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Religious in my own way: students' religious relativism and self-actualizing values

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Abstract

The article argues about the important challenges religion is facing in the global society: the relativization of some values and practices and the privatization of its public role. Pluralist options, rationalization and overspecialization are some of the modern values who are seriously reshaped the way individuals perceive the relation with religion in general and with various religious communities in particular. Students from public Universities in five Romanian cities, all Orthodox Christian ($N = 626$) have been interviewed on their social, ecological and religious values using an omnibus questionnaire and filed operators. More than 70% have defined themselves as 'religious in their own way' and this group share also higher environmental and feminist values, compare to the group of students who declare 'they are religious and they follow church advises'. The data suggest that 'the religious in their own way' group have maintained some general accepted religious values as 'the power of prayer' or 'the importance of believing in God' but they lack religious community involvement and the church attendance is limited to the main Christian celebrations.

Keywords: religiosity; religion privatization; religious values; society; public sphere; globalization.

Introduction

In February 14th 1988, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeni passed a death sentence upon Salman Rushdie for his book *The Satanic Verses*. This work, translated also in Romania in 2006[2], enjoyed great success and the readers were intrigued about Rushdie death penalty in Iran and by the fact that the book was forbidden in his

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[2] Publishing *The Satanic Verses* in Romania has been also disapproved by The Romanian Orthodox Church

origin country, India. While, the Orient has continuously rejected his work, the West hastened to reward him with Whitbread prize. Rushdie received for his book a Booker prize nominalization, and in 2007 he was knighted for his services to literature in The Great Britain, while many Muslim nations protested.

In September 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands –Posten* published 12 editorial cartoons which depicted Islamic prophet Muhammad (one with a bomb in his turban). When those cartoons have been reprinted in a Norwegian journal, the unprecedented controversy emerged around the world which escalated into violence. Thousands of Muslims in Europe, Asia and Africa protested, offended by their prophet depiction. Three Danish embassies were under attack and at least 50 people died in the confrontations. In return, the most important Iranian newspaper has invited the world to join a Holocaust cartoon contest. Other newspapers around the world, also Romanian, republished the cartoons to draw the attention to freedom of expression. Faced with unexpected violence, Danish authorities have been forces to take a stand. *Jyllands –Posten* had to apologize officially and Kurt Westergaardunui, the cartooner, has been forced to take a vacation for indefinite time. In 2008, Danish journalists reprinted the cartoons in 11 more publications in response to death threaten to Jyllands – *Posten* editors.

These are two examples which emphasis the role played by religion in today global society, using Islam as example. Why Rushdie has been condemned? How could 12 cartoons create such a world conflict? It is hard to believe that Rushdie's book would have shaken Muslims' faith because even with no interdiction, they were less probable to read it.

In order to answer those questions we should take a look on the new role played by religion in nowadays society. The international literature has long time debated about cultural globalization but the role of religion in this global world is still an open question (Gellner, 1992; Inglehart, 1997; Castles, 2000; Woodhead, Kiwanami, & Partridge, 2009). Peter Beyer (2000) claims that globalization has relativized core values and practices of particular cultures, and also religion as a part of those cultures. In fact, cultural globalization debates raise two important questions: (a) the potential of an homogeneous culture and implicitly religious homogeneity which continuously progresses until maybe one sole culture exist (Castells, 1996; Hout & Fischer, 2002) and (b) creating hybrid cultures though globalization, meaning a process of core values relativization (Robertson, 1995; Schirato, 2003).

Cultural hybridization has a direct impact on religion because peculiar religions are related to traditional cultures and express the essence of a society (Holton, 2000; Turner, 2001). Individual cultures would 'survive' in a global world in a modified, relative shape and religions have to face also challenges of contextual adjustment and absolute values rejection. We can talk about a potential crisis for the traditional religions faced with globalization process (Beyer, 2000, pp. 1-9).

Many Muslims have looked on Rushdie book as an offense of their sacred values and a denial of their importance as actors in a global world. For them, the relativization of Islam was similar to marginalization and Rushdie death penalty could be seen as a symbolic effort to counter-balance for global inequalities and particularly for any attempts to relativize Islam. In fact, Muslims are discontent with seeing Rushdie' books or Muhammad cartoons because they perceive the global pressure towards their religion and their cultural identity to relativize in order to be 'accepted' by the global world.

We argue about the economic globalization, political globalization, and cultural globalization but we can also talk about religion globalization: The role of religion in individual's daily life and in which way religious tradition would face the emergent values in the global world. The religion privatization issue – meaning the distinction between public and private – has been approached by important sociologists in the second part of the 20th century (Parsons, 1966; Berger & Luckmann, 1967). They underlined the fact that traditional religions have lost their public relevance in the modern society. More and more individuals are willing to follow the new religious moves because they fulfill needs that could not anymore be addressed through their connections in the traditional religious community.

We can also talk about a cyclical approach of the relationship between religion and globalization (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985) which states that religious privatization is not necessary a West concept but a natural process to be found throughout history: after periods of secularization follows times of religious revival. Globalization could trigger both the religious privatization and the increasing role of religion in the public sphere, using individual's permanent need for self-actualization and spiritual values integration (Kurth, 2009). Some of the recent studies (Halman & Draulans, 2006; Kaufmann, Goujon, & Skirbekk, 2011) found support for the hypothesis of religion revival in nowadays European societies, suggesting that Western Europe could be more religious, in terms of church attendance and beliefs, at the end of our century, than it was at its beginning.

For Beyer (1998), religious privatization does not necessarily mean the distinction between public and private and the decreasing role of religion in public sphere as long as we accepted the cyclical approach. Instead, the religion was challenged and found new ways to reclaim its public influence. Religious privatization, in a global world, could be depicted more as: 'open the markets', pluralistic options and individuals' tendency to choose the best religion that offers self-actualization, unites individuals and make them distinctive from others, which 'best fit them'(Lambert, 1999; Houtman & Aupers, 2007). Beyer considers that values as pluralism and voluntary choice would revival the public role of religion. It may look surprising and, for some people, even grotesque that we are talking about religious marketization, but several others collective life spheres are challenged also with pluralism of options through globalization: career, political prefe-

rences, education, romantic relations, family. Individuals are pushing to open labor markets and relocate their families in different parts of the world in order to be *career flexible*, they are using online dating to *keep their options open* and tend to prefer different types of partnerships to marriage.

However, the most serious 'threat' to the religion' role in the public sphere[3] is related to modern values of functional specialization and rational bureaucracy. Those values raise the question of the religion *function* in a global society and the global society's functional requests that religion might answer. In other words, they ask about the possibility to measure religion' performances in an over-specialized world (Beyer, 2000, p. 80).

Several religious movements from nowadays society attempt to face those particular challenges, while in the traditional society the religion functions were clear. The absence of industrial and science advance and the lack of social security have previously let enough room for religion to play an important public role. The religious actions were almost everywhere: from the individuals' health and cure to material and psychological support. Modern society however has undertaken most of these functions and the modern technologies, including media, let little room for religion to involve in areas it was originally specialized in: individual's education and community integration or access to information. New religious movements target areas that were and still are 'uncovered' by the global society. Religion position as anti-global and complemented to dominant system allows the approach of 'residual' problems which are unsolved or neglected by the modern society (Casanova, 2001). Issues related to self identity or environment protection are not enough covered by the global system and create a niche for religious movements' actions, maintaining religion into the global public sphere (Cantrell, Krile, & Donohue, 1980). New religions are more and more concern and develop communitarian action in supporting for children and women, for the environmental protection policies.

There are some key examples to the way religious movements have managed to incorporate also political, social, ecological values and to maintain their public role. Beyer (2000, p. 206) presents two: *The* New *Christian Right*, protestant religious movement in United States which has combined political republican values with conservative protestant evangelist and capitalist ones in '70 – '80, producing an unexpected impact: The Conservative party nominated the religious leader of *The* New *Christian Right* to run for presidential election. The second example is the emergence of religious environmentalist and religious leaders recently preoccupation for the planet protection topics. The so-called 'narrow space' for the religious movements, annunciated by so many theoreticians (Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, Edward Shils, Norbert Elias or Robert Bell) is not to be

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[3] When talking about religion's public role we refer here to social control and collective obligations, to norms and sanctions and legitimized behaviours.

found in the contemporary society. Instead there are empirical evidences (see Appadurai, 1996; Hardman, 2004; Dawson, 2006) about the emergence of new religious movements which are highly interconnected to global policies.

In 1989, the Pope John Paul II had his first speech exclusively dedicated to ecological issues, and next year, the members of The World Churches Council have met in Seoul South Korea to discuss aspects related to peace, social justice, and environment protection. In 1992, religious groups have been involved in The Global Forum 92, a World Conference of Non-governmental Organizations concerning planet problems, parallel to the similar one organized by the United Nations in Rio de Janeiro. During that time, ecological aspects were becoming a regular topic in the Christian theological literature (Beyer, 2000, pp. 206-207).

Parsons (1966) stated that, in the public sphere, religion operates with general accepted values that all individuals agree with, as human rights or value nature as sacred and we can consider these as global values too. The private sphere instead, operates with specific values, which are restricted to the community members' acceptance. Moreover, what we mean by 'religious privatization' in the global context is the marketization of religious private sphere: several religious movements tend to bend modern values of rationalization and success. The phenomenon is similar with what is happening in other private spheres: families discuss about rational aspects in bringing up children and *family planning* is a largely used concept, couples are pressed to balance household duties with job requirements, and to rationalize the family budget, developing long time thinking. Bauman (2004) argue for the same topic of privatization in private spheres, using the term *semi-detached couples* which are required to remain *flexible* and to decrease the level of involvement. In the globalize era the romantic relations motto is: *keep all doors open all times.*

The research about cultural globalization, conducted by Ray and Anderson (2000), have identified an emergent group, called *cultural creative*, depicted as individuals attracted by new religious movements, that regard religion as a way to actualize their self (Maslow, 1954/2007) and to achieve their spiritual and personal enhancement. The new religious movements, which have incorporated ecological, women, and child protection values 'fit' with the general value spectrum of this cultural group, complete their life style and accommodate easy with things they already believe in. Buddhism for example has not managed to spread around the world until it has become adjusted to individual's daily life and Christian movements' actions to increase welfare for different risk groups by offering free education or medical care, permitted Catholic Church to maintain an important social role at least in Latin America or Canada. As Beyer (2000, p. 80) stated, religion, as we traditionally define it, suffers disadvantages in contemporary society and when there is a pressure to continue privatize it, the solutions are to be found in his 'applications' and not necessary in increasing religious implication and practices.

As a result, we could find among the individuals with strong social and ecological values – we might call them cultural creative using Ray and Anderson (2000) concept – people who are not necessary close followers of the religious practices and norms but more those who are 'religious in their own way' and who regard religion as a way of spiritual enhancement. Cultural creatives, depicted as people who are trying to make them distinctive through the goods they are consuming, the media programs they are buying, and their life style in general, would eventually wanted to be different also by the way they define themselves in relation to religious values.

The hypothesis of the present research states that subjects who consider themselves as 'religious in their own way' and not necessarily follow the traditional religious practices and norms are also more inclined to share strong ecological and social values and they are more willing to know things about the new religious movements, others than the religion they are born with.

Methodology

A sociological survey has been conducted in May 2010 using a sample of 706 students, undergraduate, from public universities in five Romanian cities: Bucharest, Iași, Cluj, Brașov, Constanța, and Craiova. The survey has used an omnibus questionnaire and field operators. Respondents had to answer questions distributed on ten dimensions, suggested in the literature by Ray and Anderson (2000) when assessing cultural creative values: 1) general acceptance of others as different ; 2) feminist value orientation; 3) materialistic values and rational thinking; 4) consumer values and life style; 5) self-actualizing needs (using *Personal Orientation Inventory*; POI, Shostrom, 1996); 6) religious attitudes and behavior; 7) idealistic – pragmatic values; 8) critical approach towards society; 9) the importance of success in life; 10) the environment protection values.

For this particular article we present data especially about the religious dimension. Students had to answer questions about their religious values and beliefs (e.g. 'How important is to believe in God for you?'); to give details about their religious practices (e.g. 'How often do you go to church?'; 'Do you work on religious days?'), and to estimate if they would like to know more about other religious movements (as for example Hindu practices, Zen meditation, Yoga, Transcendental meditation etc.) and whether they are willing to be part of such religious groups.

The majority of students (89%) declared they are Orthodox Christian and the percent is similar to the one obtained on national level in 2002 Census. Only few respondents declared they have other religion (1.3 % protestant and 2% neo-protestant) while 1.3% answered they have 'no religion'. Since the purpose of the

present research does not include data comparison on different types of religions and facing with a small number of Non-Orthodox respondents, for further analysis we select only 626 questionnaires of the Orthodox students. Our final sample consists in 452 female students (72%) and 172 male students (28%), aged between 18 and 59 years ($M = 25$, $SD = 8.60$).

Results

When evaluating how important is to believe in God on a ten point scale ('1' – 'not at all important' and '10' – 'very important'), 84 % answered 'very important' ($M = 8.00$, $SD = 2.29$) and this proved to be a core religious value. As we have previously argued, although some religious values are subject to relativization, the ones which are associated with general human needs will still remain powerful when confronted to globalization. We found significant gender differences of how important is for students to believe in God, $t(1) = 2.90$, $p < .01$, and also significant age differences. For female students and for the group of students aged more than 25 years believing in God was more important than for male students and those aged bellow 25 years *(Table 1)*.

Table 1. *'How important is to believe in God for you?' Differences on age and gender groups*

	N	M	SD	T test
>= 25 years	256	8.33	2.00	$t = 3.33$
< 25 years	357	7.78	2.46	$p < .001$
Male	174	8.21	2.17	$t = 2.90$
Female	452	7.29	2.82	$p < .01$

There is a similar pattern for the question 'Do you have moments when you pray or do something similar?', where 92% of the respondents answered positive and again we found a significant relation between gender and religiosity ($\chi^2 = 30.182$, $df = 44$, $p < .001$). Female students tend to engage more in prayers than male students, although we could not find any age differences. While appealing to prayers is a general accepted practice by our students, 'going to church' is mostly restricted to religious key moments (as Easter or Christmas) and 43% of the respondents declared they went to church only in such celebration moments. 'Going to church' is actually a practice which reflects religion's communitarian dimension and religious group membership. Approximately 30% of the respondents declared they go to church few times per month, weekly or even often, while 21% are attending church only once a year or even less. The two groups of students: those who are often engaged in religious practices and are part of the

religious community and those who very rare interact with other religion members are comparable even though the second group is the largest *(Table 2)*. This group follows some universal religious believes as the importance to believe in God or the power of prayer together with maintaining a flexible relation with the religious community.

Table 2. *How often did you go to church lately, except for the weddings, funerals or so?*

	Frequency	Percent %
Few times per week	12	1.9
Once a week	43	6.9
Few times per month	121	19.3
On Eastern, Christmas and other celebrating days	267	42.7
Once a year or less	132	21,1
In fact, I never go to church	24	3,8

Beyond the religious practices we were especially interested in the way students perceived themselves in the relation to church and to religious dogmas. As we have predicted, a significant larger group of respondents (71%) would describe themselves as being 'religious in their own way' *(Figure 1)* offering support for our thesis about religion relativization.
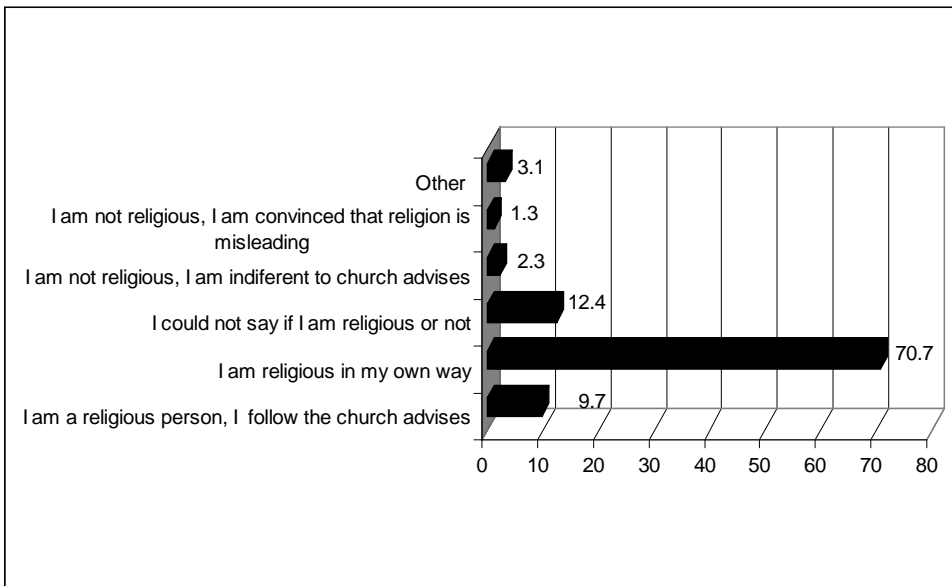

Figure 1. *Which of the following sentences describe you the best? (%)*

The second larger group is formed by students who depicted themselves as 'I could not say if I am religious or not' (12.3%), having trouble in integrated the religious values to their general values spectrum. Only 10% of the respondents thought they are 'religious and they follow the church advises', significant smaller percent when we compare with the number of those who declared they are doing 'very often' several religious practices as for example going to church, stop working on religious days or keep the fast. However what respondents mean by 'I am religious in my own way'? We did not conduct a qualitative research which might have answered such question and we can only conclude about this sentence meaning when analyzing subsequent data. The data show that respondents who declare they are 'religious in my own way' are less involved in religious practices compare to those who 'are religious and follow the church advises' but more involved in religious community important celebrations, as for example the respondents who declare they 'could not say if they are religious or not' *(Table 3)*. The 'religious in their own way' group have an intermediary position between those who feel they are religious and they and those who are rejecting religious dogmas or are not sure about their religiosity.

Table 3. *Mead and standard deviation for* Do you stop works on the religious days?* *in relation to individuals' self-evaluated religiosity*

Which of the following sentences describe you the best?	N	M	SD
I am a religious person, I follow the church advises	59	3.03	.80
I am religious in my own way	432	2.66	.86
I could not say if I am religious or not	76	2.49	.82
I am not religious, I am indifferent to church advises	14	1.79	.80
I am not religious, I am convinced that religion is misleading	8	1.75	.88

mean was calculated using a 5 point Likert scale: '1' – 'I never stop myself working on the religious days'', '2' – 'sometimes', '3' – 'most of the times', '4' – 'I stop working when there is a religious day'.

We can use self-perception model (Bem, 1970) to explain why respondents could have think about themselves as being 'religious in their own way': observing their relative involvement in church compare to the religious group and also the fact they have not abandoned some core values and important religious celebrations compare to the non-religious ones. This group of respondents might not be sure about their religiosity but they still follow some of the community religious practices. The percent of those 'religious in their own way' who are interested in new religious movements (presented in Figure 2) is larger compare to those who

describe themselves as traditional religious. In the same time, the less religious someone feels in the relation to traditional church, the more willing he/she is to know more or to take part in new religious experiences (Table 4).
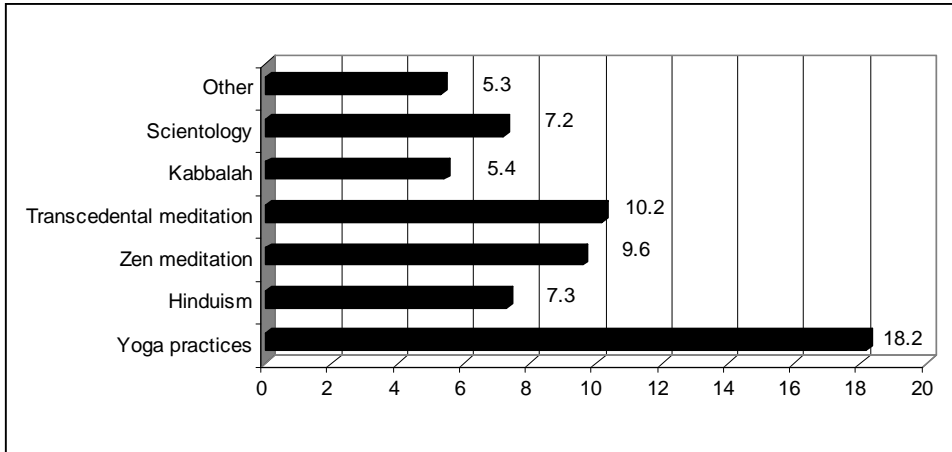

*Figure 2. Are you interested in […]? Percent of those saying 'YES' from the total (*N= 626).

These data support our hypothesis that individuals are looking for a pluralism of religious options, those who are 'best fitting' with their personal need and values. The respondents who declared 'I am not religious, I am convinced that religion is misleading' are significant more interested in new religious movements compare to people who feel close to the traditional church.

In order to test our hypothesis, that subjects who feel 'they are religious in their own way' embrace also more ecological and social values, we use two Indices constructed based on the ecological and feminist dimensions from the omnibus questionnaire. Respondents answers about their attachment with environment protection issues (e.g. 'I value nature as sacred' or 'Environment protection is less important than to create new jobs' - R) were scored creating EC1 Index and we proceed in a similar way with the respondents' answers to feminist value orientation questions ('It is more women duty to take care of children' (R), 'Women can be political leaders as good as men') creating EC2 Index.

When we compare the level of those indices on the five self-defined religiosity levels, we found support for the hypothesis that a significant relation exists between the respondents flexibility to traditional church norms and their tendencies to support ecological, $\chi^2 = 62.947$, $df = 44$, $p = < .05$) and feminist values ($\chi^2 = 65.\ 931$, $df = 44$, $p = < .01$). The respondents who declared 'they are religious in their own way' and those who 'could not say if they are religious or not' being more feministic oriented and also more environmental friendly, compare to those from the traditional religious group.

Table 4. *Are you interested in […] Affirmative answer in relation to self-evaluated religiosity*

	Yoga practices	Hinduism	Zen meditation	Transcedental meditation	Kabbalah	Scientology	Other
I am a religious person, I follow the church advises	6.7	-	3.3	1.7	1.7	-	-
I am religious in my own way	18.7	7.7	8.9	9.1	4.6	6.6	6.4
I could not say if I am religious or not	20.8	11.7	14.3	20.8	9.1	14.3	5.2
I am not religious, I am indifferent to church advises	14.3	14.3	14.3	7.1	7.1	15.4	-
I am not religious, I am convinced that religion is misleading	25.0	-	25.0	25.0	25.0	12. 5	-

Discussions

The current study shows that, among the Romanian Orthodox students, there is an emergent group: the 'religious in my own way', significant larger (71%) than the group of the respondents who thought they are 'religious and they follow the church advises'. Such findings could be interpreted regarding the current debates in the literature about the role of religion in nowadays global society. Consonant with the relativization approach, the 'religious in my own way group' has a lower church attendance, mostly restricted to religious key moments, but they preserve some core religious values, associated with general human needs, as the believe in God and the use of prayer: Almost 90% of the respondents declared that believing in God is 'very important' and they are sometimes praying or do something similar. The findings indicated that we can distinguish two groups of students: those engaged in religious practices and who are feeling part of the religious community, and those who rarely interact with the other religious members, being more 'religious in their own way'. The last group shares with the former some basic religious principles but are more looking to new ways of self-actualization through religion.

The study main hypothesis, regarding the relation between the type of religiosity and the tendency to embrace ecologic and social values, found support within the data: The students who declared 'they are religious in their own way' and those who 'could not say if they are religious or not' were also more feministic oriented and more environment friendly, compare to those from the traditional religious group. Thus, we provided support for the theoretical model that argues about pressure to privatize also the individual's religious live: People are 'choosing' from a pluralism of religion options, the ones 'best fitting' to their own integrated values. Furthermore, religions could benefit for integrating social and ecological values in their discourse, as long as those two aspects are already part of the contemporary self and consonant with personal needs and values of a large segment of younger members of the community.

The subsequent findings about respondent' interests in new religious movements depicted a similar story: The respondents who declared 'I am not religious, I am convinced that religion is misleading' are significant more interested in new religious movements compare to people who feel close to the traditional church. In this regard, the 'religious in my own way' group occupy an intermediary position, being more interested in new religious cults than those 'religious/ follow the church advises' but less, compare to the group of the respondents who 'could not say if they are religious or not'. The fact that 'religious in my own way' individuals are not feeling uncertain about their religiosity could be interpreted using self-perception approach: Observing their relative involvement in church and also the fact they have not abandoned some core values and important religious celebrations gives them the certitude of a religious live. Additionally, they distinguish themselves from 'religious/ follow the church advises' group by the way they have integrated some of the core modern values, such as ecological ones, aside to their preexistent religious values.

Conclusions

In the beginning of the article, we claimed the fact that in a global society core religious values, associated with general human issues, are strong and difficult to interfere with. They will still be part of individuals' religiosity. Indeed, in our sample 84% of the students considered 'important' and 'very important' to believe in God and approximately 92% are praying or do something similar in their daily live. The importance of God and the power of prayer could be seen as general accepted religious values, quite stable in relation to the global emergent values. The results show also that a large majority of students (71%) are defined themselves as 'religious in their own way' embracing a relativist approach in relation to religion: they are less involved in traditional practices, more on important celebration days as Christmas and Easter, and they share some universal religious

values in the harmony with social and ecological values. Our main hypothesis about the relation between the flexibility towards traditional religious values and the tendency to support environment protection values and social values in general was supported: students who declared they are 'religious in my own way' tended to agree more with ecological and feminist issues that those 'religious/ follow the church advises'. This particular group of 'religious in my own way' people are more interested in new religious movements than the traditional religious group and have an ambiguous position between the group of those indifferent towards religion and those who feel 'religious' in the traditional way.

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