

Vassilis Saroglou

Sameness, Adaptation, or Change? Understanding the Specifics and Limits of Religious Change

1

Asking the question of whether religion as an institution, and religiousness as a personal disposition regarding a specific domain of life, change or remain the same over time, may, at first glance, appear a very trivial question. Institutions, living entities, and individuals both change, to some extent, and remain the same, again, to some extent. We perceive and understand things and people as having some essence and identity and at the same time, as also evolving under the influence of time as they exist in constantly changing living environments.

However, the question above, regarding religious change is much more complex and, to my knowledge, has not yet been examined from a psychological perspective.¹ Besides the trivial idea that religion both changes and remains the same, a series of fascinating questions arises. Is religious continuity – and thus sameness – more important and powerful in individuals and groups than religious change, or is it the opposite? Moreover, is continuity in institutional religion and individual religiousness quantitatively more or less substantial than continuity in other similar, traditional and historical, institutions and other proximal individual dispositions such as personality traits, social attitudes, and values? Alternatively, it may be that religion is characterized by specific ways through which change and continuity are operationalized. Thus, the difference between religion and other domains of human activity that appear more evolutive, such as politics, economy, or leisure, may be rather qualitative. Furthermore, what are the psychological mechanisms that could explain religious continuity/sameness and religious change? Finally, what are the psychological mechanisms that may be particularly relevant and thus, theoretically interesting for understanding the resistance to change in religion?

In this work, I will present an initial examination of the questions above. From a psychological perspective, the emphasis will be on people's religiousness and reli-

¹ See, for a recent exception, Joshua C. Jackson et al., The New Science of Religious Change, in: *American Psychologist* 76 (6/2021), 838–850, an article published concomitantly to the 2021 conference of the European Academy of Religion where the present work was presented as a keynote lecture.

gious experience, i.e., their ideas, affects, values, and behavior in relation to their religion. I will thus focus much less or not at all on religion as an institution implying normative beliefs, rituals, norms, and community, the continuity or change of which belongs, of course, to the expertise of theologians and historians. The present work may be of interest for psychologists of religion who are sometimes too focused on the research literature of their generation and/or the very specifics of their own context to engage in broader consideration of research across decades, potentially missing the ‘big picture’. It may also be of interest for theologians and religious scholars who, depending on their personal preferences, could overemphasize either continuity or change when considering religion from a macro perspective.²

2 Religious Continuity and Change

Religion and religiousness both change and remain the same. Nevertheless, the two processes may not operate equally. They may each be colored by specific features compared to other domains of human activity. Furthermore, there seems to be notable discrepancies between the dynamics for change and the pressure for continuity. I will examine these issues here mostly through a series of examples.

2.1 Strong Religious Continuity, Sameness, and Inertia

By their very nature, religions are institutions whose authority comes from a foundational past and whose expertise is guaranteed only to the degree that some continuity exists with what is perceived to have been fundamental (text, credo, ritual, ministry). Not surprisingly thus, religions are heavily influenced by dynamics favoring maintenance, sameness, and inertia. Similarly, religionists, to be perceived by themselves and others as members of the community, need to believe, feel, and/or behave, if only to a minimal degree, in accordance with what is consid-

² Note that I focus on this work, from a social psychological perspective, on religious continuity and change across time and not on religious changes as a function of age and human development. For the latter, see Vassilis Saroglou, *The Psychology of Religion*. London/New York: Routledge 2021, chapter 3: Theist Children, Apostate Adolescents, Bigot Late Adults? and Paul Wink/Michele Dillon/Dan Farina, Religion, Spirituality, and the Agential Self, in: Dan P. McAdams/Rebecca L. Shiner/Jennifer L. Tackett (eds.), *Handbook of Personality Development*. New York: Guilford 2019, 364–379, for recent reviews.

ered as normative.³ The non-respect, even minimal, of such conformity with some of the features considered to be fundamental to the religion constitutes a reason for exclusion, be it by oneself, by others, or by the community.

For these reasons, it may be tempting to characterize religion as one of the domains of human cultural activity with the greatest degree of continuity, sameness, and inertia. Quantitatively speaking, compared to religion, other domains such as politics, economy, work, education, art, leisure, and even law, with its high internal coherence, and kinship systems, heavily based on biology, are characterized by greater transformative dynamics and higher flexibility regarding what constitutes authority and what defines expertise.

Undoubtedly, the observer, familiar with contemporary Western Protestantism and Catholicism, is aware of important recent developments and changes within these denominations. These developments have certainly had an impact even on aspects of religion that are typically highly resistant to change, such as rituals and the Church's organization. Very likely, the strong pressure from modern values of individual autonomy and societal secularism has facilitated such developments. Nevertheless, these developments within Western Christianity seem to be the exception when one considers the larger worldwide religious landscape.

For instance, in Orthodox Christianity, a denomination with which I am, for family reasons, quite familiar, religionists continuously oppose even the smallest superficial and cosmetic changes in very secondary aspects of faith and practice. They do so even in opposition to their religious authorities – bishops, Patriarchs, Synods – who occasionally try to introduce such changes to better serve their pastoral mission and the believers' spiritual needs. To give one simple example, these religionists still oppose the replacement of the Byzantine Greek or Slavonic texts and hymns of religious services, which nobody fully understands anymore, with modern language. The recent Covid-19 pandemic revealed that religious conservatives within Orthodox Christianity are, across countries, an important part of the community. These religionists have succeeded in opposing even the simplest changes in order to avoid contamination, such as the use of distinct individual tongs instead of a communal one for the reception of the Holy Communion.

Indeed, what appears in Western Christianity to be the expression of only a minority's religious conservatism, orthodoxy, or fundamentalism, constitutes a substantial part of everyday religious life in many other religions and denominations. Thus, we must be cautious not to conclude that religion, with the exception of conservative and fundamentalist tendencies, undergoes significant global changes. This is not to say that some religions are necessarily more conservative

³ Jean-Pierre Deconchy, *Orthodoxie religieuse et sciences humaines*. The Hague: Mouton 1980.

or fundamentalist than others: such a qualification must take the cultural context into account. It suggests though that religious continuity, sameness, and inertia are much more important than some may think.

2.2 Highly Discrete Religious Developments and Changes

At the same time, changes are also undergone in religion and religiousness. These changes sometimes occur in a blatant, explicit, and rapid way; take, for instance, the process and outcomes of the Vatican II Council. Most often, however, changes are more progressive, implicit, and slow. Similarly, religious developments that appear to be significant changes are actually not as radical or accomplished as one could imagine. I will present a few examples that refer specifically to how religiousness and related spirituality and ethics may change, but also how these changes are more modest than believed – with the discrepancy often being between theological developments and people’s everyday religiousness.

Humor was considered with suspicion in the Patristic era. Laughter, at least ‘immoderate’ laughter, was perceived as indicating that a person had lost self-mastery. It was thus condemned in Middle Age Christian spirituality. Today, theological essays tend to rehabilitate humor and laughter by finding humorous elements in the Bible, or at least by re-interpreting some biblical passages as potentially intended to be humorous. Christian, ethical, and spiritual essays tend to praise humor and laughter as a human expression that allows for self-transcendence. Nevertheless, empirical psychological research shows that even in the 2000s and the 2010s, and even in Western secularized societies, individual religiousness, and not only fundamentalism, is still accompanied by some discomfort in creating, using, and appreciating humor in general or at least many types of humor.⁴

Sexuality, not only extra-marital or pre-marital, but also sexuality within marriage, has traditionally been considered as morally and spiritually suspicious or potentially dangerous, and this has been true across all major religious traditions. Recent theological developments have contributed to a more positive reconsideration of body, senses, emotions, and sexuality, at least sexuality within heterosexual married couples, as being valuable and as potentially facilitating religious and spiritual life. Nevertheless, there is substantial recent evidence across cultures and

⁴ Vassilis Saroglou, Religion and Sense of Humor: An A Priori Incompatibility? Theoretical Considerations from a Psychological Perspective, in: *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 15 (2/2002), 191–214 and Vassilis Saroglou, Religion, in: Salvatore Attardo (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies. Volume 2*. Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage 2014, 636–641 for reviews.

religions showing the persistence of the religion-sexuality conflict. This conflict is present even among young people and adults living today in secularized Christian Western contexts. As this research shows, religiousness, i.e., being a believer or a strong believer compared to being a non-believer, is to some extent accompanied by less frequent sexual behavior, even among married couples, but also by lower sexual desire and higher sexual guilt – not to mention the clearly negative attitudes toward unconventional sexuality.⁵

Another area of interest where one can observe religious change on the basis of psychological empirical evidence is that regarding intergroup relations and outgroup prejudice and discrimination – a universal human phenomenon resulting from group belonging and collective identity. A variety of outgroups exists for religionists: religious (members of other religions or denominations), ideological (e.g., atheists), ethnic/racial, and moral (e.g., gay people, single mothers). Contrary to what we could expect based on the spiritual values of tolerance and compassion, research has rather consistently shown that religious people, not only fundamentalists, but also mere believers and practitioners, tend to have not only negative attitudes toward several kinds of outgroups, but also to express these attitudes through discriminatory behavior and, in some cases, through behavioral hostility. However, a closer examination of the empirical research on religious prejudice in the last 50–60 years shows two interesting dynamics attesting to both continuity and change. On the one hand, prejudice as a function of individual religiousness is rather constant across decades with regard to moral outgroups, in particular homosexuals, and ideological outgroups, in particular atheists.⁶ On the other hand, change has been observed regarding ethnic/racial outgroups. When racism became socially explicitly proscribed, religiousness was no longer, or at least much less frequently, found to predict ethnic and racial prejudice.⁷ Going further, some studies have suggested that, at least in Western Europe, intrinsic religiousness may

5 Vassilis Saroglou, Religion and Related Morality Across Cultures, in: David Matsumoto/Hyisung C. Hwang (eds.), *The Handbook of Culture and Psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press 2019, 724–785 for review.

6 Wade C. Rowatt/Tom Carpenter/Megan Haggard, Religion, Prejudice, and Intergroup Relations, in: Vassilis Saroglou (ed.), *Religion, Personality, and Social Behavior*. New York: Psychology Press 2014, 170–192 and Vassilis Saroglou, Intergroup Conflict, Religious Fundamentalism, and Culture, in: *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 47 (1/2016), 33–41 for reviews.

7 C. Daniel Batson/Patricia Schoenrade/W. Larry Ventis, *Religion and the Individual. A Social-psychological Perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press 1993 and Deborah Hall/David Matz/Wendy Wood, Why Don't We Practice What We Preach? A Meta-Analytic Review of Religious Racism, in: *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14 (1/2010), 126–139.

also predict tolerance of ethnic groups and immigrants and valorization of multiculturalism.⁸

The examples above of modest but observable changes are all in the progressive direction, i.e., promoting the so-called self-expressive and emancipative values. Importantly, though, there are examples of changes that seem to go in the opposite direction, i.e., increased conservatism and withdrawal to one's own community. I do not refer to phenomena here where a specific community becomes radicalized – see, for instance, the developments in some components of American Evangelicalism, occurring at the same time as other Christian denominations in the US were becoming more liberal. But here, rather, I refer to the way religion, or more precisely religious culture in society as a whole, becomes more conservative. For instance, in the Christian Orthodox world, for many decades of the 20th century, the adjective 'Christian' was broadly used to qualify all kinds of religious elements: for instance, Christian baptism, Christian faith, Christian art, and Christian spirituality. However, starting in the eighties, the adjective 'Christian' has progressively been almost fully replaced by the adjective 'Orthodox'. Lay people, practitioners, theologians, and religious authorities typically speak of Orthodox spirituality, Orthodox baptism and marriage, Orthodox faith, or Orthodox ethics.⁹

2.3 The Developments-Continuity Discrepancy: An Issue of Temporal Delay or of Overestimation of Change?

Several examples we presented in the previous sections suggest that religious continuity, not to say sameness, is in fact stronger, from a macro perspective, than it may appear to those very familiar with religion, who often apply a micro perspective in their understanding. Theological and intra-religious developments are in principle complex, nuanced, rich, and evolvable. However, when one focuses on what religiousness implies in people's life, in terms of related cognition, affects, values, and behavior, it is the persistence of many religious features that predominates change. On the basis of the examples we described, this persistence may include, among

⁸ Stefanie Doebler, Relationships Between Religion and Intolerance Towards Muslims and Immigrants in Europe: A Multilevel Analysis, in: *Review of Religious Research* 56 (1/2014), 61–86 and Tufan Ekici/Deniz Yuçel, What Determines Religious and Racial Prejudice in Europe? The Effects of Religiosity and Trust, in: *Social Indicators Research* 122 (1/2015), 105–133.

⁹ Importantly, this need to accentuate distinctiveness and uniqueness in the context of globalization, especially with respect to the West and Western Christianity, can be put in parallel with tendencies within contemporary Islam to accentuate its uniqueness with regard to a supposedly decadent West and Europe.

many other aspects, (a) beliefs, such as magical thinking regarding the efficiency of ritual, (b) ethics, such as restrictive attitudes toward sexuality, (c) intergroup attitudes, such as prejudice against convictional and moral outgroups, and (d) belonging to a tradition and community perceived as unique and superior to other ones.

One way to interpret the discrepancy above is to argue that there is often a delay between developments ‘in theory’ and changes ‘in practice’. Specifically, there may be a discrepancy between theological and official ecclesiastic discourse, which may rapidly evolve, on the one hand and what religious people really do in their everyday lives on the other hand. The latter is more easily marked by inertia, faithfulness to tradition, and continuity with early religious socialization. This explanation in terms of ‘delay’ is certainly valid in several cases but becomes difficult to accept when we observe delays for decades or centuries.

An alternative, possibly complementary, explanation is that theologians and religious leaders overestimate the presence and salience of religious change. They insert these changes in their representations but may be unaware of the empirical reality of believers’ lives being marked more strongly by continuity. Alternatively, they may defensively pretend that important changes have been made, though in fact these changes are extremely subtle – even at the explicit discourse level.

A salient example that nicely illustrates the above is the concurrence of very timid developments and strong continuity regarding religious homophobia. Empirical research in the psychological and social sciences of religion in the last 50–60 years has consistently shown that mere religiousness, not only fundamentalism, is typically associated, across various cultural and religious contexts, with not only the de-consideration of homosexuality as being both morally and socially problematic, but also with prejudice and the behavioral discrimination of homosexual people.¹⁰ Theological developments, at least in Western Christianity in the last decades, have advanced more liberal interpretations of biblical texts which were traditionally considered as condemning homosexuality. Moreover, recently, in mainstream Protestantism and Catholicism, there have been considerable developments in principle. Notably, a distinction is made today between (a) homosexual orientation, considered as given by nature and thus not being subject to moral judgment, and (b) the sexual behavior of gay people, condemned as immoral. In addition, several religions insist today on the importance of distinguishing between (a) condemning the sin (homosexuality) and (b) loving the sinner (the gay person).

Have these developments been translated into empirical reality, in terms of what religionists think, feel, and do? Yes and no. Overall, among believers in the West, there has been an attenuation of sexual prejudice, following the broader

¹⁰ Vassilis Saroglou, *Religion and Related Morality*, 724–785 for review.

tendencies of secular societies. However, surprisingly enough, empirical research using subtler methods (experimental designs, behavioral measures) attests of the continuous prevalence of religious prejudice and even the behavioral discrimination of gay people.¹¹ Indeed, the same religionists who, in principle, explicitly endorse the sin-sinner distinction are unable to apply this distinction when their behavior is tested in the lab. For instance, they will be less willing to help a gay person even to accomplish noble goals like visiting a grandmother or finding a job if unemployed.¹² Going further, an international study showed that the endorsement of the belief in the sin-sinner distinction serves to legitimize sexual prejudice.¹³

3 How Religion and Religiousness Change

There are various kinds and modalities of change. To the measure that religious changes occur, one may wonder what the specific modalities of these changes within the religious sphere are and what the implications of these modalities are. Furthermore, one may wonder whether these changes have a particular direction or whether all directions are (equally) possible. A question related to this is whether the direction of religious change parallels the direction of broader societal changes or not. Below are some tentative answers to these questions.

3.1 Religious Change as (Only) Adaptation

The clear predominance of religious continuity over change is mainly due to what we mentioned in the introduction of this work: religion's very nature and authenticity, particularly in the believer's eyes, strictly depends on its capacity to demonstrate some sort of fidelity to the original fundamental truth. This truth may be initiated by a founder figure, described in a sacralized text, or simply experienced by previous generations.

¹¹ Vassilis Saroglou, Religion and Related Morality, 724–785 for review.

¹² C. Daniel Batson et al., 'And Who Is My Neighbor?:' Intrinsic Religion as a Source of Universal Compassion, in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38 (4/1999), 445–457 and Lynne M. Jackson/Victoria M. Esses, Of Scripture and Ascription: The Relation Between Religious Fundamentalism and Intergroup Helping, in: *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23 (8/1997), 893–906.

¹³ Mark Romeo Hoffarth/Gordon Hodson/Danielle S. Molnar, When and Why Is Religious Attendance Associated With Antigay Bias and Gay Rights Opposition? A Justification-Suppression Model Approach, in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 115 (3/2018), 526–563.

This constraint also influences the way change is operationalized within religion. It implies that when religious change is initiated, discussed, and implemented, it must be presented mainly as only an adaptation of the same original truth and its acculturation with regard to a changing societal environment and a new cultural context. This implies some, or even an important, re-interpretation of the original truth but certainly in a way that demonstrates continuity if not sameness with that truth. As a consequence, the change, while well-proclaimed, may be superficial and less important than it is perceived to be; or on the contrary, change may be significant even if it is presented as only a slight adaptation. In other words, in religion, sameness often prevails despite claims of change, but changes occur beyond the rhetoric of continuity and mere adaptations.

3.2 Sameness Even if Claiming Change

The above features constitute a critical specificity of religion with regard to many other domains of cultural human activity. For instance, in politics, science, art, economy, education, and even law, to cite a few interesting examples, changes are proposed, discussed, and implemented most often on the basis of a cost-benefit rationale – which of course may include the adaptation rhetoric, among other things. But there is not necessarily a need to demonstrate or pretend to demonstrate continuity or fidelity with a previously endorsed truth or value. Of course, institutions and organized groups use the argument of fidelity to their fundamental values and principles, or their constitution, but this discourse is usually complemented by cost-benefit rationales. More importantly, non-religious institutions and groups can change and rewrite the chart of their fundamental values, principles, and constitution.

Religious change as adaptation is thus a very specific type of change. For the purpose of this work, I typed the word ‘change’ into Google Images and observed the diversity with which change is depicted across the many images that appeared. This led to a nice typology of the various representations of change. Change may be represented – and is thus perceived – as a slight or a radical shift of direction, as partial or full replacement, as a timely necessity, as an entire transformation, as an optimistic transition from impossibility to possibility, as progress and advance ahead, as the product of a discursive process, and/or as a reengagement of pre-existing pieces with some creation of new space. Based on what I have developed in this work, religious change most often adheres to the model of change as an adaptation to time and less frequently, not at all, or only occasionally to the other models of change.

An implication of religious change experienced mainly as adaptation is the implicit assumption that time and the changes time introduces denote the mutability and thus imperfection of human nature and human affairs. Only God is immutable and remains the same, since only God is perfect – or alternatively, thus only God is perfect. This model of religious change as a necessary adaptation to societal changes emphasizes an essentialist perception of truth as pre-existing and already established rather than as an objective for the future or a reality that is progressively built. Subsequently, significant large-scale changes are suspected of making substantial alterations of this pre-existing truth.

3.3 Change Under the Guise of Continuity

A way to implement religious change while still maintaining or pretending to maintain continuity and even sameness is to distinguish between primary and central versus secondary and peripheral aspects of the truth or norm that is about to be changed. Primary elements should be preserved, secondary elements can be changed. Similarly, to implement religious changes, one needs to preserve the spirit of the original text or norm by proposing a so-called symbolic instead of literal interpretation. Whereas there is usually a certain consensus among scholars, religionists, and religious leaders regarding the principle of the above conceptual distinction, typically, there is much less consensus on which specific features can be considered secondary and which elements should be preserved as primary. Similarly, there is criticism as to whether a particular symbolic interpretation may go too far and violate the spirit of the original belief, norm, or practice.

More importantly, the distinction between secondary and primary religious elements, or between a symbolic and a literal interpretation, is never established a priori. It must be negotiated and is subject to future developments. An interpretation perceived as symbolic today in a given religious community (e.g., ‘Christians will have a new life in eternity with God’; instead of ‘Christians, with a new body, will be resurrected at some point in the future’) may end up being perceived as a literal interpretation of the belief in resurrection decades and generations later and be replaced by a new, more symbolic and abstract interpretation such as ‘life is stronger than death’.

This process of continuously redefining across centuries what is, and will remain, primary and central while other elements which were previously considered to be primary undergo a process of reconsideration as secondary, allows for the implementation of significant changes under the guise that continuity has prevailed and that the change was only an adaptation. For instance, contemporary Protestants’ religious lives differ notably from believers’ lives in the early years of

Christianity, despite the fact that the many changes that have occurred since then were most often experienced as mere adaptations or as a rediscovery, in a new context, of the original truth.

3.4 Direction of Religious Change: Liberalization or Rigidification and Polarization?

The direction(s) of religious change throughout history constitutes an interesting matter. This topic is typically addressed by historians, but psychologists, together with other social and behavioral scientists, can examine the direction of religious changes in recent decades, and in particular in the context of increasingly secularized societies, on the basis of modern empirical data. Two scenarios appear intellectually meaningful.

First, religion and religiousness may align with more general cultural and societal changes. Thus, one can expect self-expressive and emancipative values, which have been found to go hand in hand with secularism, to exert their pressure. Religiousness should thus become more autonomous, more individualized, less traditional, and be less characterized by collectivistic values of loyalty to the ingroup and respect for authority.¹⁴ Note that there is cross-cultural evidence that societies in general, and not only Western ones, are becoming less collectivistic and are emphasizing autonomy and individuality to an increasing degree.¹⁵ As a consequence, faith and religious practice in secularized societies are likely to be more an issue of personal choice than of family education and societal socialization. Similarly, belief and practice are more likely to be intrinsically, rather than extrinsically, motivated: they are based on motivations directly related to faith and spiritual objectives rather than external interests and goals.

Second, it may be that religiousness, in the context of secularism, is prone to defensiveness, thus becoming more rigorous, conservative, and absolutist in beliefs, practice, norms, and group identity. Becoming a minority gradually, religionists may be tempted to radicalize, at least if we adopt the optimal distinctiveness theory.¹⁶ This theory implies, among others, that minority groups feel the need

¹⁴ Pippa Norris/Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. New York: Cambridge University Press ²2012.

¹⁵ Henri C. Santos/Michael E.W. Varnum/Igor Grossmann, Global Increases in Individualism, in: *Psychological Science* 28 (9/2017), 1228–1239.

¹⁶ Geoffrey J. Leonardelli/Cynthia L. Pickett/Marilynn B. Brewer, Optimal Distinctiveness Theory: A Framework for Social Identity, Social Cognition, and Intergroup Relations, in: *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 43 (2010), 63–113.

to accentuate their differences from the majority to preserve their own visibility and identity. As a consequence, such rigidification should imply increasing polarization in secular societies between strong religionists on the one hand, and strong atheists and secularists on the other hand.¹⁷

Extensive research from the social and behavioral sciences, having focused on various questions relevant to the above issue, has provided convergent results.¹⁸ Rigidification followed by polarization is not to be excluded but constitutes, quantitatively speaking, only a minor phenomenon. It often applies to minority religious groups under tension and experiencing discrimination for ethnoreligious reasons. But it is the first scenario that looks predominant, with religiousness overall following, to some extent, the liberalization and individualization of values and worldviews in secularized societies. In parallel, compared to the past, religiousness is changing, becoming more intrinsic, more spiritual, more prosocial, and more tolerant of various kinds of outgroups.

Nevertheless, an impression of some polarization still exists, in terms of a stronger contrast, compared to the past, between nonbelievers and religious believers, on several moral issues for instance. Interestingly, recent sociological research has demonstrated that the impression of polarization we may have is not due to religious believers becoming more conservative and reactive – if anything, they have become more liberal – but rather to atheists and secularists whose stance has shifted more significantly as they have become increasingly liberal. In traditional religious societies, there is simply more consensus regarding many moral issues and worldviews.

4 Sources of Religious Change

Even under the strong pressure for continuity, if not sameness, and even if often limited in scope, religious changes do occur regularly. What are the sources of such changes? It is reasonable to assume that both (a) factors external to religion, societal and cultural ones, and (b) factors internal to religious life and experience exert their influence, independently or jointly, in generating religious changes.

¹⁷ Egbert Ribberink/Peter Achterberg/Dick Houtman, Religious Polarization: Contesting Religion in Secularized Western European Countries, in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 33 (2/2018), 209–227.

¹⁸ Vassilis Saroglou, Religion and Related Morality, 724–785.

4.1 External Sources

All kinds of societal and cultural developments are of course important external sources of religious change. Obviously, as evoked above, secularization in the recent decades has been a major source of religious changes. Additionally, political developments, democratization, law transformations, economic crises, sociological changes, geographical mobility, demographic changes, changes in the relationships between Churches and the State, moral liberalization, scientific advances – including the development of sciences of religion, intergroup conflicts, wars, diseases, and natural disasters have been found to influence not only the mean level of religiousness and secularism in societies but also the nature of people's religiousness and the way it is expressed.

For instance, scientific advances in the understanding of the origins of homosexuality have helped major religions to reconsider, to some extent, their attitudes toward persons of sexual minorities. The legalization of issues like abortion and euthanasia has pushed many religious Westerners to tolerate the fact that others have the right to behave differently and to not embrace such religious moral prohibitions. Immigration, multiculturalism, and globalization have contributed to the decrease of religious exclusivism and to the increase of interreligious understanding and tolerance. Urbanization has decreased the social pressure in rural environments to practice religion and to be a regular part of the community. Societies with less disease, deaths, and health problems have been found to also be societies where religiousness is less salient on average and does not necessarily have an additional contributing role with regard to well-being – as do many other societal sources.

Thus, most often, religious changes are provoked or encouraged by these external sources of pressure. Religions aim to accommodate themselves to these developments. Otherwise, as history and sociology of religion have emphasized, major religions and communities take the risk of becoming marginal minorities or even being extinguished. (On the contrary, if they become too similar to the enviroing society, they end up being non-attractive).

4.2 Internal Sources

Nevertheless, there are also internal sources of change within religion. First, theological and ecclesiastic developments by themselves may generate or enable changes – for good or bad. In the Catholic world, Vatican II has been a golden example and its transformative influence has been long-lasting. In the Christian Orthodox world, the late 20th century rediscovery of Patristic theology and ancient

monastic spirituality, in combination with the opening of postgraduate programs in the departments of Orthodox theology (which reduced the departure of young Orthodox theologians in the West) contributed, together with external causes, to the phenomenon of orthodoxism, i.e., no longer self-identifying as Christian, but exclusively as Orthodox.

Second, religious changes occur due to the influence of the so-called prophetic voices and charismatic figures within religious communities, as well as the originality and attractiveness of the message and action of religious figures who have been foundational to a specific religious movement or even a new religion.

Typically, within religious communities, individuals who dispose of the power of charisma (i.e., are admired for their exemplary and authentic spirituality and their prototypicality in incarnating the group's values) are influential and initiate, orient, or circumscribe changes. Their power for change is most often more important than the influence of other persons with power of legitimacy (high rank ministers) or mere expertise (theologians).

In addition, founders of religious movements and new religions are, almost by definition, initiators of more radical changes; most often they instigate change by criticizing the limitations and even the inauthenticity of the religious expressions of a given environment. Founders of new religions and initiators of religious movements and successful schisms are great actors of changes in the world's religious landscape. They do so either by proposing a new, more authentic and faithful, interpretation of the original message of a given religion, or by creating the basis for a new religion and implicitly or explicitly signaling the limitations of the other religions.

4.3 Conservatives and Liberals: Stable Interindividual Differences

Finally, religious changes or religious continuity and sameness can simply be explained by the fact that religionists, including religious authorities, as humans in general, are characterized by important interindividual variability. A key personality dimension on which people within the same society and the same group show important variability with each other is high versus low openness to experience.¹⁹ This personality dimension denotes high or low propensity for novelty, variety, and complexity, instead of routine, sameness, and simplicity, and does so across all

¹⁹ Robert R. McCrae/Angelina R. Sutin, Openness to Experience, in: Mark R. Leary/Rick H. Hoyle (eds.), *Handbook of Individual Differences in Social Behavior*. New York: Guilford 2009, 257–273.

domains of life and human activity. It thus includes high versus low open-mindedness regarding ideas, values, and worldviews, and high versus low flexibility and openness to change regarding practices and behavior.

It is of importance to note that this interindividual variability is partly determined by genetic and biological dispositions. Subsequently, non-negligible long-term stability exists, for years, or even decades, in being high, low, or simply on average on this personality dimension – as for many other individual differences.²⁰ A practical implication of this is that people who are religious conservatives or religious liberals will very likely continue to be so for years, if not decades. If they change, their change on this dimension – as for other personality dimensions – will not be radical but rather modest in size. This accentuates the impression we have of the distance between the two positions, the religious conservatives and the religious liberals, as being crystallized to some extent without considerable possibilities for negotiation and easy compromises.

Nevertheless, there is some empirical indication of changes due to the aging process and/or the confrontation with new and challenging experiences. Several adolescents with conservative religious education may become more liberal, replacing literal interpretations with symbolic ones, as they progressively become young adults and/or enter higher education.²¹ In parallel, there is some evidence that adults may also become more intense in their religiosity and spirituality as they become older,²² and they may also become more conservative in their political attitudes.²³

A final observation of interest to the understanding of the inertia regarding religious change is the fact that, across cultures, a weak but overall positive association exists between religiousness and sociomoral conservatism. In traditional societies, this extends further to a negative association between religiousness and the more basic and global personality dimension of (low) openness to experience.²⁴

20 Wiebke Bleidorn/Christopher J. Hopwood, Stability and Change in Personality Traits over the Lifespan, in: Dan P. McAdams/Rebecca L. Shiner/Jennifer L. Tackett (eds.), *Handbook of Personality Development*. New York: Guilford 2019, 237–252.

21 Fritz K. Oser/W. George Scarlett/Anton Bucher, Religious and Spiritual Development Throughout the Life Span, in: William Damon/Richard L. Lerner (eds.), *Handbook of Child Psychology. Volume 1. Theoretical Models of Human Development*. Hoboken (NJ): Wiley ©2006, 942–998 for review.

22 Paul Wink/Michele Dillon/Dan Farina, Religion, Spirituality, and the Agential Self, in: Dan P. McAdams/Rebecca L. Shiner/Jennifer L. Tackett (eds.), *Handbook of Personality Development*. New York: Guilford 2019, 364–379.

23 Jonathan C. Peterson/Kevin B. Smith/John R. Hibbing, Do People Really Become More Conservative as They Age?, in: *The Journal of Politics* 82 (2/2020), 600–611.

24 Vassilis Saroglou, Culture, Personality, and Religiosity, in: A. Timothy Church (ed.), *The Praeger Handbook of Personality Across Cultures. Volume 2*. Santa Barbara (CA): Praeger 2017, 153–184.

Thus, in many societies in the world today, especially in traditional societies, conservative religionists are a majority.²⁵ In modern secular societies, low openness to experience is characteristic only of religious fundamentalism, but not necessarily of mere religious belief and practice. In other words, within the latter societies, there is non-negligible variability among religionists regarding their propensity to consider or not consider change in the religious domain.²⁶

5 Resistance to (Religious) Change: Underlying Factors

What are the factors that undermine religious change and favor resistance to change? Psychological research has identified a series of individual and situational factors that do not facilitate or may even prevent change, in general.²⁷ I will revisit these factors here, applying them to the religious context, and I will also describe specific factors that appear particularly salient for religion and religiousness.

5.1 Classic Individual and Situational Factors

Above, we mentioned the role of personality, mainly low openness to experience and related tendencies, which, associated with religiousness, particularly in traditional societies, inhibit the interest and propensity for religious change. In addition, older age is a factor known to favor resistance to change. And older adults are overrepresented among religious believers and especially among active religionists and members of religious communities.²⁸ Certainly, the fact of entering old age

25 Kibeom Lee et al., Personality, Religion, and Politics: An Investigation in 33 Countries, in: *European Journal of Personality* 32 (2/2018), 100–115.

26 Jochen E. Gebauer et al., Cross-Cultural Variations in Big Five Relationships With Religiosity: A Sociocultural Motives Perspective, in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 107 (6/2014), 1064–1091.

27 See, for introductions and reviews: Eric B. Dent/Susan Galloway Goldberg, Challenging ‘Resistance to Change’, in: *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 35 (1/1999), 25–41; John T. Jost, Resistance to Change: A Social Psychological Perspective, in: *Social Research* 82 (3/2015), 607–636; Joseph R. Lao/Jason Young, *Resistance to Belief Change: Limits of Learning*. London/New York: Routledge 2020; and Shaul Oreg, Resistance to Change: Developing an Individual Differences Measure, in: *Journal of Applied Psychology* 88 (4/2003), 680–693.

28 Pew Research Center, The Age Gap in Religion Around the World, on: Pew Research Center

is not necessarily accompanied by an increase of faith and practice – in fact, some older adults may even exit religion at that stage of life. Similarly, young adulthood is not necessarily a life period that leads to apostasy.²⁹ Nevertheless, some asymmetry exists in terms of age among religionists, with young adults being underrepresented. Older adults are also overrepresented among the high clergy, a body that can reasonably be perceived as being very vigilant regarding the maintenance of the many features of a given religion. Therefore, not surprisingly, age should not facilitate a propensity for religious change.

Beyond individual characteristics like age and personality, there are several situational factors that enhance humans' natural resistance to change. Organizations with a highly hierarchical and authoritarian structure are also reluctant to change. This is particularly the case when organizations do not make significant space for discursive processes that would allow for self-reflection, criticism, and reconsideration of things. Indeed, many religions, denominations, and religious communities are characterized by a clear, even rigid, hierarchical structure and by the unwillingness to give discursive processes legitimate authority. An example from the Christian Orthodox Churches may be significant. Though explicitly promoting synodality as the Church's system of governance at all levels, from the parish level to the Panorthodox Synod level, these Churches have been heavily criticized by internal actors – typically lay theologians and lower-rank clergy but not bishops – for the considerable dysfunction of the synodal system at various levels.³⁰ In such contexts, authority is concentrated in the hands of one person, i.e., the Primate of a local Church, or the body of bishops. Interestingly, some bishops recently added the term 'and episcopal' (καί ιεραρχικών) when referring to the 'synodal' (συνοδικόν) system of the Church's governance. Not surprisingly, the Orthodox Churches are those that have been marked by minimal change, if any, compared to the Catholic and Protestant Churches and communities.

Furthermore, resistance to change is particularly strong in societal contexts where people, especially key actors, are unprepared for change and may even lack the competence to imagine and implement change. To remain with the same religious context of the Christian Orthodox Churches, which I am quite familiar with: the religious authorities seem to have little perception of the need for change,

(13.06.2018), URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/06/13/the-age-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/> (30.03.2023).

²⁹ Paul Wink/Michele Dillon/Dan Farina, Religion, Spirituality, and the Agential Self, in: Dan P. McAdams/Rebecca L. Shiner/Jennifer L. Tackett (eds.), *Handbook of Personality Development*. New York: Guilford 2019, 364–379.

³⁰ Stavros Yangazoglou (ed.), Συνοδικότητα και όμοφωνία [Conciliarity and Consensus] [Special section], in: *Θεολογία* 86 (2/2015), 3–194.

not necessarily because of unwillingness, but partly due to lack of knowledge and subsequent incompetence. For instance, their familiarity with human and social sciences in general, and human and social sciences of religion in particular, is particularly weak. In fact, among religions and religious denominations, there is an implicit hierarchy regarding the familiarity with human and social sciences. For instance, mainstream Protestantism and contemporary Catholicism have experienced important openness to these sciences. This, in turn, has had an impact, for instance, on the historical and critical approaches of the sacred texts or the consideration of the ways to assume pastoral responsibilities and understand traditional religious practice and norms. The opposite has been the case for religions and denominations that are unaware of and indifferent with regard to the knowledge accumulated by scientists of religion – this seems to be particularly the case today in Orthodox Christianity and Islam.

Resistance to change is also strong when the key actors are simply unaware of the need for change, are sitting in a zone of comfort, and thus have poor motivation to change. For instance, in countries with a religious monopole, i.e., with one religion or denomination being highly predominant, religious expressions are typically traditional, rather immutable, and not really negotiable.³¹ Countries with a still vibrant Western Christian tradition like Poland, and especially (all) countries of Eastern Christian tradition, dispose of religious authorities who feel too comfortable within a society where religiousness looks natural and is part of the collective identity. Religionists and religious leaders may thus be hostile against secularism, religious diversity, and the associated need for change. On the contrary, in contexts with high religious and convictional diversity, including those where believers and non-believers coexist as important segments of the society, religious beliefs, rituals, norms, and institutions experience considerable internal developments.³²

Low trust of leaders may be another factor that diminishes the propensity for change. Even when leaders propose well-justified, meaningful, and pertinent changes, followers may be reluctant to welcome such changes because of a generalized distrust of these leaders by the members. Within the Christian Orthodox world, an interesting example of this process is, in my opinion, the current opposition that very active religious believers and practitioners show against any change proposed by ecclesiastic authorities, even very secondary changes regarding minor aspects of the ritual and the tradition. Since there is a cleavage in these religionists' minds between power- and career-oriented religious leaders on the one hand,

31 Vassilis Saroglou/Vanessa Delpierre/Rebecca Dernelle, Values and Religiosity: a Meta-analysis of Studies Using Schwartz's Model, in: *Personality and Individual Differences* 37 (4/2004), 721–734.

32 Pippa Norris/Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*.

and ascetic excellence and authentic spirituality of famous monastic figures on the other hand, any change proposed by the former is typically confronted with high resistance. This factor partly explains, in my opinion, why decades of formal ecumenical dialogue has had almost zero effect on important segments of the Christian Orthodox world which have remained hostile toward Western Christian Churches. The Orthodox participation in this dialog has been almost exclusively left in the hands of ecclesiastic authorities and their close theologian experts.

Finally, ironically, too many changes may be an obstacle for new change due to exhaustion. Individuals, groups, and organizations are not programmed to change constantly; they also need periods of continuity and calmness. Large organizations in particular need time for all members to assimilate change and develop the experience of continuity beyond the changes they have experienced. For instance, Vatican II has created a series of important and impactful changes within Catholicism – possibly with some costs, even if these costs are minor compared to the greater benefits. Subsequently, new important proposed changes in the Catholic Church, like accentuating synodality in the Church’s governance to the highest degree or allowing women to enter priesthood, may be too ‘onerous’ to be implemented in the period following the many Vatican II-related developments.

5.2 Religion-Specific Factors of Resistance to Change

As stated earlier in this work, the idea that truth pre-exists as a whole within a given religion, rather than being a reality to be fully discovered in the future, is by itself a major factor undermining the propensity for religious change. In the least, it pushes for religious change that is primarily an adaptation that contributes to a more accurate consideration of that truth. This conception is further consolidated within those religions that claim some kind of infallibility, be it located in a text, a person, or an institution. Of course, infallibility is often complemented by a source of counter-power: for instance, *reception* by the community is considered as important for the acceptance of a specific synod’s infallibility. Nevertheless, the mere idea of the existence of some kind and location of infallibility is sufficient to make religious changes particularly difficult.

Furthermore, at least within monotheistic traditions, religious beliefs, ritual, norms, and institutional functioning are typically conceived as a well-integrated whole with a strong internal coherence. Consequently, even a change in one minor aspect of the whole, such as an update to the interpretation of a given belief, the modification of a feature in a particular ritual, or the replacement of an old rule with a new one in the life of the community, needs to be made in a way that will not disturb – or will not be perceived as disturbing – the other parts that constitute the

coherent whole. In other words, religions characterized by high integralism may have particular difficulties in implementing changes because of the interconnection between all aspects of belief and practice.

In line with the ideas of pre-existing truth, infallibility, and integralism, religions endorse certain beliefs and use a specific rhetoric that allow contradictions to be minimized and serve the well-known psychological need to resolve cognitive dissonance. The latter is the need to reduce and extinguish the discrepancy in individuals' minds between their ideas that may be divergent and contradictory with each other; the same can be said for the discrepancies between their ideas and acts, and between their acts. For instance, how can the religious community reduce cognitive dissonance when errors and failures become evident? A helpful idea is the belief that the religious community is glorious and eternal. Such a belief implies the minimization, if not denial, of failures and errors, including those within the moral domain: since the Church is invincible and will persist for ever, failures are only accidents and do not potentially threaten the existence of the community. This may be an erroneous estimation if one takes the historical fact into account that religions can die. It is of importance to note that the endorsement of the idea that quality is more important than quantity minimizes the risk the decrease in membership (e.g., due to secularization) may have for the maintenance of the community: despite significant losses, the community will be eternal. Obviously, these perceptions do not produce pressure to consider potential changes.

Another, subtler, rhetorical strategy is the propagation of the idea that the positive things, acts, and accomplishments are produced by the glorious Church, whereas the errors, failures, and sins are committed by the 'sons and the daughters of the Church.' This denotes the psychological defense mechanism of projecting the bad self to the outside. A related defense mechanism is the development of the idea that negative considerations about aspects of a given religion in general, or at specific moments of its life, are due to external sources of unjustified criticism. These sources, such as the media and some politicians, are usually considered immoral or by definition hostile to religion. The fact that several empirical studies, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, have shown that individual religiousness is positively associated with an endorsement of conspiracy beliefs,³³ and not only in very traditional

33 Paweł Lowicki et al., Does Religion Predict Coronavirus Conspiracy Beliefs? Centrality of Religiosity, Religious Fundamentalism, and COVID-19 Conspiracy Beliefs, in: *Personality and Individual Differences* 187 (2022), Article 111413 and Gordon Pennycook et al., On the Belief That Beliefs Should Change According to Evidence: Implications for Conspiratorial, Moral, Paranormal, Political, Religious, and Science Beliefs, in: *Judgment and Decision Making* 15 (4/2020), 476–498.

societies but also in secularized Western countries,³⁴ reveals the importance of this mentality: the evil fights the faithful people from inside, but also from outside.

A final factor, inherent to religious communities, that works to discourage change is the risk for schisms. The history of most, possibly all, religions is simultaneously a history of their schisms. Leaders of dynamic and lively religions that want to prevent a significant decrease of their membership and the long-term effects of disunity are very attentive to avoid decisions that may facilitate internal schisms. Undoubtedly, implementing changes constitutes such an important risk. Disunity is a cause of suffering, and schisms raise doubts about the value and validity of the original religion. In addition, a drastic decrease in membership is a subtle reminder that religious beliefs are fragile assertions: their uncertainty and independence from any kind of objective proof need to be compensated by a significant number of coreligionists who attest together that these beliefs, embraced by many, should somehow be true.

Therefore, religious communities most often live under the threat of their most conservative or fundamentalist segments, which may depart from the community if they deem that significant changes have been implemented. One can even consider the fundamentalist tendencies within established religions as being animated essentially by a propensity for competition for the greatest possible purity: the most authentic spiritual father, parish, bishop, movement, etc. will be the one that adopts the strictest standards in their religious expression. (Although less frequent, the direction may be the opposite, with the liberal segments initiating schisms). Religious leaders are thus often obliged to maintain a subtle equilibrium between conservative and liberal voices. They most often choose the equilibrium that will preserve some sort of consensus – not necessarily what they themselves believe as being the best. Undoubtedly, the constant search for consensus is not the best way to encourage change.

6 Summary and Conclusion

In this work, I examined several key issues regarding the interplay between religious continuity and religious change, by focusing mainly on religiousness, i.e., people's experience of religion through beliefs, rituals, norms, and community. Going

³⁴ Inga Jasinskaja-Lahti/Jolanda Jetten, Unpacking the Relationship Between Religiosity and Conspiracy Beliefs in Australia, in: *British Journal of Social Psychology* 58 (4/2019), 938–954 and Natasha Galliford/Aadrian Furnham, Individual Difference Factors and Beliefs in Medical and Political Conspiracy Theories, in: *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 58 (5/2017), 422–428.

beyond the simple idea that, similar to all living entities, religion both remains the same and changes, it appears that religious continuity, not to say sameness, is strong, certainly stronger than that of many other domains of human activity. This is of course mainly due to the very nature of religiousness as an attachment and fidelity to a fundamental and foundational past truth and thus is not restricted to conservative and fundamentalist religious expressions.

The substantial impact of continuity limits the possibilities for change and shapes religious change, which, after a close examination of some examples from empirical research, appears to be more limited and discrete than experts adopting a micro approach may think. Here, I used the examples of the relationships of individual religiousness with humor, sexuality, homophobia, and intergroup prejudice. Though some changes have been observed, indicating that religious changes parallel and follow societal changes, the continuation is striking. This poses, among others, the question of how to explain the discrepancy between theological and ecclesiastic developments on the one hand and non-negligible stability in the way people's religiousness functions in everyday life on the other hand. Here, I proposed at least three explanations: delay between theory and practice of change, overestimation of change by experts, and defensive rhetoric to give the illusion of change.

A further examination of the diversity of the representations people have of change, and thus the diversity of the underlying models of change, suggested that religious change is initiated and experienced mainly as an adaptation to societal changes and as acculturation to new cultural contexts. Thus, religious change is much more restrained compared to other models of change such as change of direction, progress, timely necessity, replacement, or full transformation. As a consequence, very often, religion either implies continuity and sameness despite claiming change; or, on the contrary, it implements change under the guise of continuity and slight adaptation. Nevertheless, discrete and restricted religious change within the constraints of heavy continuity implicitly activates the idea that time and mutability denote human imperfection, and thus change may be an alteration.

How do religion and religiousness change – when is this the case? Though it is risky to advance the idea that religious changes have a direction, I argued that both directions are possible, with religiousness potentially becoming more liberal, individualized, autonomous, and thus intrinsic in motivation, or, on the contrary, more traditional, conservative, and conformist in motivation. However, as shown by an impressive number of studies focusing especially on the moderating role that societal developments and secularism play on religiousness, the evidence favors the idea that the big picture does not point to rigidification of believers and polarization between them and secularists. Religiousness, at least within major religions that have adapted to survive, follows societal changes, though with some delay.

And the differences between believers and non-believers appear greater in secular compared to traditional societies due to nonbelievers' liberalization, not due to the hypothetical rigidification of believers.

All kinds of societal and cultural changes constitute external sources of religious change. These include changes in the domains of politics, economy, health, education, law, science, ethics, mobility, natural disasters, conflicts, and war, among others. In parallel, or independently, sources internal to religion may cause change – any kind of religious change. Theological and ecclesiastic developments may generate changes, but most importantly charismatic religious figures, prophetic voices, founders of new movements or new religions, often in opposition to the institutional authorities or the dominant traditions, initiate change and bring significant developments to the landscape of world religions. In addition, interindividual variability, among people in general, and thus among religionists and religious leaders in particular, with regard to the personality disposition for either high or low openness to new, diverse, challenging, and complex ideas, values, acts, and experiences, as well as the intra-individual stability of these personality tendencies, guarantee the persistence of the battle between religious conservatives and religious liberals, as well as the continuous interplay between continuity or sameness on one hand and change or adaptation on the other hand.

Finally, there are plethora of well-known factors that enhance humans' natural tendency to resist change. Many of them also apply to the religious context. Beyond individual factors like age (across religious cultures, older adults, less open to change, are typically overrepresented) and personality disposition for low openness to experience (conservatives are overrepresented among religionists, especially in traditional countries), we can note several relevant situational factors. These include an unawareness of the need for change, an unpreparedness for change, a lack of competence, poor motivation to change when living in comfortable societal environments, simple exhaustion from previous changes, a hierarchical and authoritarian structure, and non-valorization of discursive processes, but also a lack of trust of the organization's leaders when the latter try to implement meaningful changes.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, one can describe specific internal features of religion that amplify the natural tendency to resist change. I have presented several that seemed critical: the idea of infallibility, the belief that the group is glorious and eternal, the strong integralism characterizing at least the monotheistic traditions, several rhetorical strategies that facilitate the reduction of cognitive dissonance when facing important failures and errors in the community, and finally the fear of (new) schisms. The latter, among others, is strategically used as a threat by conservative and fundamentalist segments in order to oppose the implementation of change.

At the end of this initial exploration of the understudied topic of religion and change, at least from the perspective of the behavioral sciences of religion, I would like to mention a limitation of the present work. An important area where, within religion, it is believed that significant changes are implemented is that of the ascetic and monastic life, at least for religions that include these forms of religious life. From the believer's perspective, it is assumed that these modes of life contribute to more internal and more gradual personal transformations. Moreover, these internal transformations are perceived as bringing about, albeit indirectly and progressively, external changes and transformation of the world. These assumptions may not be purely idealistic elaborations and pose interesting questions that can be empirically investigated. Nevertheless, relevant empirical research on this issue is lacking and thus it may be premature and risky to make any empirical statement confirming or infirming these interesting assumptions here.

To conclude the present work, I would like to claim that of intellectual intrigue is less the question of how religion succeeds to preserve sameness despite implementing some kind of change, at least as adaptation. Rather, for the scientists of religion, the more challenging and perhaps fascinating question seems to be how religions succeed to cultivate a feeling of uninterrupted continuity and true fidelity while at the same time they introduce gradual and progressive, sometimes even radical, changes within the religious landscape.