

## **Innovation Funding Project Report and Student Stipend Report**

**Peter Beyer**

**Project Title: *A Web-based Survey Instrument on Religious Identity***

### **1. Project Goals**

The purpose of the project was to create a single research instrument that allows the understanding of religious identity differences, both group and individual. It consisted in the putting together of a web-based survey instrument useable by different researchers, working with different groups and identities. The survey questionnaire consists of a basic and uniform set of questions that nonetheless allows the inclusion of a range of variable and specific questions tailored to each religious group and co-determined by the researchers using the survey instrument. Development of the survey included pre-testing it on a range of subjects drawn from the researchers' contacts and representing different religious identities. The idea was that the actual use of the survey instrument will be done by different subsequent research projects.

### **2. Researchers and Students Involved**

The project was carried out primarily by Peter Beyer & Solange Lefebvre, with the collaboration of Patrice Brodeur, Kim Knott, Prema Kurien, Susan Palmer, Sam Reimer, Gary Bouma, Michael Wilkinson, Morgan Hunter, and Caitlin Downie (MA students, Ottawa).

### **3. Rationale**

The primary question of reference for Strand 1 research asks how different groups, agencies, and institutions in Canada construct and understand religious identity and religious diversity. Given the relational nature of such identities in a context of presumed religious plurality, carriers of religious identity can be expected always to understand their own identity both in terms of its own unique characteristics, and in contrast to other formally homologous religious identities. Such identity constructions can therefore be expected to vary from religious group to religious group and from individual to individual, but also show certain similarities as 'differences within identity'. Researching religious identity constructions therefore requires methods that take this into account, that allow the measurement of how different religious

identities are constructed ‘identically’ – or not. The survey instrument was designed to contribute to the possibility of such measurement.

#### **4. Methods**

Preliminary background research determined what sorts of survey instruments have been used in past research to measure religious identity. The aim was specifically to find possibilities that are not overly biased toward Christian/Abrahamic religious identities. Few if any such broadly applicable models were found. The project therefore, on the basis of the researchers’ own expertise and familiarity with a wide range of religious groups, constructed a survey of religious identity more likely to fulfill the purpose. The resulting survey instrument was given to a variety of people outside the research group for feedback and was then subsequently refined on that basis. It was then mounted on the RDP site through its Survey Monkey account. It was then tested further through Survey Monkey, with a different set of subjects, again drawn from the researcher’s contacts and networks.

#### **5. Ethics, permissions**

Consultation with the head of the Ethics office at the University of Ottawa confirmed that, since in pre-testing the instrument we were not actually gathering data from individuals, that this did not actually constitute research involving human subjects and therefore ethics clearance was not necessary. Essentially since we did not use, analyze, and report what the pre-testing people told us, but only used it to improve the questionnaire, that this all constituted activity preliminary to actually carrying out research with human subjects.

#### **6. Summary of Activities**

Preliminary background research was conducted in the summer and fall of 2011. Throughout most of the fall of 2011 and winter 2012, consultations among the researchers took place to try to come up with a basic questionnaire. These consultations proved difficult, but in spring 2012, a first working draft of the questionnaire was completed with contributions from most of the researchers, and preliminary testing was done through students of Susan Palmer in Montreal. Using their and other feedback, the questionnaire was then further developed and refined. A

useable version was mounted on the RDP website through Survey Monkey in July 2012, and then further pre-tested in August 2012.

## **7. Provisional Findings**

Preliminary background research revealed that the kind of survey instrument we sought to develop did not exist. The closest found was a survey developed by the Bertlesmann Stiftung of Germany (available on its web site), but even this turned out to be too broad and not focussed enough on the question of diverse religious identities. The research team therefore had to design the questionnaire more or less “from scratch”. It initially proved very difficult not to arrive at a questionnaire that did not implicitly favour “Abrahamic” religious identities. Subsequent efforts arrived at a better version which had a tripartite structure: depending on the answers to three key first questions concerning the respondent’s orientation to the concepts of religion and spirituality, a respondent would be directed to one of three question sets which address the broad range of possible religious identities without assuming any one of them as a “default standard” (at least this is what we think we have arrived at). These three question sets are labelled as follows: (1) “religious”, meaning that the person considers themselves to be religious (by their own understanding) or considers that they are an adherent of a particular religion, religious tradition or spiritual tradition (or more than one of these); (2) “spiritual” meaning that the person does not consider themselves to be religious, does consider themselves to be spiritual, and does not consider that they adhere to one or more particular religion, or religious or spiritual tradition; (3) “religious none” meaning that the person does not consider themselves to be spiritual or religious, nor do they adhere to one or more particular religion or spiritual or religious tradition.

## **8. Outputs**

The main output is the questionnaire itself. It requires use, refinement, validation, and further testing to see just how good it is or can become. Given the opportunity, we will also deliver a future report on the process of trying to arrive at this questionnaire.

## **9. Finances**

### **Student Information:**

#### **Research Assistantships**

The project engaged two student assistants who were primarily responsible for background research, communication among the team members, coordinating and collating results of the consultations and feedback, and helping to design the questionnaire itself. the data analysis One of the assistants was financed by the grant received from the RDP (Downie), and one was financed through Beaman’s CRC funds (Hunter).

| <b>Breakdown of Expenses</b> |         |                |                              |
|------------------------------|---------|----------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Student Funding*</b>      |         |                |                              |
|                              | Amount  | Name           | Dates                        |
| Student Assistantships       | \$4,000 | Caitlin Downie | September 2011 – August 2012 |