

New Age, Fundamentalism and Moral Orientations

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Thomas Luckmann postulated that both New Age and fundamentalism are reactions to pluralism and the structural differentiation of modernity, and also asserted a link between religion and morality. Although not fully developed by Luckmann, this may suggest that attitudes to 'life and death' issues will differ between adherents of traditional religiosity, and those inclined to New Age religiosity. Drawing on Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning, four hypotheses are constructed and subjected to statistical analysis using a New Age/fundamentalism scale (Doktór 2003) and the 1998 RAMP (Religious and Moral Pluralism) data-set. It is concluded that privatization of religion and morality takes place mainly in the more modernized sector, whereas in the less modernized sector the opposite tendency appears, toward deprivatization of religion and morality.

New Age and fundamentalism are among the most often studied topics in the scientific study of religion. Although usually they are analyzed separately, we may also find interpretations considering them as phenomena with something in common or even a common axis of variation (Doktór 2003).

One of these interpretations was proposed by Thomas Luckmann (1996, 1999, 2003), who placed both phenomena in a large social and cultural context. According to this author, New Age and fundamentalism are holistic reactions to the pluralism of world views and structural differentiation introduced by modernity. This process, although initiated much earlier, has been significantly quickened in recent years, contributing to significant changes in religion and morality manifested mainly as the privatization of both spheres:

As the pace of functional differentiation of political, economic and legal functions of social life speeded up since the late Middle Ages, the process spared neither religion nor the moral order. For a prolonged period, religious institutions continued to serve as the social-structural basis of morality but religious institutions themselves were eventually restricted to what was considered their proper functions by the modern state. In consequence, the socially and morally disciplining force of religious institutions began to weaken. Both religions and morals were increasingly individualized and, first in the case of religion and subsequently in the case of morals, privatized. (Luckmann 2003: 280)

Changes in religion have resulted in the emergence of its new social form of 'invisible religion' and reactions within its more traditional forms manifested as fundamentalism.

* © Tadeusz Doktór (1950-2007). An obituary appears at the close of this volume.

The new, privatized, and, in a manner of speaking, invisible social form of religion, can be best illustrated by certain diffuse recent developments usually collected under the same label: the ‘New Age’ movement – which of course is anything but a movement in the accepted sense of a social movement – including the ‘new occultism’, and various programmes favouring the ‘spiritual’ development of the individual. They are highly syncretistic. They gather diverse psychological, therapeutic, magic, and marginally scientific as well as older ‘esoteric’ materials, repackage them, and offer them for individual consumption. ... In fact, this may be a precondition for the successful maintenance of a vague holistic approach, an approach expressly designed to overcome the ‘alienating’ specializations of science, religion, art, etc into institutional spheres and segregated cultural domains. ... The conditions favouring the spread of the highly subjectivized forms of the New Age also gave rise to another ‘holistic’ option. It looks like the opposite of individual syncretism and subjective bricolage but it shares one feature with the former: it is an individual option. (Luckmann 1999: 255)

We may add that it is an individual option because it is based on individual choice, but manifested collectively and not privatized (untouched by direct institutional control) as in the case of New Age.

In modern Western societies Protestant and Catholic versions of fundamentalism have chosen traditional models of wholeness in reaction to modernity (institutional specialization, the immorality of economic and political life, the lack of obligatory controls for private life and pluralism and lack of cognitive support for one’s worldview, disorientation, and mass availability of immoral products and behaviour). It seems unlikely that these reactions, which range from the Catholic *Opus Dei* to Protestant moral majorities, will prove successful in the long run. It can be improved, however, in closed communities of various kinds. On the whole, privatized syncretism seems to have a better chance to become established as a (minimally) social form of religion. (Luckmann 1996: 76)

In contrast to New Age, fundamentalism does not have much chance for success as an attempt “to reuniversalize what may have once been universal but has now become the religious and moral dogma of a cognitive minority” (Luckmann 2003: 282).

Although Thomas Luckmann does not formulate a more detailed interpretation of fundamentalism to differentiate it from New Age, it seems that the latter represents a less traditional and more individualized form of reaction to modernity. In this sense, it is rather a continuation of social and cultural trends inherent in late modernity, whereas fundamentalism is opposing them by an attempt to revive the more traditional and collective type of religion. Although both represent an individual option because it is primarily a matter of individual choice, individualism in the New Age is manifested in a much stronger way. Individual choice is extended to the greater scope of materials from various religious traditions and other cultural

domains but is also manifested in the individualized ways of constructing worldview from these heterogeneous materials.

The same sociocultural factors which contributed to the erosion of church religiosity and the emergence of this new privatized form of religion also contributed to the privatization and de-institutionalization of morality. Both processes are rooted in the erosion of shared and overarching systems of meaning.

According to Luckmann, religion and morality are closely related, and “as the reach of religious institutions diminished, the obligatory social and intersubjectively compelling evaluation of human conduct by reference to a transcendent reality became weaker” (Luckmann 1996: 79). In the absence of canonized moral rules, which are rooted in the legitimated religious meaning system, morality does not disappear from social life but changes its form and content.

In societies with a generally obligatory moral code and in which interaction based on highly anonymous social roles is less pervasive, moral consensus could be assumed until evidence to the contrary appeared. In modern societies, one could say with some exaggeration, the situation is reversed. Moral consensus can be assumed only after evidence for that assumption becomes available. Among persons who are not reasonably certain about each other’s moral attitudes and views, social interaction in general – and most specifically, explicit moralizing – becomes a risky intersubjective undertaking. Similarity of views on morally relevant issues in social interaction needs to be cautiously negotiated in specific communicative processes between the parties of social encounter. (Luckmann 1996: 81)

The change in content of religion and morality is manifested mainly in “a shift of the transcendences to which they are addressed – from the great to the intermediate and, especially, the minor ones” (Luckmann 2003: 283). Moral orientations are becoming this-worldly oriented, and free from many constraints superimposed by traditional religion. The solutions to ‘life and death’ issues, traditionally regulated by religious norms, may now not be as obvious as before. We may therefore expect that the attitude towards these issues may be different among those who are religious in a traditional way (church religiosity or fundamentalist religiosity) and those who are inclined towards New Age religiosity. Among the former we may expect attitudes which are in accordance with the norms of Christian ethics, whereas among the latter we may expect a departure from these norms in the direction of greater freedom for the individual.

The changes in morality predicted by Luckmann’s interpretation are not restricted to the content of moral norms but are also related to a change of more general moral orientations (the way in which specific moral decisions are made and justified). We may expect that, in contrast to more traditional moral orientations typical of church or fundamentalist forms of religiosity, people who are religious in the New Age way are less dependent on religion and the opinion of others as the source of their moral decisions, more relativistic and more frequently using higher levels of moral

reasoning (more abstract and universal as required by the necessity of negotiating moral issues in the process of social communication taking place in pluralistic milieu).

A theory of moral reasoning was developed by Lawrence Kohlberg (1967, 1981, 1984). His theory asserts that human beings pass through six developmental stages of moral reasoning as they mature in order to be more sophisticated, complex, universal, and adequate than the reasoning of earlier stages. Higher level of moral reasoning could be seen as a necessary condition for the communicative competence (Habermas 1984) also in relation to morality.

The development of moral reasoning follows a universal and invariant sequence in all cultural settings and is independent of religious orientation. "Our evidence of culturally universal moral stages, then, is also direct evidence against the view that the development of moral ideologies depends on the teachings of particular religious belief systems. No differences in moral development due to religious belief have yet been found" (Kohlberg 1967: 180). Reviews of empirical studies conducted later on this topic (Richards 1991) have, however, shown that fundamentalists tend to score lower than average on the measures of moral reasoning. Similar results were also found in relation to the literal/symbolic dimension of religiosity (Duriez 2003).

In relation to specific 'life and death' issues empirical studies indicate that New Age orientation is related to a more liberal attitude in the case of abortion (Hollinger 1994) and fundamentalist orientation to a greater acceptance of the death penalty (Young 1992), which is consistent with the Old Testament but not with the contemporary moral teaching of mainline Christian Churches.

On the basis of the interpretation of New Age and fundamentalism proposed by Thomas Luckmann, we may formulate the following hypotheses in relation to New Age orientation (in the case of fundamentalism we will always expect the opposite):

- H1 The New Age orientation is positively related to higher levels of Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning.
- H2 The moral decisions of New Agers are interpreted as not being dependent on religion and the opinion of others.
- H3 The New Age orientation is positively related to moral universalism.
- H4 The New Age orientation is negatively related to the solutions of 'life and death' based on the moral teachings of the Christian Churches in the case of the death penalty, abortion, suicide and euthanasia.

In this study we will test these predictions using the New Age/fundamentalism scale developed earlier (Doktor 2003). It consists of five items related to form and content of religious beliefs. Formal qualities include the beliefs related to the epistemological value of the other religious belief systems (religious particularism/universalism), the assimilation of elements of other religious tradition into one's own belief system

(exclusivism/inclusivism) and the hermeneutics of own beliefs justifying the way in which they are derived from their source (literalism/symbolism). The content of beliefs is operationalized by the personal/impersonal concept of divinity and the degree of acceptance of the statement that suffering may be attributed to God's punishment for our sins (crucial for fundamentalism but not accepted in New Age, where it is usually replaced by 'karma' or psychological mechanisms).

Data and measures

We will test these predictions on the RAMP (Religious and Moral Pluralism) data, which were collected in 1998 in 11 European countries, using random representative sampling and face-to-face interviews with people aged 18 years and over. The total sample includes 12,342 respondents.

New Age/fundamentalist orientation is measured by five items:

- (a) Religious particularism, consisting of four forced-choice items: "There is only one true religion" (1), "There is only one true religion, but important truths can be found in some other religions as well" (2); "There are important truths to be found in some religions" (3); "There are important truths to be found in all religions" (4). The last possible answer – "There are no important truths to be found in any religion" (5) – was excluded from the analysis).
- (b) Religious exclusivism measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1, strongly disagree to 7, strongly agree): "Even if people belong to a particular religion, they should still feel free to draw on teachings from other religious traditions".
- (c) Personal/impersonal idea of divinity consisting of four free-choice items: "I believe in a spirit or life force" (3); "I believe that God is something within each person rather than something out there" (2); "I believe in a God with whom I can have a personal relationship" (1). The items "I don't believe in any kind of God, spirit, or life force" and "I really don't know what to believe" were excluded from the analysis.
- (d) The image of a punishing God measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1, strongly disagree to 7, strongly agree): "Most human suffering in this world is because of God punishing us for our sins". The coding of answers was reversed.
- (e) Biblical literalism (consisting of three forced-choice items: "The Bible records the actual word of God, so everything it says should be taken literally, word for word" (1); "The Bible was written by humans who were inspired by God, but not everything in it should be taken literally" (2); "The Bible is simply an ancient book of religious stories, historical events and moral teachings" (3). "I don't know" answers were excluded from the analysis.

By computing the mean of the standardized scores for answers to these five items a scale was constructed with pooled Cronbach's alpha = .64. High scores on this scale indicate New Age orientation and low scores indicate fundamentalist orientation.

Church religiosity is measured by frequency of attendance: "Apart from ceremonies for birth, marriage or death, roughly how often do you attend religious services these days?" measured on an eight-point scale: "every day" (0); "more than once a week" (1); "once a week" (2); "at least once a month" (3); "a few times a year" (4); "once a year" (5); "less than once a year" (6); "never" (7). The coding of answers was reversed.

Moral orientations

Moral reasoning was measured by the question: "Imagine that a big private enterprise has advertised a job, for which the nephew of the employer has applied. The nephew is not as well-qualified as another applicant, Mr Miller. Do you think that the following reasons, which might be given for employing or not employing the nephew, are good or bad reasons?"

- (a) The nephew is not employed because fairness demands that the applicant with the best qualifications is recruited.
- (b) The nephew is not employed because it is in the economic/financial interest of the company to recruit the best candidate.
- (c) The nephew is employed because the employer owes the nephew's father a favour.
- (d) The nephew is employed because the employer believes that one's relatives are more reliable than other people.

On the basis of these items, measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1, "very good reason" to 7, "very bad reason") an index of agreement between evaluation of the reasons given by the respondent with those of the Kohlberg theory was computed.

Moral universalism was measured by the question "Some people think that what is good and what is bad or evil depends entirely upon the circumstances. Other people think that rules about what is good and bad apply at all times, whatever the circumstances. Which is closest to your opinion?" with answer possibilities in the form of a seven-point Likert scale between two opposite statements: "What is good and bad depends entirely on the circumstances" (1) and "What is good and bad applies at all times, whatever the circumstances" (7).

The sources of moral decisions were measured by the statements "If you need to decide what is right or wrong and good or bad, how strongly are you influenced by the following?" (A) my religion (1, not at all influenced to 7, strongly influenced); (B) what others will think of me (1, not at all influenced to 7, strongly influenced).

'Life and death' issues were measured by items related to the acceptance of the death penalty, suicide, abortion and euthanasia. Attitudes towards the death penalty are measured by three items answering the following question "How strongly do you agree or disagree that the death penalty is justifiable in the case of serious crimes such as brutal murders for the following reasons?" on a seven-point Likert scale – "because it deters others from committing such crimes", "because the criminal needs to be punished", "because it makes absolutely sure that that particular criminal will never commit such a crime again" (1, strongly disagree to 7, strongly agree). The mean value of these items constitutes a scale with pooled Cronbach's alpha = .90. Attitude towards suicide is measured by a single item on a seven-point Likert scale "People who are in full possession of their faculties (senses) should have the moral right to commit suicide" (1, strongly disagree to 7, strongly agree). Attitude towards abortion is measured by six items answering the following question: "Can you tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a woman to have an abortion for the following reasons?" with two answer possibilities "Yes, should be possible" (1) and "No, it should not be possible" (2).

- (a) if there is a strong chance of a serious defect in the baby?
- (b) if she does not want any more children?
- (c) if her health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?
- (d) if she just does not want to have a baby at that time?
- (e) if the family thinks it cannot afford any more children?
- (f) if she became pregnant as the result of rape?
- (g) if she is not married and does not want to marry the child's father?

The mean value of these items constitutes a scale with pooled Cronbach's alpha = .84. Attitude towards euthanasia is measured by the following question: "A woman is in the final stages of an incurable and painful disease. She is in full possession of all her mental faculties (senses). She asks her doctor to give her an injection that will end her life. Should the doctor be allowed to do this?" with three answer possibilities: "No" (1); "Yes, but only if her family agrees as well" (2); "Yes" (3).

The sociodemographic characteristics of respondents include:

- (a) sex: (0 = male 1 = female)
- (b) year of birth: (18 years and older)
- (c) education: (1) incomplete primary level; (2) primary completed; (3) incomplete secondary; (4) secondary completed; (5) university incomplete; (6) university degree completed
- (d) community size, measured on a scale from (1) "less than 500 inhabitants" to (10) "more than 1 million inhabitants".

Results

Table 1 Regression analysis with moral orientations as dependent variables

	Moral reasoning	Moral universalism	Religion as the source of moral decisions	Opinion of others as the source of moral decisions
Sex	.062***	-.011	.058***	.054***
Year of birth	.062***	-.106***	-.117***	.055***
Highest level of education	.092***	.026*	.038**	.041***
Community size (administrative)	.029**	.020	.014	.027*
Church attendance	.025*	.086***	.363***	-.050***
New Age	.117***	-.026*	-.240***	-.104***
Rs ²	.041	.023	.298	.015

Beta values: * significant at .05 level; ** significant at .01 level; *** significant at .001 level

New Age orientation is positively (and fundamentalism negatively) related to a higher level of moral reasoning, which confirms the first hypothesis. It is also the strongest predictor of all independent variables. Level of education, which is usually the most influential predictor in many empirical studies testing Kohlberg's theory, is here weaker than the scores on the New Age/fundamentalism scale. Education, age and community size also reflect the social localization in more modernized sectors of society, which is also in accordance with the predictions of Luckmann's theory relating changes in moral orientation to the process of modernization. Higher levels of moral reasoning are a necessary condition for negotiating moral evaluations, especially in the most modernized sectors of society (among people who are younger, better-educated and living in larger communities).

These results are less favourable for Kohlberg's theory. Religion is related to moral reasoning not only in the case of the dimension of New Age/fundamentalism, but also for church religiosity as measured by the frequency of church attendance. Another anomalous result, not predicted by the theory but commonly observed in other empirical studies, is higher level of moral reasoning among the females observed. It must, however, be noted that the measurement of moral reasoning used here is more simplified than methods usually used in empirical studies testing Kohlberg's theory. The relationship between New Age/fundamentalism orientation and the evaluation of religion and the opinion of others as the sources of moral decisions also confirms our expectations based on Luckmann's theory. Religion and the opinion of others as sources of moral decisions are positively influenced by fundamentalist and negatively by New Age orientation.

Positive evaluation of religion as the source of moral decisions is most strongly influenced by church religiosity (frequency of church attendance). New Age/fundamentalist beliefs are the second predictor. In the case of fundamentalism, the direction of influence is the same as church religiosity (frequency of attendance).

New Agers are less dependent on religion on their moral decisions and more often choose the option “not influenced at all”. Religious sources of moral decisions are more often emphasized by women and older but also better-educated respondents. The sociodemographic pattern of the answers does not entirely reflect the social positions of respondents in more modernized sectors of society.

The New Age/fundamentalist orientation is the strongest predictor of the estimation of the opinion of others as the source of moral decisions. Fundamentalists perceive the opinion of others as significantly influencing their views of what is good and what is bad, whereas in the case of church religiosity and New Age orientation the influence is the opposite. Greater frequency of church attendance and greater acceptance of New Age beliefs are negatively related to perception of the influence of others on moral decisions. The option “strongly influenced” is more often chosen by younger people, the better-educated and those living in larger communities.

Moral particularism (the belief that “what is good and bad or evil depends entirely upon the circumstances”) is more typical for fundamentalists than for New Agers and frequent church attenders, who are more universalistic (more often accepting the statement that “rules about what is good and bad apply at all times, whatever the circumstances”). A closer look into the relationship between these variables reveals, however, that they are not related in a linear way. The sociodemographic correlates of particularism (older age and better education) are also ambiguously related to social position in more modernized sectors of society. The possible explanation for these results may be the formulation of this question, which may be understood as indicating moral universalism (more highly valued from the point of view of various theories of morality, for example in relation to Kohlberg’s level of moral reasoning) and moral absolutism (which may have more negative connotations). In our study moral absolutism/universalism is correlated with a higher level of moral reasoning, which seems to support the way of understanding of this question as related rather to moral universalism than to moral absolutism.

Table 2 Regression analysis with moral attitudes towards ‘life and death issues’ as dependent variables

	Approval of death penalty	Disapproval of abortion	Approval of suicide	Approval of euthanasia
Sex	-.017	-.028**	.057***	.043***
Year of birth	.038***	.040***	-.066***	-.006
Highest level of education	-.230***	-.017	.127***	.034**
Community size (administrative)	.050***	-.046***	-.005	.019
Church attendance	-.063***	.286***	-.193***	-.209***
New Age	-.121***	-.204***	.249***	.273***
Rsqr	.074	.185	.182	.182

Beta values: * significant at .05 level; ** significant at .01 level; *** significant at .001 level

The influence of New Age orientation on specific moral issues related to 'life and death' issues is stronger than in the case of more general moral orientations and opposite (with the exception of the death penalty) to the influence of church religiosity.

In the case of the acceptance of the death penalty, New Age/fundamentalist orientation is the strongest predictor after the level of education. New Agers and frequent churchgoers oppose the death penalty, even in the case of serious crimes, whereas fundamentalists approve capital punishment. Paradoxically, the liberal pole of the New Age/fundamentalism scale better reflects the teachings of mainline Christian churches than the conservative pole. This is also close to the opinion of better-educated respondents, opposing this form of punishment most strongly, in contrast to those who are younger and living in bigger communities.

In other 'life and death' issues the pattern is clearer. New Agers are more permissive and 'pro-choice'-oriented in relation to abortion, suicide and euthanasia. Fundamentalists and frequent church attenders are more restrictive and in accordance with the teachings of the mainline Christian churches. In the case of suicide and euthanasia the New Age/fundamentalism scale is the strongest predictor of these attitudes. The influence of social position is similar to the influence of New Age orientation. Younger people (in the case of suicide and abortion), the better-educated (suicide and euthanasia) and those living in bigger communities (abortion) are usually more liberal and 'pro-choice'-oriented.

Conclusions

Moral orientations and specific attitudes towards 'life and death' issues, as observed in this study, confirm the predictions of Thomas Luckmann related to changes in morality accompanying changes in religion.

New Age orientation as representing the uninstitutionalized and privatized form of religiosity is related to similar changes in morality. Moral orientations among New Agers are less dependent on religion and the opinion of other people, but more universalistic and related to a higher level of moral reasoning. Their attitude toward specific moral problems related to 'life and death issues' is 'pro-choice'-oriented and not based on the moral teaching of the Christian churches (with the exception of approval of the death penalty, which is also 'pro-choice'-oriented but in accordance with the norms of Christian ethics), reflecting the process of privatization of morality and the accompanying process of privatization of religion. In both cases institutionalized forms are replaced by individual choice, which is stressing the individual freedom based not on canonized ethics but on universal principles.

These changes are most visible in the more modernized sectors of society: among people who are better-educated, younger and living in larger communities, which confirms Luckmann's thesis that these changes are related to the process of modernization.

The other pole of this axis of variation represented by fundamentalism has the opposite influence on morality. It affirms the religious ethics and social control reflected in the influence of the opinion of others on moral decisions. It is also more particularistic, both in relation to general interpretation of moral norms as dependent on the particular situation, and to the lower (more particularistic) level of moral reasoning. Specific moral problems related to 'life and death' issues are solved in accordance with the norms of Christian ethics (with the exception of approval of the death penalty, where the solutions are provided by more conservative ethics such as the Old Testament and the older versions of moral teaching of Christian churches). Fundamentalism represents here the conservative option (in the case of approval for the death penalty even more conservative than the actual moral teaching of the Christian churches) manifesting in the deprivatization of religion and morality. In contrast to the liberal option in religion and morality represented by New Age, fundamentalism is more common in less modernized sectors of society (among people who are less-educated, older and living in smaller communities).

The interpretation of the different social localization of these two options is not sufficiently developed in Luckmann's theory, but on the basis of results from the present study we may state that liberal and conservative options in religion and morality are more common in more or less modernized sectors of society. Privatization of religion and morality takes place mainly in the more modernized sector, whereas in the less modernized sector we may observe the opposite tendency toward deprivatization of religion and morality. Therefore the statement that "morality is becoming more individualized, less socially compelling and unrelated to a transcendent reality" (Luckmann 1996: 79) needs the qualification "restricting this phenomenon only to some sectors of society".

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