

What to Make of Life When You Are an Urbanite

Religion or Secularisation: the Meaning of Life as a Modern Predicament¹

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The American Anthropological Association (AAA) allows for local, sub-disciplinary and thematic smaller organisations to become a member of the AAA family. Over a decade ago a group of urban anthropologists decided to join as a society. They called themselves SUNTA: Society for Urban National and Transnational/Global Anthropology. The links that are made explicit in this choice of name are of great importance: the urbanisation of the world is an irreversible fact (with over 60 per cent of the world's population already living in urban contexts in 2005, Castells 2002). In that sense, the trend is a universal one, going hand in hand with a rapidly deploying globalisation of services, communication and trade. At the same time nationalism is far from dying out, and transnational relationships and ditto travel and trade are becoming part of the daily life of millions of people. The growth of urban contexts and of urban living conditions is not an isolated process. It happens in a globalising world, with a rise in demography and a sharp growth in the battle for natural resources (e.g., water, oil, gas, uranium, etc.). In that historical context the new information technologies (mobile phone, PC), the communication explosion (the internet and the search programs) and tourism and trade are having a very rapid expansion and a gradually deeper impact on the lifestyle, on the knowledge and on the religious and cultural taste and value systems. At the least, that is what we all experience in our private life, when looking at the younger generation and comparing their use of the media and the IT facilities with that of only two decades ago. The 1990s will certainly be remembered as the decade of the breakthrough of the mobile phone and the PC in a large segment of the world's population. The so-called 'peace dividend' of that time allowed for an unforeseen and sudden expansion of this technology. We are now trying to assess the impact on the traditional domains of anthropological inquiry: kinship ties, beliefs, values, tastes, material products and religion. Stating that the name of SUNTA combines different foci and that this was a wise choice is, of course, a mere confession of fate lest we can actually show evidence of the linkage of the changes on the urban, the national, the transnational and global level. While the globalisation

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processes involve a great percentage of humanity, and in some cases (like natural resources or the market economy) the whole of the world's population, it is important to keep in mind that it does not intrinsically entail equal opportunities or equal health and wealth for all. We need to reflect on the uneven interconnectedness of people as well. As Friedman (1997: 70) puts it: 'We are told that the world is one place, but for whom, one might ask!' Bitterly enough globalisation, which by the very name for the trend seems to imply the inclusion of everybody, in actual fact produces new exclusions and continues some of the old inequalities (see Allen and Hammet 1995).

With this contribution we offer at the very least some insights in this area. We are aware that a small (and sometimes a more substantial) literature exists in each of the sub-disciplines involved. Although we obviously appreciate this work, we will hardly refer in a systematic way to the literature. Indeed, we do not want to assess the field nor bring a state of the art contribution. Rather, we feel free to develop a rather philosophical angle to the whole field and try to come up with sharp and relevant questions where we can. Some aspects of the problematic we sketch were dealt with in some previous work, and some in other contemporary research by others or by us (e.g., Castells 2002; Pinxten, Verstraete and Longman 2004).

As anthropologists we all have a sort of idiosyncratic attitude, at least when compared to researchers in religious studies, whom we address here as well. That is to say, anthropologists tend to be especially knowledgeable in one particular field, and hence to sometimes approach questions under an almost casuistic angle. As authors guilty of this vice we have come to appreciate the tremendous importance of the deep analysis of a case and will not in any way try to deny the strength of fiercely detailed empirical studies. However, we also have come to learn that comparison is of the essence if we want to avoid casuistics and allow for a scientific model or theory (Geertz 1983). On top of that we personally side with the emphasis on the importance of the conscious and scrupulous contextualisation of anthropological knowledge (Nader 1993; Pinxten 1997). So, the general tendency of this contribution will be one of broad comparative analysis with an acute awareness of the contextual constraints of cultural and religious phenomena (including these thoughts themselves) in the present world, instead of arguing in minute detail on the basis of available ethnographic data.

Making Sense in the City

This ESF workshop *Making Sense in the City* continues a line of research. For the past ten years the research group Centre for Intercultural Communication and Interaction (CICI) at Ghent University has been exploring a model on identity dynamics. The general metaphor we hold when thinking about cultural identities is a visual one: the chiasm—best known as the butterfly attractor—represents in a graphic way how identities are formed and reshaped in a continuous way, showing temporary structure and ongoing shifts and restructurings at the same time (Pinxten et al., 2004). Members of the research group have been elaborating aspects of the model in processes of gender identity (Longman 2004), of religious identity (Orye 2004), of cultural and intercultural identity (Pinxten & De Munter, 2006; Dikomitis 2005; van Dienderen 2004, forthcoming). Two times in a row we organised conferences on extremist exclusivist identity as is the case in racism (Evens eds. 2002; Pinxten and Preckler 2006). The latter symposium posed the question of new forms of exclusion through racism in large cities in the world. That was the first time we explicitly linked our model with the urban issue (the symposium took place in 2002). In becoming more acutely conscious of the importance of the urban context for humanity now and in the future, we decided to explore the link between the urban condition of life and culture more systematically in the following years (see Pinxten and De Munter 2006).

The basic philosophical question of this focus (and of the symposium) needs some explanation. When we try to combine the knowledge of religious studies with that of anthropology a most intriguing problem materialises. In the perspective of our identity dynamics model the learning processes in religions can be characterized as identity forming paths, where religion is a vehicle for identity construction (see Pinxten and Verstraete 2004). That is to say, either in the education of mythological meanings or in ritualistic practices every new generation is socialised in a tradition or in an identity group by means of religious markers: one is raised from childhood to adulthood in age groups undergoing a series of rituals together, one is initiated in the holy lore of the tradition through becoming knowledgeable in the sacred stories, and so on. Religious beliefs and/or practices can be analysed as vehicles for identity dynamics. This need not imply that they are the only ones, nor that this is their sole use or function. It only states that it gives us an insight (which has comparative potential) of how religious traditional practices and/or beliefs work in the socialisation process. Continuing a local identity may safely be regarded a role of religion (Pinxten 2000). From that axiom we then move on to the bold generalisation that in the

relatively recent non-colonial analyses in religious studies, which we know of, it appears that religions do constitute identity for a group primarily by using one or two types of basic referents: the small group (village, lineage group, clan, age groups and what have you) or the genealogy.

In several myths of origin (e.g., Long 1972) a genealogy of the people is described: this allows for the contemporary clans or for the kinship groups to situate themselves vis-à-vis one another within the great stream of the people. In some instances (most notably in the Old Testament) it explains for everybody of the present generation how and why they are related with each other through belonging to one people. Where the blood tie and the descent from the first days till the present time are crucial for the religious identity of Judaism and hence of the Jewish people, some other traditions adopt a mixed genealogical model. Navajo Indians of the USA, for example, give a primary identifier role to clan membership, but the genealogical reasoning is more open than in the tradition where blood ties are dominant and exclusive markers: new clans emerge every so often in the history of the people through intercultural marriages, expanding the range of the people occasionally (Witherspoon 1977).

A second referent, which allows possibly for even more variation and fuzzy boundaries is that of the small group. This could either be the household, the family (especially the extended family), the neighbourhood or the village. The very model of democracy was founded in what would today be regarded as a village context: the ancient Greek 'polis' was usually a community of twenty or thirty thousand free citizens. Athens at its highest moment of glory counted not more than one hundred thousand citizens (Dutoit 1989). In terms of our present day world, these are villages or at best little towns. Sociologically speaking these concentrations of people are controllable: in principle, all contacts within such a context can at some point in life or other become face-to-face contacts. Put differently, within the constraints of this kind of magnitude (i.e. the village) all people can be known and treated as persons one has encountered 'in the flesh' or heard about as neighbours or relatives. In technical terms the 'polis' has mainly group characteristics: interactions between people have primarily the character of face-to-face contacts (Pinxten and Verstraete 2004). In contemporary cities, and most certainly in the vast and mixed complexes of the multi-million metropolitan areas like Mexico City, Tokyo or even Brussels, this character does not obtain. They harbour communities where face-to-face contact is a minority phenomenon (happening in small groups within the complex), but is unattainable at the level of extension of the city as such. One cannot communicate in a direct way with a million people, even not in a lifespan. One can only invest in virtual interactions when one

wants to reach the community inhabiting a large city: through advertisements, media, papers and books, and the like.

The general thesis in thinking about sense making in the city (meaning especially the contemporary type of large concentrations of people) then becomes: to the extent that religions and other types of *Weltanschauungen* stick to the old referents of descent lineages and (small) groups, they cannot offer an adequate answer on the meaning of life at the level of the larger cities. Or, alternatively, it is relevant to look into the ways the modern urban context impacts on the communication and interaction formats and even on the themes of different traditions of 'making sense', even more so when the urban context is worldwide becoming the main and dominant one.

Our general proposal is to try and 'unpack' what the term 'making sense' or 'meaning of life' could mean in a thoroughly and irreversibly urban context. Do the rules of conduct of the kinship group hold, or is individualism an inevitable and 'natural' attitude of the city dweller? Is networking in the present era and in the urbanised context yielding a world filled with individualists, and does that mean egoists? Or will it enhance despair and a steep rise in suicides or low thresholds for euthanasia? On the other hand, the rise of different sorts of community identities might be appreciated as a quite different response to the same trends of globalisation and individualisation. Before we go into the task of delineating at least some possible candidates of good questions, we want to offer a bit of reflexive anthropology: where do we come from in our theory formation in the social sciences and the humanities, and can we become conscious of the biases and prejudices which are ours?

Augustine on the Human Predicament

Whatever else, Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430) is, unlike some of the later theologians, respected by a wide variety of Christian denominations, both catholic and protestant. His view is illustrative of the way westerners have been dealing with sense making. Admittedly, modernity has introduced important shifts in the western outlook, but we claim that some of the parameters of the primary attitude have remained.

In *The City of God* Augustine presented a very powerful view on the meaning of life, according to the Christian heritage. He analyses the downfall of the Roman Empire and points to the causes of the decline. Not the barbarians are the main protagonists: they only finish a process of decay with intrinsic dynamics. According to Augustine, the fact that the Romans had it all wrong is the main cause: they worshipped the wrong gods, and lived with

the wrong moral rules. In modern terms, their way of giving meaning to life or making sense of the human predicament was wrongheaded. In Augustine's interpretation, they did not follow God's will. In a remarkable proposal Augustine tries to 'prove' in *The City of God* why the Romans and the heathens in general ran themselves into the ground by disregarding God's plan, and how the Christians can come to know the latter. Creation, the death and resurrection of Christ and the meaning of life for every single Christian are explained in one integral 'theory' about the principles and workings of the 'city of heaven'. Human beings will be saved and safe to the extent that they live as much as possible according to these principles and workings in their miserable and mortal life on earth. Otherwise, their life according to the rules of the common 'city of earth' (i.e., that of the Romans and other heathens) will yield eternal misery, making it all pointless or devoid of meaning. The important point is not so much the concrete proposal of what people have to do in order to gain eternal bliss, but rather the frame of mind where an integral and integrated sense or meaning for life is thought out and expressed. Moreover, Augustine presents this frame on the basis of an argumentation that shows where and why other proposals (in this case those of the heathens) had to fail and how God's plan takes care of it all by bestowing a keen and thorough deeper sense on human life. Moreover, this major shift in thinking about the meaning of life is versed in a metaphor about two cities: the city of evil, despair and futile senseless life in the 'city of the earth' and the 'city of heaven' as an ideal of rules of conduct and beliefs. According to our interpretation, the deep message here is that life and everything human beings encounter in their world of experience holds a place in one grand encompassing ideology which gives meaning to it all or makes it into a sensible predicament.

We can point to other Church fathers (Paul, for certain) or theologians as well, but the point is made and that should suffice. What we emphasize with this short digression on Augustine is that the Christian heritage with its emphasis on meaning and sense making, understood as an encompassing or integral (cognitive) interpretation of the lived reality, has been so pervasive in the history of the West that it gained the status of reality or obviousness in the mind of the lay person and the researcher alike. Moreover, this interpretation has a normative aspect as well: it yields certain unmistakable rules of conduct and the attached values. In other words, according to this tradition life has to have a meaning and sense making is an important activity of humankind. Over the centuries the latter emphasis has become deeply engrained in Western culture. We adopt the view that 'there has to be a sense' in it all and that human beings are only fully human when the dimension of 'making sense' or 'meaning of life' is present in their culture. Maybe it even serves as a normative fundament

for the people or the culture one belongs to. In the very notions of ‘primitive culture’ versus ‘civilization’ of the nineteenth century and that of ‘development’ in the later era, this emphasis became crucial: if anything, the ‘primitive’ lacks the meaning of life or at the very least holds faulty views here, pretty much in the way Augustine analysed the ‘mistaken’ position of Romans and heathens in his time. Development, in order to catch on, implies the adoption of the normative program of meaning of life. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* holds the same message, thus professing that ‘sense making’ or the meaning question has to be a universal human concern. At the same time, and not surprisingly, anthropologists have detailed the lack of this dimension in numerous traditions. For example, when asked about the lack of myths and of meaning in their elaborate ritual life the Nepalese Jains told anthropologist Humphreys that they did not care about that at all. They even advised her, in case she would be in need of myth or meaning, to borrow some from other traditions: the Jains had no need for them (Humphreys 1996). Similarly, large development programs of the past decades shipped a normative program on sense making along with the material project and the discussion on the failures often turned on this issue again. This led some critics of the development attitude very recently to break away from the attitude and plead for the right to be different (Verhelst 2003).

Augustine used the image of the city in his time. Obviously, that image will be hard to compare with contemporary urban realities. As mentioned before, the city in those days counted limited numbers of people (thousands, tens of thousand, but never even a million, Dutoit 1989). Probably the image of the city had to stand in his mind for that of a certain type of order: the wrong order (although not really chaos) of the city of the earth versus the divine order of the city of God. It is clear from the reading of Augustine’s book that the author imagines to be able to have an overview of the ‘city’, which in itself guarantees this notion of order. Given the fact that the author spoke and wrote at the time of the downfall of the western Roman Empire (i.e., the fifth century CE), the proposal can be appreciated indeed as an attempt to plead for a concrete and manageable type of order for a relatively small amount of people in a context which can be overseen and managed with the proper means. It is clear that in the present era, with over 6 billion people we know of (compared to a few millions Augustine might have been aware of) and the concentration of more than half of them in poorly structured and fast growing urban contexts which can not be genuinely managed by any central ruler or council most of the time, and with impact on large areas and ultimately on the life conditions of the whole of humanity, the projection of an ideal order for the world in the image of a well ordered city is unlikely. The very notion of the right meaning of life in

Augustine's understanding of the order emanating from God could be advanced in a context of promise for a strong monocultural Christian world in the making as pitched against the multitudes of semi-orders of the barbarians all around. However, in the present world at the very least eight strong religious orders are recognized as competing forces to rule large areas of the world by rightist thinkers such as Huntington (1996), whereas less opinionated social scientists would rather speak about several thousand cultural traditions, which continuously loan and adopt traits and practices between each other in an endless chain of lesser or greater transformations (Hannerz 2003). The very idea of the one good and holy format for all is less likely now than at the time of Augustine, since our knowledge of the diversity in the world is so much greater.

In terms of the focus of this chapter we question whether, to what extent and in what way the universalised urban living conditions of humanity will change the relevance or lack of the sense making or meaning producing processes, which were so dominant in the Western tradition. Will Westerners dilute or even loose their urgency vis-à-vis the meaning of life questions, or will the rest of the world adopt this basically religious emphasis in the course of the process of urbanisation? One way this question can be investigated is through the research on the internal changes of religious groups when deploying their institute in an urban context.

The Old and the New Worlds

The situation in Europe may be different from that in other parts of the world: in 1800 a rough 3 per cent of the world population lived in urban contexts, mainly in the so-called 'old world' (from the point of view of Europe, that is, definitely not that of China). By 2000 this percentage has risen to half the population, and the so-called Third World cities know the fastest growing urban complexes. In terms of religious expansion through and in cities, the Europe is cited in recent studies as the sole region in the world where secularism is holding out (Martin 2005). Everywhere else in the world, according to Martin, religion is on the way up. So, only Europe constitutes a 'problem' from the point of view of churches. We are not convinced that this is a 'problem', but will not go into this here. We are not convinced either that the concepts used (secularism and religion) apply without misunderstandings or potentially dangerous abuses throughout the world. We go a bit into this question here, because it might be leading us to a crucial question about 'making sense in the urbanised world'.

We take as a given that presently three generations are living in a shared context around the world. On that basis we can speculate on the different experiences and perspectives in each of them on the issue at hand. The learning processes of each of the generations have shifted rapidly and possibly irreversibly: the present grandparents were raised in religious schooling and followed all the regular procedures in their youth and later life (baptism, puberty ritual/holy communion, marriage in a church, etc.), but their children who are now parents themselves had to engage in a hectic survival struggle as double wage-earners. For them, the traditional institutions were gradually less frequented, except for the grand occasions (like marriages and funerals, for example). Family ties and traditions became less important for this generation, where individualism set in together with a generalised consumerism. The youth of today breaks away drastically from former patterns: they develop their personal network of relationships and peer groups, partly through school and leisure circles and increasingly through virtual contacts and networks (Castells 1996; Bateson 2000). For the first time, from the 1990s on the world of experience expands tremendously by means of the availability of mobile phones and PC for a large segment of the present generation of youngsters. Over these three generations, urbanisation has been increasing tremendously all over the world, triggering a deep change in experiential opportunities and at the same time heightening a contradictory way of living in cities. The opposition in life experiences and expectations in rural and in urban areas is rapidly dissolving, since on the one hand the physical and the informational boundaries between both are blurring (Smart and Smart 2003), and on the other hand the information technologies in the past two decades have made it possible for people to share life experiences, regardless their lack of kinship ties or their differences in religious background. Paraphrasing Appadurai (1996) one can say that the ‘imagination combines with new media technology to allow us to affiliate in ways that bring us closer to someone around the globe than to our next-door neighbour.’ (Smart and Smart 2003: 267).

In an attempt to assess what such globalisation processes yield in terms of cultural (and religious) shifts and trends Hannerz (2003) offers a very useful model of three scenarios. He presents an insightful summary of the three types of ‘theories’ which are around to explain the impact on cultural processes and formats of economic globalisation. One scenario projects that the world is ‘Westernizing’ uniformly (e.g., Wallerstein, Klein and others in Hannerz 2003). A second one, which is extremely powerful in the political arena today, professes that a small amount of ‘civilizations’ (re)emerges in the present era and is due to yield clashes between them in the future (Huntington 1996 is the most successful defendant

of this perspective so far). Hannerz claims that anthropologists do not find empirical data to support either of these scenarios. At the micro-level what appears to be happening rather looks like continuous streams of small transformations, adaptations and reshufflings of cultural structures and processes. Hence, anthropologists doubt that the geopolitical trends which are proposed by the ideologists and the colleagues of international politics yield uniform patterns of living experiences and sense making processes in the local communities. Rather, what we observe at the micro-level are continuous small shifts and changes, often captured by such notions as 'creolisation' or 'hybridisation'. The terms are tainted by a colonial and post-colonial history. Hannerz speaks about the 'transformationalist' view. A better term is needed than any of these three, but we lack a good candidate so far. The important point is that the third view looks at the many ongoing little adaptations, lending and importing, exchanging and transforming processes going on all over the world in a myriad of ways, and yielding numerous new forms of 'change-in-continuity'. There is no general 'takeover' by one or even by six cultures of all the others, at least not when looked at from a grassroots perspective.

Moreover, such processes can be witnessed around the world. That is to say, granting that Fordism has reached its limit as an economic system in western or other contexts (with increased specialisation of production, Keynesian fiscal policies, union-capitalists treaties for the benefit of all, etc.) and globalisation is moving up worldwide (with corporate power, delocalisation, and so on), the cultural processes and structures do not simply obey these economic trends. Rather, culturally speaking one witnesses most of all two concurrent trends: worldwide one sees an increase in complexity of societal and cultural processes and an increase in diversity of tastes and patterns. The latter two trends manifest themselves in a variety of ways and a plurality of smaller or more encompassing processes, indicated in the following paragraphs.

Through urbanisation one sees at the same time an 'increased connectivity' (Smart and Smart 2003) as expressed in the worldwide web and a continuation or even a growth in local identity. The latter is visible in ever more festivities, but also vigilance activities in neighbourhoods, 'wars' between regions or cities, and the like. In a rather awkward expression of urban Danes: 'we tolerate foreigners and we become more racist at the same time' (Hervik 2006). That is to say, there seems to be a heightened ethnocentrism with the defence on one's privileges on the one hand, and a greater adoption of universal tastes and opinions by means of the web and other communication devices in the same lived experience.

Especially cities (smaller ones and of course metropolitan areas) face a sudden and encompassing growth in diversity of cultures, languages and religions. One of the features pointed at by researchers in this regard is that of transnationalism (Glick Schiller et al. 1992). That is to say, more citizens detach themselves from the local ties and customs they run into when settling in a city as a foreigner. Rather, they obey the local rules and do business with the establishment, but at the same time they strengthen the ties with their region or country of origin, for which they now became successful migrants. Even small cities illustrate this trend in an incontestable way. For example, a city like Ghent (Belgium) with some 300,000 inhabitants is now confronted with refugees from over 150 non-European countries, while Brussels or Amsterdam easily go beyond migration groups from next to 300 different countries (Kom-Pas 2005).

A slightly different perspective points to the growth of so-called 'double loyalties' in migrant leaders and communities: Smith (2004) studied in depth the remarkable engagements in political mandates of migrants and former residents from Chicano descent. Typically, several of them took up offices in their former country (e.g., Mexico, the Caribbean islands) while staying loyal to the USA. Similar developments can be witnessed with Maghrebin and Turkish migrants in Europe (IMECE n.d.). A concurrent trend could be identified in double nationality, we think. In both of these phenomena the link between citizenship and nationality is cut, and engagements and loyalties can hence be detached from the belonging to one nation only.

Another important line of research comes is offered by political scientists, social geographers and urban sociologists. The leading thinker, we claim, is Manuel Castells who was able to sketch a theoretical frame combining the analysis of the impact of ICT, urbanization and worldwide political trends after the Cold War. In his *magnum opus* Castells (1996) presents this frame of reference: the rapid deployment of ICT in the world (starting in the 1980s) triggered a new division of wealth: those regions which have excellent higher education, a climate of freedom and new high tech facilities take the lead worldwide and yield rapid and distinctive new wealth for the population. Most commonly these regions are dense urban areas, since the richer urbanized parts of the world prove to fulfil all the conditions of excellent higher education, high degree of creativity and room for innovation. With the globalization of the capital markets and of some types of trade and industry the power of the nation state is quickly eroded. The combination of all these trends have us land presently in a world where traditional labour conditions and the concomitant national government power dwindle, insecurity on the labour market rises and with these all sorts of

identity movement flourish. In the latter category we also find all sorts of religious identity movements. When their profile and action procedures fit nicely in the urban conditions we predict that their success (temporary or not) will be greater. The Evangelical and the Pentacostal churches are the better known examples from recent studies on these issues (see Smart and Smart 2003). We claim that not all is understood on these matters, but that it is at the very least likely that the generalised urban context for human populations seems to 'select out' certain types of religious presences. Taking Castells's theory as a point of departure for further research promises to be very fruitful to contextualise processes and structures of 'making sense in the city' (Castells 2002). Obviously we do not make a value choice here, saying that developments such as urbanisation or globalisation are good or bad in a moral or a political sense. We cannot possibly make such judgments. All we can do as researchers is to detect and describe trends and processes, unpack the concepts used to catch them and assess the scientific liability of the descriptions, models and theories we find. Since we are subject to the trends and changes we study at the same time, this is a delicate position we will have to assume as scientists.

New Themes and Engagements

The impact of a series of parameters, which will need to be analysed and thought through more thoroughly to be sure, can be assessed more fruitfully with the younger generation. In a rather generalised way the old churches, but also the traditional non-religious sense making organisations (the humanist federations, the Masonic lodges, and so on) are said to be losing appeal for the younger generation (e.g., Verté et al. 2006). On the other hand Buddhism is a booming phenomenon in the West and in the East, and a variety of New Age, neo-pagan, fundamentalist or exotic sense making groups and activities are offered on an ever more varied market: sweat lodges from North American Indian denomination are a success in Europe, and Wiccans and Satanists are attractive throughout the West. On the other hand, the tremendous rise of television preachers and congregations in the Americas as well the birth of city shamanism in very diverse places on the globe are only countered by a spread of spirituality in many places and the reappearance of traditional churches (catholic, protestant, orthodox) in international politics. Finally, all sorts of eclectic products are offered: catholic Buddhists, Anglican Buddhists (Smart 1996), vision seekers inside and outside of established churches, peyote cults, Santeria initiates, Capoeira Christian scouts, and so on.

One way of appreciating this variety of religious and life stance forms is by describing and eventually assessing them by means of the standards from our past. That is to say, by looking at and thinking about them in the religionistic terms outlined at the start of this contribution: do they qualify as ‘meaning of life’ perspectives such as we came to understand these in the religious traditions which were developed in the small communities of the past? The answer will undoubtedly be that most often they do not. Indeed, people in the urbanised world of today increasingly build their own networks in which a variety of sense making perspectives can hold their places within one lifetime. More often than before, people pick and choose what they like and seem little bothered by a fixed neighbourhood (like the village or the family group) or a binding tradition in doing so. The city context offers the opportunities and allows for sufficient anonymity to carry this through. Some examples illustrate what we mean by this: North American Indians one of us works with were members of a medicine tradition and became peyotists in the span of two generations: they picked up the peyote cult during weekend trips in the cities of Oklahoma, from where it spread over all Indian reservations in half a century. In Europe, so-called perennially catholic countries such as France and Belgium (especially Flanders) witness a boom of eastern denominations (Buddhist and other traditions), yielding a fourth place as a ‘religion’ for Buddhism in France at this point in time, only three decades after its appearance on the scene in the West. Again, the proliferation happens through urban networks. Further examples can be found in abundance in ‘non-western’ places: the shaman tradition of Central Asia surfaced again after seventy years of Soviet domination and persecution, taking the form of city shamanism now (Denaeghel 1998); China witnessed a rather sudden growth of the so-called Falung Gong sect in the metropolises and reacted with a fierce persecution (the Tien an Men tragedy). Examples could be multiplied.

Research questions which emanate from this contribution are of the following sort:

-a- One point we want to make is that it is clear that urbanization is an irreducible trend for the world population, and hence for all culturally signified and distinguished groups and communities. This is a completely new human predicament: for the first time in the history of humankind the (larger) urban context will be the predominant context for a growing majority of the human population, and hence for formal and informal education of this and the next generations. In order to survive and flourish in this new predicament, human creativity will be an essential asset. However, forces of inertia may be presupposed to be at work. We know, as anthropologists, that linguistic structures are relatively stubborn and conservative. May we presuppose that the same is true of sense giving and making processes and their products? If

we can speak of tradition in the old sense of the term (the immovable, stable ‘core of a culture’) it might be in these domains of the cultural field. Do the formats of belonging and of learning about particular traditions yield forces of inertia, which pull to continuation and conservatism, or rather become the tools for innovation and creative adaptation? Or, in a more scientific perspective: under what conditions do they act this or the other way?

-b- How can we begin to unwrap the impact of generalized urbanisation in the particular way it is taking place: in an economic globalisation context, with growing availability of the new information technologies, and fast development of partially structured metropolises in the poorer parts of the world? What processes of learning and adaptation, of individualisation and of belonging take shape there, and what will be their impact on the structures and contents of life stances and religions of the younger generation who is rapidly picking up the opportunities offered by context and means and develops individualised networks rather or ‘shops around for values’ in a variety of traditions on the market? Does this entail that the older and established churches are hence bound to withdraw in a hopelessly conservative or even reactionary doctrine and practice, which Taylor (2006) seems to imply when looking at the ruling of the new catholic pope? Or, put differently, how can such institutes adapt to this new predicament? Not only in terms of doctrine (which may be the easier part), but also in terms of interpersonal relationships and learning styles.

-c- If we thought about meaning producing and transferring traditions such as life stance systems or religions in terms of continuity and stability (and dearly fought changes) in the past, then we clearly presupposed by doing so that uniformity, training new generations to become (almost) the same as past generations was the general pattern in the processes of making sense. That is to say, a group or community was supposed to transfer a doctrine, a meaning system or a way of life in a thoroughly uniform way to newcomers or a new generation. To the extent that we stick to this emphasis on uniformity and ‘equalisation’ of all when speaking about processes of making sense we may well be forced to drop the notion of sense making altogether. Indeed, with growing globalisation and urbanisation it is not clear at all that uniformity in doctrine or in practices will still be found in a generation from now. Then what concept should we use, or how can we think the possibly loosely structured sources of sense or meaning which people will find, use or constitute in this unforeseen new predicament?

-d- The final and most encompassing question may be the one that smacks of a late battle with orientalism and colonialism: was the way we thought of sense making and meaning production altogether a ‘western’ (maybe a Christian) way of dealing with socialisation or

enculturation? And do we have to get rid of this *in globo* and focus on particularism and difference, rather than on uniformity and universality?

The theoretical work of concept analysis and problem identification still has to be begun, but at the least we are looking into the issue in a detailed way now.

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