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INTRODUCTION



The International Social Survey Program Modules on Religion, 1991–2018

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This is an introduction to the special issue on the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) religion survey. Previous special issues covered the ISSP surveys on “citizenship” (Scholz et al. 2017; Eder 2017), “work orientations” (Jutz et al. 2018; Volk and Hadler 2018), “role of government” (Edlund and Lindh 2019; Hadler et al. 2019), and “social networks” (Sapin et al. 2020; Hadler et al. 2020).

The four substantive articles in this special issue cover a wide range of important issues about religion around the world. Hoellinger and Lorenz (2021) examine the level and nature of religiosity across religious cultures. Their comparison covered three aspects: identifying with and belonging to a religion, public and private religious behaviors, and religious beliefs. They found large cross-cultural variation in both the pattern and level of religiosity across nations and religious cultures. Standard secularization theory does not apply uniformly across different religious cultures. Dimova and Dimov (2021) study the connection between religion and ethnicity in comparative perspective. They found that ethnic minorities had higher levels of religious behaviors and beliefs than the dominant national groups. Also, they discovered that “religion is among the key markers of ethnicity” but one cannot be simply substituted for the other. Babunashvili and Kipiani (2021) look at the connection between religion and liberal attitudes toward same-sex relationships and how it differs between former-Communist countries and other countries. They observed that liberal views toward sexual minorities decrease as religiousness rises, that independent of religiousness post-Communist countries are less accepting of homosexuality than those in other countries, and that in post-Communist countries religion has less impact on views about homosexuality than it does in other countries. Ladini et al. (2021) conduct a case study in Italy of the relationship of religiosity and attitudes toward immigration. Their analysis showed that the non-religious and Catholics frequently attending religious services were the most favorable toward immigration, while Catholics who irregularly or never attended church services were the least in favor of immigration.

The ISSP evolved out of preexisting general social surveys. Its origin was a bilateral collaboration between the respective national studies of the National Opinion Research

Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago and Zentrum fuer Umfragen, Methoden, und Analysen (ZUMA, now part of GESIS-Leibniz Institute of the Social Sciences) in Mannheim, Germany. The institutes started to collaborate in 1982, devoting a small segment of their national surveys, Germany's Die Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften (ALLBUS) and the United States' General Social Survey (GSS) to a common set of questions.

In 1983, SCPR in London (now the National Centre for Social Research, NATCEN) started a social indicators series called the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) similar to the ALLBUS and GSS and initiated meetings to further international collaboration. As a result, representatives from NORC, ZUMA, SCPR and the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, organized ISSP in 1984. They agreed to:

- jointly develop topical modules dealing with important areas of social science,
- field the modules as a (fifteen-minutes) supplement to the regular national surveys (or a special survey if necessary),
- include an extensive common core of background variables,
- make the data available to the social science community as soon as possible.

The ISSP has conducted a cross-national survey annually since 1985. From the founding four, the ISSP has grown to having included a total of 57 countries. It has conducted almost 1,000 international surveys and has interviewed over a million people.

Table 1 shows the countries that have fielded rounds 1–4 and the sample sizes for each survey. The ISSP Religion study was first conducted in 1991. It was fielded in 18 countries which collected 24,970 cases. Religion II was fielded in 1998 by 32 countries with 39,034 cases. Religion III in 2008 covered 46 countries, including four non-ISSP members with funds from the Templeton Foundation (Indonesia, Kenya, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania) with a total of 66,683 cases. Religion IV in 2018 was carried out in 48 countries, including 15 extra countries with funds from the Templeton Religion Trust (Algeria, Cambodia, Ghana, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Malawi, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Nigeria, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tunisia,¹ and Vietnam) with a total of 68,186 cases. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several countries have not yet been able to complete archiving their data. It is hoped that an additional two to four countries will later deposit their data and that the cross-national file can be supplemented in due course.

The ISSP Religion study is designed to analyze religion both within its own sphere and as an independent sector affecting other areas of society. Within the religious sector, three main facets are examined: 1) religious background—the religious orientation of one's parents and what religion, if any, a person was raised in, 2) religious beliefs such as in God, an afterlife, heaven and hell, religious miracles, the supernatural powers of deceased ancestors, nihilism, and fatalism, and 3) religious behaviors such as attending religious services, being otherwise active in a religion, praying, reading holy scripture, and having religious shrines in one's home and/or visiting them.

Several major approaches were used to assess religion's connection to other realms of society. First, there were items asking directly about the role of religion in other areas such as politics and science.

Table 1. ISSP Country participation and respondent counts by year.

	I—1991	II—1998	III—2008	IV—2018
Algeria				1642
Australia	2203	1310	1718	
Austria	984	1002	1020	1200
Belgium/Flanders			1263	
Bulgaria		1102		1019
Cambodia				1400
Canada		974		
Chile		1503	1505	1402
Croatia			1201	1000
Cyprus		1000	1000	
Czech Republic		1224	1512	1407
Denmark		1114	2004	1631
Dominican Republic			2086	
Finland			1136	1229
France		1133	2454	953
Georgia				1440
Germany-West	1346	1000	1182	1724
Germany-East ^a	1486	1006	524	
Ghana				1433
Hungary	1000	1000	1010	1017
Iceland				1210
Indonesia			2000	1418
Ireland	1005	1010	2049	
Israel (Jews + Arabs)	991	1208	1193	1267
Italy	983	1008	1078	1215
Japan		1368	1200	1466
Jordan				1539
Kenya			1502	1400
South Korea			1508	1031
Latvia		1200	1069	
Lithuania				1028
Malawi				1587
Malaysia				1422
Mexico			1471	
Mongolia				1280
Nepal				1469
Netherlands	1635	2020	1951	
New Zealand	1070	998	1027	1334
Nigeria				1480
Norway	1506	1532	1072	1252
Philippines	1200	1200	1200	1200
Poland	1063	1147	1263	
Portugal		1201	1000	
Russia	2964	1703	1015	1583
Singapore				1800
Slovak Republic		1284	1138	1325
Slovenia	2080	1006	1065	1079
South Africa			3292	2736
Spain		2488	2373	1733
Sri Lanka			1676	1431
Suriname				1044
Sweden		1189	1235	1777
Switzerland		1204	1229	2350
Taiwan			1927	1842
Tanzania			1519	
Thailand				1535
Tunisia				1218
Turkey			1453	1511
Ukraine			2036	
United Kingdom	1257	804	1986	1552
Northern Ireland	838	812	1089	

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

	I—1991	II—1998	III—2008	IV—2018
United States	1359	1284	1365	1175
Uruguay			1010	
Venezuela			1077	
Vietnam				1400
Total	24970	39034	66683	68186

^aEast and West Germany are listed separately through 2008 and merged for the 2018 Religion IV study.

Second, there were items on religious tolerance and societal harmony covering both the acceptance of different religious orientations and whether religion promotes or hinders societal harmony. These include three different types of questions. First, there were assessments of statements like “People with very strong religious beliefs are often too intolerant of others” and “All things considered, people belonging to different religions cannot get along with each other when living close together.” Second, items asked about civil liberties for religious extremists (i.e. should “people who believe that their religion is the only true faith and all other religions should be considered as enemies” be allowed to hold public meetings). Finally, items were included on positive or negative views toward Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and atheists or nonbelievers.

Third, the relative standing of religion in society is examined by comparing confidence in churches and religious organizations to confidence in other institutions such as the national legislature, business and industry, the courts and legal system, and schools and the educational system.

Finally, the role of religion as an independent variable influencing other sectors of society is considered. This included religion’s role in promoting physical health and psychological well-being (overall happiness, family satisfaction, self-rated health, and comfort in times of trouble or sorrow), developing and sustaining friendships, and shaping social values and attitudes regarding sexual morality, gender roles in society in general and within religion itself, and abortion rights.

Across all of these components, the ISSP religion studies are able to test secularization theory, which posits that religion’s role in societies inevitably declines as societies modernize. Under this theory, education and science undermine religious beliefs, while governments and secular institutions replace the role of religious institutions in conducting activities such as education, healthcare, and care for the poor and needy. First, secularization theory can be tested by monitoring trends in religious beliefs and behaviors over time. Second, it can be examined by looking at generational changes in both religious and quasi-religious beliefs and behaviors across birth cohorts. Third, individual level changes can be tracked by retrospective measures comparing present and past belief in God, religious orientation, and the attendance of religious services. Fourth, secularization can be assessed by comparing the religious orientation and attendance of religious services of respondents to those of their parents when respondents were growing up. Fifth, respondents are asked directly about their views on religious change (e.g. “In [COUNTRY] religion represents the past and not the future.” and “In [COUNTRY] religion is just as relevant to life today as it was in the past.”) and on science vs. religion (“We trust too much in science and not enough in religious faith.”). Finally,

counterarguments to secularization are explored via items which examine whether or not religion has been undergoing an adaptation from the formal and organized to the informal and personal, especially with the rise of a group that is spiritual, but not traditionally religious (e.g. agreeing/disagreeing with the statement “I have my own way of connecting with God without churches or religious services.”).

The 2018 ISSP Religion IV study was developed according to ISSP’s standard four-year cycle. In year one, the topic is selected; in year two, the sub-topics and themes are prioritized; in year three, the questionnaire is finalized; and in year four, the study is fielded. At the ISSP general meeting in Cape Town, South Africa on April 26–29, 2015, Religion IV was adopted as the 2018 ISSP study and a drafting group was selected to carry out the task. The members were the Czech Republic, India, Norway, Turkey, the United States, and Venezuela. The United States was chosen as convener of the drafting group. Then at the ISSP general meeting in Kaunas, Lithuania on April 30–May 4, 2016, the themes and topics to be focused on were selected. The drafting group proposed a number of topics to be expanded and a second group of topics to be added. The general meeting voted to establish the following priorities:

To be expanded:		To be added:	
Religiousness vs. Spirituality	18	Threatening Religions	23
Secularization theory	17	Religion and gender	16
Religious pluralism/particularism	12	State support for/accommodation of separation from religion	14
Well-being	12	Religion and environment	3
Misanthropy	5		

Following on the guidance of the general meeting, the drafting designed, conducted, and analyzed a series of pretests. Based on these and general deliberations, the drafting group proposed a set of 60 items for consideration at the ISSP general meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland on April 29–May 3, 2017, where the final content of the 2018 Religion IV study was adopted. The drafting group then prepared the final questionnaire and sent it to the Secretariat on June 5, 2017.²

Of the 60 variables in Religion IV in 2018, 32 have been asked in all four rounds, as have two religious items on religious identification and attending religious services which are part of the ISSP’s standard background variables. Three items have been asked from 1998 through 2018, nine items in 2008 and 2018. So of the 62 measures in 2018, 46 were repeats and 16 items were new. The more recently added items have largely explored established themes from new perspectives and/or with updated measures. This includes items to measure the alternative to secularization theory that posits a transformation from being religious to being spiritual and direct questions on whether people think religion has declined and is more part of the past than the future. Likewise, the measures of religious beliefs and behaviors were augmented to cover facets of eastern religions. More emphasis has been given to the topics of religious tolerance and inter-religious conflict, especially in 2018 when an item on positive-negative assessments of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and atheists or nonbelievers was added. Similarly, a general item on gender roles in society was supplemented by two items on gender roles within religion itself (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009).

The ISSP Religion studies have been widely used in research in the sociology of religion and related fields. When a bibliography of research using the ISSP religion studies was compiled in 2015 as part of the development of ISSP Religion IV for 2018, about 850 publications were identified (Document 1 in Smith 2020). Studies of religious change in general and examinations of secularization theory in particular are the most frequently researched topics. The results show that religious change has been following a very varied and complex pattern. Secularization in both religious attitudes and behaviors appears to have been underway for some time in some societies, the trends are mixed with a combination religious gains, loses, and stability in other countries, and especially in some post-Communist societies religion has increased its position (Alastuey 2008; Altemeyer 2004; Andersen 2012; Crockett and Voas 2006; Davie 2006; Dogan 2003; Eberstadt 2013; Edlund 2013; Kaufmann, Goujon, and Skirbekk 2012; Meulemann 2004; Pickel, Pollak, and Müller 2012; Requena and Stanek 2013; Smith 2009; 2013). In addition, some support has been found for the alternative to secularization theory that a transformation is occurring with spirituality growing while formal religion is declining (Houtman, Heelas, and Achterberg 2012; Lambert 2003; Mercadante 2014; Stolz and Könnemann 2014). Another often studied topic is the impact that religion has on socio-political attitudes and psychological wellbeing. The research shows that religion often strongly shapes many attitudes such as views on sexual morality (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009; Das, Eargle, and Butts 2011), abortion rights (Kim 2014), gender roles (Jennison 2012), and other issues (Bréchon 2004; Brooks 2002, Paul 2005). In addition, religion is associated with well-being and happiness (Greenfield, Vaillant, and Marks 2009; Levin 2014; Megumi 2004).

With the addition of data from round four in 2018, it will be possible to expand on all of these previous areas of research, to update trends, and to expand into new directions. In particular, the great expansion of nations from Africa and Asia in 2018 makes the ISSP's religious coverage much more global than before and allows more inter-religious comparisons.

Notes

1. Tunisia was an ISSP member, but received support from the Templeton Religion Trust and their survey was included as part of the supplemental Templeton studies.
2. Details of this process can be found in Tom W. Smith, "A Compilation of Documents Used to Develop the 2018 Religion IV Questionnaire for the International Social Survey Program," ISSP Report, July, 2020. https://dbk.gesis.org/dbksearch/file.asp?file=ZA7570_questionnaire_development_report.pdf

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