the mythologies of progress it has produced on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the globalization and the transnationalization of religious matter itself, are not unfamiliar to these more comprehensive approaches of symbolic layouts of the human existence that are religions.