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Religiosity: analysis of international and national quantitative surveys

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How much confidence can be done to the measure of religious indicators in the main international surveys (EVS, ESS, ISSP)?

The *European Values Study* (EVS) and the *International Social Survey Programme* (ISSP) carried out a wave of survey in 2008 with many religious indicators. The *European Social Survey* (ESS) also asks every two years some questions on the religious dimension (the 2008-2009 wave has been retained). We consider identical or very similar indicators for these three main international barometered surveys in 21 countries common to these waves of surveys in 2008.

While these surveys are all conducted on samples expected to be representative of the population of each country, but sometimes with different modes of administration, what is the magnitude of differences in the obtained distributions? Are countries ranked in the same way on key measures of religiosity? Are relations with the main background variables of same extent?

When the wording used to measure the same indicators of practices or beliefs are different, does the comparison of results allow conclusions on the pros and cons of the choices made in each tradition of survey, for example about the number of levels of answer?

This communication will update and revisit a previous work (on the data of 1998-1999): Pierre Bréchon, 'The measurement of religious beliefs in ISSP and EVS surveys', in Max Haller, Roger Jowell, Tom W. Smith (eds.), *The International Social Survey Programme 1984-2009. Charting the globe*, Routledge, 2009, pp. 337-353.

EVS has a wave each 9 years on the main domains of life (family, sociability, work, politics, religion). About 30 ticks on religion.

ESS has a wave each 2 years mainly on social and political attitudes. Questionnaire only includes 7 questions about religion in the core module but no rotary module was realized on religion since the beginning of the survey in 2001.

ISSP conduct a survey each year since 1985 on a specific subject. Religion was at the center of the survey in 1991, 1998, 2008 and will be repeated in 2018 (about 60 ticks each year).

Religious belonging

For **EVS**, religious belonging is measured by a filter question before asking the name of this religion:

Do you belong to a religious denomination?

Yes 71 %

No 29 %

For **ESS**, belonging is also always measured with a filter question:

Do you consider yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination?

Yes 65 %

No 35 %

And after, for the two surveys, interviewers ask “**Which one?**”, often with a national-specific card listing religions of the country. In EVS, a card is always used. In ESS, it is not completely clear. It seems that it is possible to use an open question, interviewers having a pre-coded list.

For **ISSP**, religious affiliation is asked in the socio-demographics. As a result there is no complete homogeneity of the phrasing in the different surveyed countries, and in particular not always a filter question. It is one of the methodological weakness of the ISSP: several modes of administration are authorized (face to face, mail, drop off) and the socio-demographics are not identical in the national questionnaires, as the ISSP surveys in some countries is paired with another and so the socio-demographics are these of the basic national survey (for example in Germany, the ISSP is a drop off linked with Allbus all the two years).

The wording of the **ESS** question – longer – invites to not answer too automatically, as to a question of objective and traditional belonging, of which the answer would be natural. Then the answers are more focused on the current felt affiliation than on religious origins, like in the EVS. It is the explanation of the higher number of no religion in ESS (35 %), compared to EVS (29 %).

Obviously, other general explanations of the differences of measurement on the same questions are always possible: sampling, weighting by countries, translations. So, when figures only differ from 2 or 3 points, it can be said that there are no sociological deviation in measurement.

The percentage given for each question are calculated on 21 European countries where the three international surveys are carried out, with a weighting on gender, age and the number of inhabitants.

Table 1 – The “no religion” people by countries

	EVS 2008	ESS 2008	ISSP 2008	EVS 1999	ISSP 1998
East Germany	77	68	76	67	69
Czech Republic	71	78	63	66	44
The Netherlands	52	58	42	55	58
France	51	53	47	43	43
United Kingdom	45	53	44	17	47
Hungary	45	39	15	43	31
Latvia	35	49	39	41	34
Sweden	34	69	29	24	28
Slovenia	29	45	20	30	24
Switzerland	28	31	26	-	10
Spain	25	28	22	18	14
Finland	24	41	18	12	-
Slovaquia	23	22	18	23	16
Norway	20	44	16	-	10
West Germany	16	30	16	13	15
Denmark	12	44	14	10	12
Poland	5	7	13	4	7
Portugal	19	12	10	11	7
Ireland	13	19	8	9	8
Croatia	17	19	6	11	-
Cyprus	0	0	0	-	0
Turkey	1	3	0	2	-
Mean	29	35	26	23	22

Countries are ranked here according to the EVS figures, from the highest rates of no religion to the weakest. The ranking is not exactly the same for the two other surveys, but not too different.

For ISSP figures, the absence of filter in a part of countries explain that we observe more members and less of no religion.

The ESS wording (more current affiliation than past) seems have a stronger effect in some countries (Sweden, Slovenia, Finland, Norway, West Germany, Denmark).

No members of a religion who were members in the past

This question only appears in EVS and ESS.

EVS. If the respondent answers “no” to the question about his religious belonging (29 %), it is asked him:

Were you ever a member of a religious denomination?

Yes	14 %
No	15 %
Current members	71 %

ESS : If no religion or denomination (36 %), ask :

Have you ever considered yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination?

Yes	10 %
No	25 %
Current members	65 %

This question is supposed to measure the extent of religious disengagement from childhood to nowadays.

The difference in the results is linked to the previous question: ESS using a narrower definition of religious affiliation, through the wording of the question more linked to the current position of each one than to his origins, it is normal that less people having left their religion are recorded.

Table 2 – The current no religion people who were members in the past by countries

<i>% of the sample</i>	EVS 2008	ESS 2008
East Germany	13	15
Czech Republic	4	5
The Netherlands	34	20
France	23	15
United Kingdom	19	13
Hungary	18	6
Latvia	8	3
Sweden	24	7
Slovenia	7	6
Switzerland	20	13
Spain	16	13
Finland	23	10
Slovaquia	4	6
Norway	3	12
West Germany	12	11
Denmark	9	8
Poland	3	4
Portugal	8	5
Ireland	9	7
Croatia	4	4
Cyprus	0	0
Turkey	2	0
Mean	14	10

Differences are particularly high in Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland, Hungary, Norway.

It is possible that the translations may explain the importance of discrepancies in these countries.

Rate of affiliated people for each religion

	EVS	ESS	ISSP
No religion	29 %	35 %	26 %
Catholic	34 %	33 %	36 %
Protestant	17 %	14 %	19 %
Orthodox	1 %	1 %	0.5%
Other Christians	-	1 %	2 %
Jewish	0.5 %	0.2 %	0.2 %
Islamic	15 %	15 %	15 %
Buddhist	0.2	1 %	0.1 %
Hindu	0.2		0.3 %
Other religions	3 %		0.5 %
DK/NA	-	-	1 %

ISSP: In many countries data were probably entered at a detailed level, and recoded according a wording *suggested* for this question in the guidelines: “Do you belong to a religion and if yes which religion do you belong to?”

For the three surveys, the percentage of Catholics and Muslims are very near. A distance is noticeable for Protestants. The rate of Christians goes from 49 % in ESS to 57,5 % in ISSP. The frequent lack of filter question in ISSP increases the number of people who accept to declare a religion in the proposed list.

Attendance to religious offices

In the three surveys, the question of attendance has to be asked to every interviewee, even to people declared without religion.

It is a question of behavior, so in principle less subjective than the previous measure, where a rather floating religious belonging had to be declared.

The labels of the three questions are about similar, however the modalities of answers are a little different (borders of categories, number of items: 7 in EVS and ESS, 8 in ISSP).

EVS: Apart from weddings, funerals or christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?

More than once a week	5	
Once a week	13	27
Once a month	8	
Only in specific holy days	17	23
Once a year	6	
Less often	9	49
Never, practically never	40	
Do not know, no answer	1	1

ESS: Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays?

Every day	2		
More than once a week	3		
Once a week	13	27	27
At least once a month	9		
Only on special holy days	18		18
Less often	17	35	
Never	37	37	54
Do not know, no answer	1	1	1

ISSP: Apart from such special occasions as weddings, funerals, etc., how often do you attend religious services?

Several times a week	7	
Once a week	14	30
2 or 3 times a month	5	
At least once a month	4	
Several times a year	14	21
Once a year	7	
Less frequently than once a year	12	42
Never	30	
Do not know, no answer	7	7

Table 3 – The attendance at least once a month to religious services

	EVS 2008	ESS 2008	ISSP 2008
East Germany	9	9	5
Czech Republic	13	11	12
The Netherlands	24	22	19
France	12	11	11
United Kingdom	19	18	19
Hungary	15	17	13
Latvia	16	18	14
Sweden	8	10	6
Slovenia	25	27	28
Switzerland	20	21	24
Spain	24	26	35
Finland	10	13	7
Slovaquia	44	45	41
Norway	13	10	7
West Germany	24	23	21
Denmark	10	10	9
Poland	72	71	64
Portugal	37	47	36
Ireland	54	61	58
Croatia	41	41	41
Cyprus	51	51	41
Turkey	40	43	66
Mean	27	27	30

On this question of behavior, results are very near in many countries.
 Exceptions: Spain, Portugal, Turkey.

Intensity of prayer

Difference in the labels: pray to God for EVS, pray without specification for ESS and ISSP.

7 items for EVS and ESS, close wording. Unique difference: “several times a year” or “only on special holy days”.

11 items for ISSP and in an inversed order

EVS: How often do you pray to God outside of religious services? Would you say...

ESS: Apart from when you are at religious services, how often, if at all, do you pray?

	EVS		ESS	
... every day	26		26	
... more than once a week	9	41	9	41
... once a week	6		6	
... at least once a month	5		5	
... several times a year (EVS)/Only on special holy days (ESS)	7	23	4	24
... less often	11		15	
... never	33	33	34	34
Do not know, no answer	3	3	1	1

ISSP: About how often do you pray?

Never	31	31
Less than once a year	5	
About once or twice a year	5	22
Several times a year	9	
About once a month	3	
2-3 times a month	4	
Nearly every week	6	
Every week	5	44
Several times a week	14	
Once a day	10	
Several times a day	5	
Do not know, no answer	2	2

Answers are very close for EVS and ESS. The addressee of the prayer (undetermined or God) do not change results.

And the number of categories do not change very much the answers for ISSP compared to the two other surveys.

Rather surprising as questions are different.

Table 4 – Strong frequency of prayer
(every week for EVS and ESS, at least 2 or 3 times a month for ISSP)

	EVS 2008	ESS 2008	ISSP 2008
East Germany	12	16	11
Czech Republic	19	10	16
The Netherlands	33	33	33
France	19	19	23
United Kingdom	27	19	29
Hungary	33	29	32
Latvia	34	25	34
Sweden	17	14	19
Slovenia	26	26	33
Switzerland	40	39	48
Spain	38	36	42
Finland	31	33	34
Slovaquia	54	54	57
Norway	23	19	20
West Germany	32	32	43
Denmark	16	17	23
Poland	70	68	71
Portugal	45	60	51
Ireland	62	69	69
Croatia	56	55	60
Cyprus	69	62	58
Turkey	92	85	89
Mean	41	41	44

By countries, answers remains very close,
with some rare exceptions.

Subjective feeling to be religious or not religious

EVS: Independently of whether you go to church or not, would you say you are...

... a religious person	57
... not a religious person	31
... a convinced atheist	8
DK/NA	4

ESS: Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are?

Not at all religious										Very religious	DK/NA
00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	
14 %	5 %	7 %	7 %	6 %	16 %	10 %	12 %	11 %	5 %	7 %	1 %
39 %					16 %	44 %				1 %	

ISSP: Would you describe yourself as ...

... Extremely religious	4 %	
... Very religious	13 %	49 %
... Somewhat religious	33 %	
... Neither religious nor non-religious	18 %	18 %
... Somewhat non-religious	11 %	
... Very non-religious	9 %	30 %
... Extremely non-religious	11 %	
Can't choose	3 %	3 %

The measured dimension is in principle the same but with three very different manners of doing.

The strong advantage of the EVS process is to distinguish people who are atheists and so, are very anti-religious and not only indifferent or not religious.

The two other questions consider the religious feeling as a continuum and therefore measure the subjective degree of being religious or not religious, with 11 positions for ESS, 7 for ISSP. Their advantage is to be finer than the EVS process.

The % of religious people are different according these indicators : 44, 49 and 57 %.

Table 5 – Feeling to be religious
(a religious person for EVS, positions 6 to 10 for ESS, 1 to 3 for ISSP)

	EVS 2008	ESS 2008	ISSP 2008
East Germany	17	20	16
Czech Republic	30	15	17
The Netherlands	59	51	49
France	41	26	27
United Kingdom	43	32	38
Hungary	54	36	37
Latvia	71	30	34
Sweden	29	23	19
Slovenia	67	35	39
Switzerland	58	45	41
Spain	52	38	43
Finland	50	49	38
Slovaquia	74	60	59
Norway	46	26	36
West Germany	53	42	50
Denmark	69	30	23
Poland	84	66	76
Portugal	73	59	66
Ireland	63	52	66
Croatia	78	61	77
Cyprus	90	69	69
Turkey	88	75	88
Mean	57	44	49

Having only three items for EVS seems to lead to a higher rate of religious people, also knowing that the “atheist” answer is rarely chosen.

Here we observe strong differences in the process of measurement and also strong differences in results.

Table 6. Believing in a personal God (EVS), in God without doubts (ISSP 1) and in God who concerns with every human being (ISSP 2)

	EVS 2008	ISSP 1 2008	ISSP 2 2008
East Germany	9	8	9
Czech Republic	10	11	17
The Netherlands	24	21	28
France	18	16	21
United Kingdom	25	17	31
Hungary	41	24	32
Latvia	9	22	39
Sweden	14	10	22
Slovenia	22	24	29
Switzerland	26	25	47
Spain	44	38	41
Finland	34	18	32
Slovaquia	38	39	55
Norway	23	15	30
West Germany	25	27	38
Denmark	21	13	32
Poland	79	62	65
Portugal	59	51	60
Ireland	53	43	67
Croatia	41	59	63
Cyprus	83	59	61
Turkey	91	93	93
Mean	40	37	42

The first and the third indicators of strong belief in God may be considered as rather close indicators (personal God), the second is a little different (believing without doubts). The mean for the 21 countries is rather close but discrepancies are sometimes important between countries (Latvia, Switzerland...). In Scandinavia, the rate of believers without doubts is weaker than the rate of believers in a personal God. As if Scandinavians are particularly prone to doubts.

Other beliefs in a supra-human world

EVS

Do you believe in...	Yes	No	DK/NA
Life after death	49 %	39 %	11 %
Heaven	48 %	44 %	8 %
Hell	36 %	56 %	8 %
Reincarnation, that is, that we are born into this world again	21 %	67 %	11 %

ISSP

Do you believe in...	Yes, definitively	Yes, probably	No, probably not	No, definitely not	Can't choose/NA
Life after death	31 %	22 %	16 %	22 %	10 %
Heaven	30 %	19 %	17 %	25 %	10 %
Hell	25 %	14 %	20 %	31 %	11 %
Reincarnation – being reborn in this world again and again	17 %	13 %	22 %	36 %	12 %

Identical questions but dichotomous in EVS, in 4 items in ISSP. Very similar results but a little less DK with four possible answers. Is it the same thing for each country?

Table 7. Believing in life after death
(dichotomous for EVS, 4 items for ISSP)

	EVS 2008	ISSP 2008
East Germany	15	14
Czech Republic	24	25
The Netherlands	46	45
France	39	38
United Kingdom	44	46
Hungary	33	35
Latvia	41	41
Sweden	34	37
Slovenia	32	41
Switzerland	45	54
Spain	41	44
Finland	34	40
Slovaquia	55	55
Norway	45	41
West Germany	39	46
Denmark	33	33
Poland	66	64
Portugal	41	43
Ireland	60	73
Croatia	50	54
Cyprus	53	64
Turkey	93	94
Mean	49	52

In average, very similar results and substantive differences only in Ireland (13 points) and Cyprus (11 points). Smaller differences in Slovenia and Switzerland (9 points), West Germany (7 points), Finland (6 points).

Individualized contact with God/the Divine

A new question in 2008 in the two surveys tries to capture a personal religiosity without the mediation of churches and institutionalized religions.

EVS: Please chose a number on the card to describe how true this statement is for you? “I have my own way of connecting with the Divine without churches or religious services”

Not at all	1	2	3	4	5	Very much	DK/NA
23 %		9 %	21 %	17 %		24 %	6 %
	32 %		21 %		41 %		6 %

ISSP: Do you agree or disagree with the following...

	I have my own way of connecting with God without churches or religious services	
Strongly agree	21 %	48 %
Agree	27 %	
Neither agree nor disagree	15 %	15 %
Disagree	13 %	
Strongly disagree	15 %	28 %
Can't choose/NA	9 %	9 %

The wording of the statement is identical, except for the word God, changed in Divine in EVS. The five eventualities of answers are not the same, a scale for EVS, a verbal dimension for ISSP. And the order of items is reversed.

The distribution of answers is not completely identical:

	1	2	3	4	5	
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree/disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
EVS	23 %	9 %	21 %	17 %	24 %	6 %
ISSP	15 %	13 %	15 %	27 %	21 %	9 %

A scale seems stimulate the extremes, while a verbal expression for each item favors the two answers “agree”. But perhaps the term Divine may also seem too large for some very strict religious people. Have a look on the table by countries.

Table 8. Having his/her own way of connecting with the Divine/God without religions (positions 4-5 for EVS, strongly agree and agree for ISSP)

	EVS 2008	ISSP 2008
East Germany	16	19
Czech Republic	24	21
The Netherlands	33	37
France	46	42
United Kingdom	38	40
Hungary	33	31
Latvia	46	50
Sweden	37	32
Slovenia	37	49
Switzerland	52	65
Spain	39	62
Finland	43	42
Slovaquia	35	28
Norway	24	32
West Germany	44	49
Denmark	49	42
Poland	39	48
Portugal	48	72
Ireland	55	58
Croatia	34	47
Cyprus	54	51
Turkey	53	68
Mean	41	48

Discrepancies are large in certain countries, in particular in countries of strong Christian or Muslim tradition (Portugal, Spain, Turkey, Croatia, Switzerland...). The ISSP result, with the word “God” is higher. Conversely, in Denmark, rather weakly religious, the word “Divine” may have attracted fringe people compared to the Christian God. These differences may be explained by the effect of the word Divine rather than God. The word “Divine” would be rejected by exclusivists/integralists Christians: for them, there is the only God, this of their religion).

The image of religions

EVS

These are statements one sometimes hears. Please choose the statement that best describes your view.

There is only one true religion	21 %
There is only one true religion but other religions do contain some basic truths as well	21 %
There is not one true religion, but all great world religions contain some basic truths	35 %
None of the great religions have any truths to offer	16 %
DK/NA	7 %

ISSP

Which of the following statements come closest to your own views:

There is very little truth in any religion	17 %
There are basic truths in many religions	53 %
There is truth only in one religion.	16 %
Can't choose	15 %

The two questions are aiming to measure the level of truth included in religion, according to interviewees. The two questions differ a little in phrasing but the main difference is in the number of items, three in ISSP, four in EVS.

The EVS question seems to be better as it is possible to divide the central item of the ISSP question in two positions in the EVS question. A comparison by countries can be done for the extremes of the two EVS and ISSP questions.

Table 9. Levels of truths in religions: the extreme answers

	Only one true religion		Little truth in any religion	
	EVS	ISSP	EVS	ISSP
East Germany	4	3	43	29
Czech Republic	8	7	34	28
The Netherlands	10	7	25	19
France	6	4	29	32
United Kingdom	9	6	15	17
Hungary	14	12	14	19
Latvia	14	11	14	23
Sweden	3	5	19	20
Slovenia	10	12	18	21
Switzerland	7	5	12	15
Spain	24	19	16	20
Finland	5	7	13	12
Slovaquia	16	18	12	17
Norway	7	7	11	21
West Germany	14	5	17	14
Denmark	7	8	12	24
Poland	29	16	4	7
Portugal	23	18	10	14
Ireland	18	12	6	7
Croatia	23	11	6	13
Cyprus	48	28	1	7
Turkey	66	58	1	6
Mean	21	17	16	16

In general, the extreme figures are near in many countries whatever the survey and its number of modalities.

Some exceptions:

For “Only one true religion”, Cyprus (20 points), Croatia (12 points), West Germany (9 points), Turkey (8 points).

For “Little truth in any religion”, East Germany (14 points), Denmark (12 points), Norway (10 points), Latvia (9 points).

Do the religions can influence government decisions?

	EVS Religious leaders should not influence government decisions		ISSP Religious leaders should not try to influence government decisions	
	Strongly agree	34 %	63 %	49 %
Agree	29 %		24 %	
Neither agree nor disagree	17 %	17 %	11 %	11 %
Disagree	12 %		8 %	
Strongly disagree	4 %	16 %	3 %	11 %
Can't choose/NA	4 %	4 %	5 %	5 %

These two questions are very near: same eventualities of answer, an almost same general wording.

The only difference is in the statement and seems very slight. The ISSP wording emphasizes on the strategy of religious leaders: they *should not try to* influence, while in EVS the statement is more direct and factual: religious leaders *should not influence*....

This little difference seems substantially modify the answers. In the ISSP more strategic approach, the answers are even more opposed to a political influence of religious leaders.

We observe that a large majority is opposed to an influence of religious leaders on government decisions. Many people are in favor of a separation between religion and (government) politics¹.

¹ And the link between this question and the attendance to religious offices is not very high (V=0.14 for EVS and ISSP). Probably, many convinced Christians are in favor of human values related to their faith but they don't want that their church act as a political party, a pressure group or a lobby.

Table 10. People opposed to an influence of religious leaders on government decisions

	EVS 2008	ISSP 2008
East Germany	56	74
Czech Republic	49	68
The Netherlands	56	76
France	79	76
United Kingdom	53	67
Hungary	58	69
Latvia	48	60
Sweden	58	63
Slovenia	73	81
Switzerland	66	81
Spain	69	79
Finland	58	68
Slovakia	57	68
Norway	59	67
West Germany	61	71
Denmark	77	81
Poland	68	84
Portugal	55	71
Ireland	55	72
Croatia	64	78
Cyprus	62	76
Turkey	57	77
Mean	63	74

Due to the difference of wording (to influence or to try to influence), the difference of measure exists in all countries except France.

I do not know why the difference is higher in certain countries than in others.

Building of an index with **religious attendance + intensity of prayer**, rather identical for the three survey Table 11.

Distribution of the index (%)

	ESS	EVS	ISSP	
Very strong 2-5	18	26	26	Very strong 2-7
Quite strong 6-10	31	27	19	Quite strong 8-12
Quite weak 11-13	24	18	17	Quite weak 13-16
Very weak 14	26	26	29	Very weak 17-19
DK/NA	2	4	9	DK/NA

Index from 2 to 14 (EVS and ESS), from 2 to 19 (ISSP).

Table 12. Binary logistic regression on religious practice, controlled by gender, age and level of education

	EVS		ESS		ISSP	
	Wald/ddl	Exp B	Wald/ddl	Exp B	Wald/ddl	Exp B
Man	788	1	1152	1	705	1
Woman		0.7		0.7		
18-34 years old	71	1	163	1	120	1
35-54 years old		1.1		1.1		
55 years and more		0.8		0.8		
Primary	366	1	377	1	140	1
Low secondary		1.3		1.1		
High secondary		1.3		1.4		
Universitary		1.5		1.4		

Question by question, we have observed some differences in results, but often explainable by the wording or the number of items.

But the links between variables are the same whatever the survey. Here, the main socio-demographic explanation of the religious practice is the gender, women being more practicing than men. And, rather surprisingly, the effect of level of education seems stronger than this of age. Young people and individuals with a high level of education are less religious. But the three variable are significant at 0.000.