

How do you recognize a "congregation"? Definition and operationalization strategies of the Swiss congregation census

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Abstract

In congregation studies, scholars have to define and operationalize their unit of observation. While most mapping studies routinely give a definition of congregation, there has been no attempt to show just what techniques of operationalization are needed to apply the definition to the field, what problems may arise and how they can be solved. This article uses the example of the Swiss congregation census in order to fill this gap in the literature. We first discuss general questions of definition and operationalization and give our definition of congregation. Second, we show how the definition has been operationalized in the census, demonstrating for every element of the definition how it includes certain phenomena and excludes others. We give special attention to borderline cases and discuss with what techniques they have been treated.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a significant rise of scholarly attention for the meso-level phenomenon of the religious congregation (Chaves 2004, Ammerman 1997, Knott 2005, Pepper, Sterland, and Powell 2015, Giordan 2013, Harris 1995, Rebenstorf, Ahrens, and Wegner 2015, Monnot and Stolz 2014). In congregation studies it is necessary to define and operationalize the unit of observation by specifying what counts as a congregation and what should be excluded from observation. Of course, researchers may work without a definition and think that they "recognize a congregation when they see it". But this only means that they use an implicit, unsystematic definition that will probably create an incoherent selection of phenomena to be studied. As we will see, the task of how to delimit a coherent set of phenomena as "congregations" is far from trivial.

While mapping studies often give a definition of congregation, there has been to our knowledge no attempt to show just what techniques are needed to apply the definition to a given field, what problems may arise, and how such problems can be solved.

This article uses the example of the Swiss congregation census in order to fill this gap in the literature. The Swiss Census of congregations in 2007/8 (Stolz et al. 2011) is the first example of a census of religious congregations in a whole country and including congregations across the entire range of religious traditions.

The central question of our paper is: How can a definition of "congregation" be operationalized in order to be applicable to the field and how can borderline cases be treated? How are results influenced by these techniques?

The plan of the article is as follows. In part 2, we discuss general questions of definition and operationalization and give our definition of congregation. Part 3 shows how the definition is operationalized in the census. We give special attention to borderline cases and discuss with what techniques they are treated. Part 4 presents selected census results and concludes with recommendations for future studies.

The contribution of our article is methodological. We want to give an exemplar in order to show how a congregation census can be put into practice.

2. Definition and operationalization strategies

At the risk of stating the obvious, definitions are not empirical statements and can therefore be neither true nor false (Opp 1976, Bernard 2000, 36f.). They tell us how a given term should be used by creating an identity between the definiens (term to be defined) and the definiendum (terms defining). If the definition is operationalized, it gives us rules of how to empirically include a certain number of phenomena into the domain of observation, thereby excluding other phenomena.

Although not veryfiable, definitions can be more or less useful for the purpose of the research at hand. They are useful if they coherently and systematically include what researchers want to study.

Such a view implies three points that are not often mentioned in textbooks on social science methodology. First: The definition process is not just "theoretical" and cannot be completely separated from empirical observation. Rather, it is only on the basis of solid knowledge of the objects under study that we can draw the boundaries conveniently. Second: The quality and usefulness of a definition may vary with the historical, geographical, and sociological context. It is an empirical question if a given definition "fits" the empirical field or not (Wilson 1970, 23). Third, operational definitions always encounter borderline cases that demand special attention.

2.1 Defining "congregation"

The term "congregation" has been defined in different ways. Harris (1998, 307), for example, defines them as "local institutions in which people regularly gather for what they feel to be religious purposes" and sees them as special kinds of voluntary associations. Ammerman et al. (1998, 7) see congregations as "local, voluntary, lay-led, religious assemblies". These are useful definitions, but they lack the specificity that is needed when creating a census. To our knowledge, the first researchers who have used an operational definition of "congregation" in order to create a census of religious congregations are Cnaan and Bodie (2001, 563-564). They defined congregations as "a cohesive group of people with a shared identity; a group that meets regularly on an ongoing basis; a group that comes together primarily for worship and has accepted teachings, rituals, and practices; a group that meets and worships at a designated place; a group that gathers for worship outside the regular purposes and location of a living or work space; a group with an identified religious leader; and a group with an official name and some formal structure that conveys its purpose and identity" and set to work. After 3 years of counting, they concluded that there were 2095 religious groups in Philadelphia.

The Swiss congregation census used the definition given by Chaves (2004, 1f.). He defines "*congregation*" as "a social institution in which individuals who are not all religious specialists gather in physical proximity to one another, frequently and at regularly scheduled intervals, for activities and events with explicitly religious content and purpose, and in which there is continuity over time in the individuals who gather, the location of the gathering, and the nature of the activities and events at each gathering" (Chaves 2004, 1-2). We added one point that emerged during our attempts to operationalize the definition: Subgroups of congregations (e.g. prayer groups, congregation music groups) and federations of congregations are not themselves to be counted as congregations.

Let us note two important attributes of this definition. First, the central

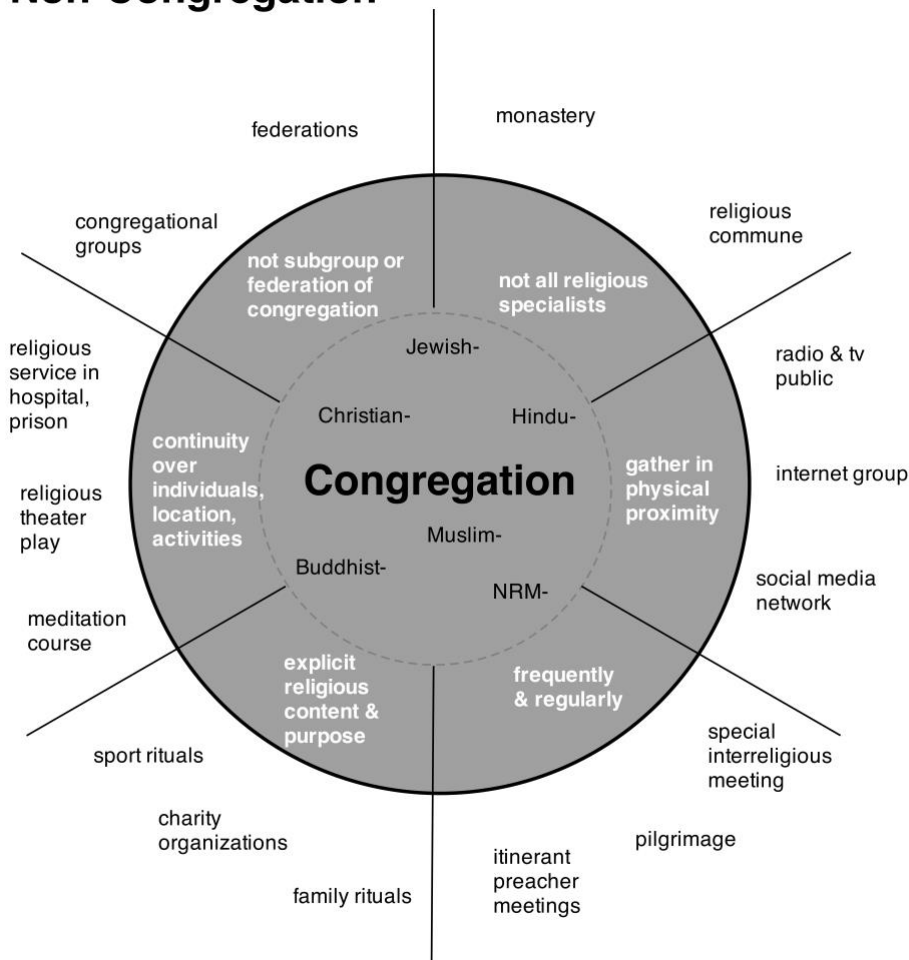
characteristic of the congregation is here seen in the *ritual and the participants that gather physically for the ritual*. It is clear that this definition fits Christian, Jewish, and Muslim groups particularly well and that it might be less well adaptable to other religions. However, as different scholars have argued, many other religions have increasingly taken up the congregational form in Western countries (Bankston III and Zhou 2000, Ammerman et al. 1998, 7f.). Second, attributes that are *not* stated in this definition are treated as *empirical variables* that may or may not be present (or vary in degrees) in a given congregation. For example, our definition does not say anything about the juridical form of congregations. A congregation may therefore be established as a parish, take the form of an association under private law, or be an informal group of believers. One of the most important attributes that is not fixed in the definition is its size. For us, a congregation may be extremely big as it may be extremely small (as long as there are several, that is at least three members).

2.3 Operationalization strategies

Operationalization is the process of specifying how a concept should empirically be measured (Schutt 2004, 86). Chaves' definition is already very close to the needs of an empirical study; nevertheless, a few additional operationalization steps proved to be necessary. Thus, we had to define the terms "institution", "religious specialist", and "religion", specify what is meant by "frequently", and detail (as noted above) one additional criterion. With Chaves' definition and our operationalization, we were able to decide without hesitation about 95% of the cases encountered. In the remaining 5%, a more thorough examination normally permitted to apply the rules without developing additional precision. In a remaining group, we had to add a number of specific rules. In table 1 we show how our definition excludes phenomena that are not congregations.

Table 1 *How the Chaves definition of congregation excludes different phenomena*

Non-Congregation



3. Putting the strategies into practice

3.1 A social institution...

According to Chaves' definition, congregations are a special case of an institution. An institution may be defined for our purposes in a very general way as a social phenomenon that is regulated by rules and norms. Such a wide definition of institutions includes habits, roles, organizations, groups, interactions, etc.¹

3.2 ... in which individuals who are not all religious specialists ...

Congregations are local groups that *do not consist exclusively of religious specialists*. A "religious specialist" is defined as a person, who is (1) a full-time or part-time leader

¹ It might have been theoretically more elegant to define congregations as special kinds of *groups* instead of special kinds of *institutions*. Good practice in definition is to use the closest more general term and then name the specifics. We stay, however, with Chaves' definition; in practice the term "institution" works just as well, since the specifying attributes of Chaves' definition eliminate all non-group phenomena anyway.

of a religious group and/or (2) a full-time member of a religious commune, and/or (3) a person who is salaried by a religious organization. This criterion permits to exclude monasteries, orders, and communes that gather religious specialists only - such as the Saint-Maurice Abbey founded in 515, the oldest continuously inhabited Christian monastery in Europe (Mariaux 2016), or the Benedictine Einsiedeln abbaye founded in 1130 with two religious communities (one for the monks and one for the nuns under the authority of a single abbot), or the Cistercian abbey of Haute Rive, the oldest Cistercian abbey in Switzerland founded in 1138. Note that congregations *can* consist exclusively of *religious virtuosos*, that is, individuals who subject their whole lifestyle to religious precepts and show a very high level of religious practice, beliefs, and religious-ethical conduct (Weber [1922] 1993, 60-79, [1920] 1978).

Although the criterion seems to be unambiguous, interesting borderline cases exist. Thus, there are monasteries with their groups of religious specialists (monks) that at the same time are used for the reunions of lay people. Take the monastery of the *Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch* situated at the border of the lake of Zug. This St. Avgin Arth Closter is the home of 6 monks and the bishop for Austria and Switzerland Mor Dionysios Isa; at the same time, it is the only place where the Syriac Orthodox in Switzerland, coming from Turkey, Syria, the Lebanon, can celebrate their Armenian ritual in Switzerland. We have therefore included it in our count of congregations. Another case is the *Buddhist monastery founded in 2006 by the Fo Guang Shan of Taiwan*. This monastery is inhabited by two nuns who work as priests for a Chinese-speaking Buddhist community of about 200 members. This monastery is resolutely geared towards providing religious services for Buddhist laypeople and functions as a meeting place for a local religious group. It, too, can be counted as a congregation. A very different borderline case is the *Buddhist monastery in Rikon*, in the canton of Zurich, where an entrepreneur hired a number of people from Tibet. He constructed in 1967 a Tibetan Buddhist monastery, the first of its kind in Europe. This monastery is frequented by different Buddhist meditation groups, but it is not a place where one and the same group would gather regularly for worship. This is why it has not been counted as a congregation in our census.

3.3 ... gather in physical proximity to one another...

In a congregation, according to our definition, individuals have to gather in *physical proximity* to one another. This includes again all the local religious groups of different religions whose lay members meet for ritual purposes in churches, mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras, temples, etc.. And it excludes phenomena such as radio and TV publics, new social media networks (Facebook, Twitter,...), internet chat groups, blogs, vlogs, etc.

Again, however, borderline cases come up. An interesting case is *Neo-pagans* and especially *Wicca*. While some Wiccan groups have regular and frequent physical

meetings as stipulated by our definition - most people identifying as Wiccans have predominantly contact to other Wiccans through the internet and may meet physically only in irregular intervals (e.g. for a Wiccan fair). For our census, we therefore have counted only the few and frequently gathering groups as congregations. Another interesting case is a structure called "*ICF-Léman*" that, on its website, claims to be a church of more than 1000 members. It is true that the sermons, posted on the website are seen more than a 1000 times every week². However, since the website creates only the internet-public, it cannot itself be counted as a congregation according to our definition. A closer look shows that the website is linked to two local religious groups that consist of 50 to 120 individuals each. The pastor gives his sermon to the one group; the other group watches the celebration on a big screen - while the internet community can follow on the web. In this case, we have only counted the two physically gathering groups as congregations.³

3.4... frequently and at regularly scheduled intervals...

In a congregation, according to our definition, the physical gatherings for ritual purposes have to take place *frequently and at regularly scheduled intervals*. This criterion includes, for example, Christian, Jewish, or Muslim groups whose main religious service takes place weekly, be it on a Sunday, a Saturday, or a Friday. It excludes groups whose religious gatherings are (1) regularly, but infrequently scheduled (such as a yearly pilgrimage to Lourdes); (2) frequently, but irregularly scheduled (such as the religious celebrations by a famous itinerant preacher in a certain region); (3) neither regularly nor frequently scheduled (such as a visit by the pope, a special interreligious meeting because of a tragedy).

When trying to apply this criterion, it quickly became apparent that religious groups can have very different rhythms of meeting. Pious Catholics and Muslims may meet daily in their places of worship; Jehovah's Witnesses meet twice a week with an hour of Sunday School before the celebration; the Bahá'ís gather every 19 days; some Catholic groups meet only every three weeks because of a lack of priests. It is therefore necessary to specify what is meant by "frequently". We have opted to define frequently as "monthly or more often". In our exploratory interviews we had found that new congregations often start seeing themselves as a group when they are able to have at least a monthly cadence of meetings. Conversely, groups whose meetings fall below a monthly rhythm will often merge with other groups or cease to exist. If a group is not in decline and still has a less than monthly pace of meeting, this will often be because of members who are very widely dispersed or too few to be able to constitute a true local religious group.

While the criterion of at least monthly regularly scheduled meetings worked well in

² E.g. See on YouTube <https://youtu.be/Pb3TS-kPzx8> (937 views).

³ After the census, the pastor became ill and the website is not working anymore and now the French speaking ICF Channel on YouTube reaches only about hundred views.

most cases, again some borderline cases appeared. An interesting case is the *Armenian Apostolic Church* that officially consists of three parishes in Switzerland: one in Geneva, a second one in Neuchâtel-Jura and a third one in Zurich. However, a regular mass only takes place in the church Saint-Hagop in Geneva. In addition, there are 12 masses⁴ that take place irregularly and in different places in Switzerland. Applying our definition, we have therefore counted only one congregation in Geneva. The most remarkable case we have found concerning this criterion is the *Orthodox Serbian parish* in Lucerne that meets only once a year in Lucerne in order to celebrate Easter (Hämmerli 2014, 2011). While the group meets for ritual purposes on a regular basis, its pace is not frequent enough to be counted as a congregation.

3.5 ... for activities and events with explicitly religious content and purpose...

According to our definition, a group is only to be counted as a congregation, if its activities and events have *explicitly religious content and purpose*. Evidently, this part of the definition forces us to define the term "religious". Knowing the literature, this might seem to be a daunting task.

Interestingly, however, operationalizing and applying the criterion of "religion" proved to be easier than other criteria of our definition. True, eminent scholars in the sociology and study of religion tell us at great lengths about the difficulty of defining "religion" - but when we had to apply the concept in our census, only minor problems arose. We used the definition by Stolz (2010, 258) according to which

- “*Religion* denotes the whole of cultural symbol-systems that respond to problems of meaning and contingency by alluding to a transcendent reality, which influences everyday life but cannot be directly controlled. Religious symbol-systems incorporate mythical, ethical, and ritual elements as well ‘salvation goods’.”⁵

In this definition, the different terms are again defined. Thus,

- A *transcendent reality* is a superempirical (or "higher" or "ultimately real") plane which cannot be directly controlled by humans but which is thought to be influencing the lives of men in some way or other. The transcendent reality may be seen as anthropomorphic (including spirits, gods) or not (superempirical laws or states of beings)".
- *Symbols* are objects, actions or elements of communication that refer to something other than themselves. They consist of a "signifiant" and a

⁴ <http://www.armenian.ch/church/Pages/F/main.html> (Accessed 5 February 2008).

⁵ See for similar definitions Geertz (1993) , Stolz Fritz (Stolz 1988, 2004), Pollack (1995). See also Jeavons (1998, 81)

"signifié".

- *Problems of meaning and contingencies* are situations individuals or groups find themselves in, in which things are not how they should be or how they are normally (success, disappointment, catastrophe, positive or negative surprises, malady, death of a near one), thus leading to (a) the question of "why" things have happened in this way and (b) the motivation of influencing such situations with out-of-the-ordinary means .
- *Salvation goods* are both the ends that individuals seek with their religious practices and the means to reach them. These ends and means may themselves be transcendent or immanent (e.g. eternal life, illumination as transcendent ends; richness, social status as immanent ends).

What phenomena do we want to exclude with our religion criterion? It is groups whose activities and events do not show a clear link to a transcendent reality both in content and purpose, that is, their primary focus is not to link the participants to a transcendent plane (a god, a higher force, etc..). Examples are fraternities, scouts, soccer crowds, academic communities, or political parties. Note that the fact of presenting oneself explicitly or implicitly as a religious group is *not* a criterion in our definition. The definition allows to include a group as a congregation even though the group itself denies being "religious" (this is often the case for groups in the holistic milieu) and conversely to deny a group the status of the congregation even though the group itself claims to be a religious congregation. Neither is the fact of *societal acceptance (or not) as a religious group* important for our definition. In other words, it is irrelevant for our endeavour if the state, the media, or general opinion thinks that a certain group is or is not "religious".

Let us look again at some specific borderline cases.

The Alevis are a minority and a specific branch of Islam from Turkey. "Because of their negligence of the pillars of Islam and probably earlier practices (worship of trees, stones, etc.) it is difficult to assign a precise origin"(Massicard 2002, 142). The Alevis are not considered as Shiites by the Shiites. As for the Sunnis, they oscillate between denying them a religious status and assimilating them to Islam by denying them any specificities (White and Jongerden 2003). The Alevis do not pray in the mosque but in the cemevi, a Turkish word for "house of gathering". The term cemevi underlines in itself the ambivalence: what is the purpose of the gathering? In Switzerland, the Alevi have invested their time and effort predominantly in the defense of their minority situation in Turkey and the transmission of a tradition and folklore (Manço 2004, Massicard 2005). When trying to apply our definition, we have to admit that this is a borderline case, the central content and purpose of the the group activities only being partly religious. However, since the Nineties, there has been a religious turn in the cemevi, first in Turkey, then in Western Europe. We finally did decide to include these groups, since the purpose of the Alevis's associations *also* refer to a religious understanding and not only a political one

(Baumann 2015). The fact that the group is a hybrid phenomenon is reflected in the fact that the auto-description of the group as religious or non-religious is ambivalent.

Another hybrid phenomenon is the group of *liberal Quakers in Geneva* (Knobel, Gonzales, and Montandon 2014, Collins 2004). The main focus of this group is its engagement in the lobby work for peace initiatives at the ONU, through the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) (Trigeaud 2016). However, it also organizes a monthly ritual in the Quaker House for its members (the "friends"). This (mostly silent) ritual is clearly religious in nature (Collins 1996). We have therefore included in the list this group as a congregation.

An interesting case is *Yoga*. Here, we clearly find a ritual - but is it religious? Following Altglas (Altglas 2005, 2008), and Baumann (2009), we have made a distinction as follows⁶. Groups of Kriya Yoga that link Yoga clearly with a spiritual teaching (such as the Self-Realization Fellowship Center, Sahaja Yoga, Yesudian-Haich Yoga or Babaji's Kriya Yoga) were counted as religious congregations. Groups that practiced postural yoga without spiritual teachings, closer to sport and wellness groups, were not counted as congregations.

An interesting case of groups that systematically refuse to be seen as "religious" are the *Freemasons*. In the canton of Lucerne, three Masonic lodges⁷ had gone so far as to take juridical action against a scholar who had included them in a list of local religious groups (Sindemann 2005)⁸. In order not to encounter such problems, we pragmatically excluded Freemasons from our list. Substantively, the question is not easy to solve and would probably have to be decided on a case-by-case basis. Freemasons clearly have rituals; there is an ideology including ideas about a transcendent plane (Schmid and Schmid 2003). However, the importance accorded to this transcendence varies strongly depending on the group in question⁹. For instance, in the group affiliated to the Alpina Great lodge, the members are mainly agnostics (and then they can sustain a kind of "spirituality"), and in the lodges under the obedience of the Grand Orient of France, members defend radical atheism.

In what is often called the "holistic milieu" or "alternative spirituality milieu" (Houtman and Aupers 2007, Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Siegers 2012) our religion criteria leads us to count some groups as congregations while excluding others. Thus, for example, *Transcendent Meditation* or *Zen Buddhist* groups can clearly be seen as congregations (even though they might want to reject the label). There is a ritual, we find the "groupness" asked for in the definition, and there is a clear

⁶ Also see (Altglas 2014)

⁷ Druidic order and Odd Fellows (one male and a female lodge). The Fiat Lux Lodge (from the Alpina Great Lodge) did not pursue the scholars, but sustain the other lodges for a new classification of the groups.

⁸ See www.religionenlu.ch

⁹ In Lucerne, the juridical debate was mainly to specify if a philosophical organization could be categorized among religious organizations.

allusion to a transcendent plane (Obadia 2007, Numrich 2003, Prebish 1993). *Mindfulness groups* or groups interested in *Family Constellation* are no congregations since the transcendent element is not strong enough.

One of the best-known cases is, of course, *Scientology*. This group, whose religious or non-religious character has been debated both by scholars and the courts (Wilson 1990, Wallis 1995, police 1998, Reitman 2011), claims to be religious, a claim challenged by many critics (Dericquebourg 1998)¹⁰. As has been noted above, our definition does not take into account whether or not the group itself claims to be religious. In Switzerland, we find five groups in the largest Swiss cities and three missions that try to implant new groups in other cities. In our view, there is no doubt that Scientology may be called "religious" according to our definition of religion. Clearly, the group links its activities in a very important way to some "transcendent plane" (including thetans, reincarnation beliefs, mythical beliefs about the origin of the world, etc.). It is a more difficult question to decide if the group actually engages in a common ritual that benefits the members. The ritual pointed to by the group itself (a religious service on Sunday) seems to be mainly an effort to *appear* as a religion. But in our view even when looking at the normal functioning of a Scientology group, the course meetings of members during the week and the auditing sessions can be seen as gatherings of and for the members with religious content and purpose. Thus, we have included the Scientology groups as congregations.

3.6 ... in which there is continuity over time, individuals, location, and activities

Religious congregations, according to the definition, have to show a certain *continuity over time, the individuals gathering, the location, and the activities and events proposed*. The criterion is important in order to be able to exclude phenomena that may well unite individuals for religious purposes on a regular basis - but without the continuities mentioned. Thus, for example, a recurrent pilgrimage, a recurrent religious service in a hospital, and a religious theatre play that tours the country, all lack the continuity of individuals involved - the theatre play additionally lacks the continuity of place. In all three cases we would not count the phenomenon as a congregation.

Again, borderline cases allow to highlight the boundaries that our definition imposes on the empirical material: Take the case of "*Forum Licht*"¹¹, a centre for new spirituality in Zurich. It comprises a book store, a store for wellbeing products, a publishing house "Licht Welle Verlag" (Waves of light) and a meeting hall in which about 10 seminars per month are organized (at evening or during the week-end). While there is a continuity over time in the location and types of activities, the

¹⁰ In France, the church of Scientology is a court case nearly every fifteen years (1983, 1998, 2014).

¹¹ See www.imlicht.ch.

fact that there are always different courses with different participants leads us to the decision, not to count the centre as a congregation. Neither can the courses themselves be counted as a congregation, since they do not create a continuity in the participants over time. Another example is the "*Zurich Christian Connecting Point*". This is a Christian "Meet up". "Meet ups" are physical meetings of people who have virtually made contact on the internet and share a common interest. They can have any theme, such as an interest in home-brewed beer, philosophy - or religion. Thus, Karina "from Switzerland and Argentina" has created her Christian meet up. Sometimes, this is a Christian breakfast, sometimes an after-work prayer. This meet up does not fit the definition of a congregation, since neither the continuity of participants nor of the activities nor the regularity of the activities over time is guaranteed. On the contrary, the idea of the meet up is a very flexible and changing mix of participants and activities. Yet another borderline case is the group "*Connect*". This group has had to change location nearly every week for two years¹². At first sight it might seem as if the group does not fit the continuity of the location over time. However, the group is not as such "itinerant", its frequent change of location was caused by various external factors and both leaders and members were clear about the fact that the group wanted in principle to be a stable group. There is no doubt, then, that this group can be counted as a congregation. In a similar manner, we found quite a number of smaller and emerging groups that gathered at home at one of the members' home. Again, such groups, that at least in principle were looking for stability even if they did not necessarily yet have it, were counted as congregations.

3.7 ... and that is not a sub-group or a federation of congregations

An important attribute of our definition of congregation is that the congregation *may not be a subgroup nor a federation of another group having the characteristics of a congregation*. This is the one criterion that we had to add to the original definition by Chaves. Examples of subgroups of congregations are prayer groups, women's groups, men's groups, outreach groups, groups that read holy scriptures, etc. Examples of federations of congregations are denominational organizations as well as organizational unities that comprise a number of congregations in order to pull certain resources.

Again, borderline cases are instructive. Let us first look at examples of possible subgroups. The Pentecostal groups *@home* in the canton of Vaud, for example, are prayer and bible reading groups, most times with fewer than 15 members. They have been created on the initiative of a young pastor who led young families out of existing congregations, explaining that meeting in small groups was the "new model of the church for the postmodern society".¹³ Since *@home* groups have deliberately

¹² Presently, the group has found little stability with a hall to rent in Geneva downtown.

¹³ See the website atomic.ch and the study by Maëlle Wahli-Bühler « Eglise de maison quelle vision ? » that can be downloaded (consulted 4.9.2016). See also <http://pages.rts.ch/la-1ere/programmes/hautes-frequences/3875464-l-avenir-des-eglises-2-4-les-eglises-tupperware.html> (consulted 4.9.2016).

cut any link to a bounding congregation, they have to be counted themselves as congregation. A similar example consists of the groups of "*Universelles Leben*" (in Zurich and Lausanne) that was a renewal movement in the historical churches (mainly in Germany) and split off in 1985 from these churches, thus creating a few small congregations (Hitziger 2008, Humbert 2004). An interesting (and sometimes quite difficult) case are *linguistic groups* (Bünker 2015). In many congregations, we find different language groups that have their own ritual in their respective language in the same building. Are they to be counted as subgroups or as separate congregations? We decided to use the following criteria: If there existed joint rituals of the linguistic groups that were considered as the basic ritual of the overall congregation, then the linguistic group was to be considered a subgroup (no congregation). If no such overarching rituals existed, the linguistic groups were to be seen as congregations of their own. According to this criterion, the three linguistic groups of the *Latter Day Saints in Geneva* are to be seen as congregations (Basset et al. 2011, Trigeaud 2013). The counterexample are the linguistic groups of the *mosque of Geneva*. This mosque attracts up to 2000 believers coming from locations as different as the Maghreb, the Middle East, and every week for a common Friday prayer. At other times, different linguistic groups meet separately for prayer and study, using their specific language (Banfi 2013). These groups have not been counted as congregations.

Turning to groups on the "upper level", we are again facing some difficult borderline cases. Thus, in some churches, congregations (mostly parishes) are to a certain extent, but not completely, merged. To respond to the vocational crisis¹⁴, the Roman-Catholic church has a new organization called "Pastoral Unit" gathering several parishes. The idea is to allocate three priest or ministers to a region gathering on average between three to four parishes. Instead of having four Sunday services, the Pastoral Unit provides one (and sometimes two) masses on Sunday (the masses in the parishes turning). We counted 180 Pastoral Units in Switzerland (gathering 653 parishes). One may therefore ask whether the Pastoral Unit is the congregation or if the parishes should continue to be seen as congregations. Since there continues to be a regular religious ritual in the parish and since the parish as an organizational unit is upheld, we decided to count the parish as congregation (and not the Pastoral Unit).

4. Results

The definition has led us to capture 5734 congregations in Switzerland (Table 1). The oldest has been founded in 900, the youngest in 2008; the largest has 2500 regular attendants, the smallest only 3; the richest congregation has an annual income of 8'000'000, the poorest 0 CHF. 49.6% of the congregations are either Reformed or Roman Catholic, uniting 81% of the individuals associated with a congregation to any degree. 24.8% of the congregations are evangelical - although

¹⁴ On the vocational crisis in Switzerland, see : (Bünker and Husistein 2011).

only 6.1% of the associated persons with a congregation. This latter fact is, of course, explained by the fact that these evangelical groups are much smaller.

Table 2 Numbers of congregations and their associated members, by religious tradition

	Congregations ⁽¹⁾		Individuals		
	N	%	N	% Person associated ⁽²⁾	% Swiss population ⁽³⁾
Reformed	1,094	19.1%	1,731,832	42.3%	22,5%
Roman Catholic	1,750	30.5%	1,579,849	38.6%	20,5%
Old Catholic	35	0.6%	11,182	0.3%	0.2%
Evangelical	1,423	24.8 %	251,478	6.1%	3,3%
Orthodox Christians	58	1.0 %	67,424	1.6%	0,9%
Other Christians	399	7.0 %	102,995	2.5%	1.3%
Jewish	33	0.6 %	23,412	0.6%	0.3%
Muslim	315	5.5 %	221,832	5.4%	2,9%
Buddhist	142	2.5 %	21,454	0.5%	0.3%
Hindu	189	3.3 %	59,309	1.4%	0.8%
Other	296	5.2 %	23,706	0.6%	0.3%
Total	5,734	100.0 %	4,094,473	100%	53.3%

(1) Census of the Swiss Congregations, September 2008, see: (Stolz et al. 2011, Monnot 2013, 45-63).

(2) Total number of persons associated with a congregation to any degree: number of persons that are associated in any way with the religious life of a congregation – counting both adults and children, counting both regular and irregular participants, counting both official or registered members and also participating nonmembers¹⁵

(3) Swiss populations 2009 (Swiss Federal Statistical Office): 7'701'856

We could go on with results for a long time, but that is not the purpose of this paper. What we do want to emphasize, however, is that these results depend in at least three ways on our methodological procedures. First, on the *way we have defined and operationalized "congregation"*. Had we defined and operationalized "congregation" differently, the numbers in table 2 would have been different. For example, if we had introduced a minimal size (say: 20 regular members), the majority of neo-Buddhist, neo-Hindu, and "Other" movements would have been excluded from our census. Had we used a functional definition of religion à la Luckmann (Luckmann 1967), the number of "Other" religious movements would possibly exceed many other religious traditions. Second, on the *coherence with which this definition/operationalization has been put into practice*. Had we put less time and energy in the operationalization of "congregation", the application to the field, and of the

¹⁵ See the discussion about the differences between official affiliation numbers and the persons associated to a congregation number in (Monnot 2012).

treatment of borderline cases, the numbers in table 2 would certainly have looked different and the results would have been less trustworthy.¹⁶

5. Conclusion

This paper has treated the problem of "how to recognize a congregation" for purposes of censuses and mapping studies. A congregation, we have argued can only be recognized as such on the basis of an explicit, operationalized definition. One cannot trust to "recognize a congregation when one sees one".¹⁷ We have given an exemplar of how a definition and operationalization of "congregation" has been put into practice in the Swiss congregation census, focusing on borderline cases and on the way strategies translated into results. We hope to have shown that the definition and operationalization of concepts is not an abstract and theoretical, but rather an eminently practical activity and that our paper helps other scholars in designing and conducting their own census or mapping studies. We also welcome other papers presenting different definitions and operationalization strategies for comparative purposes.

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¹⁶ Of course, the results depend also on the *time and energy put into searching the congregations*. This is a point we have not touched on in this paper. See on this Cnaan and Boddie (Cnaan and Boddie 2001)

¹⁷ This reminds us of a joke: How do you recognize a boomerang? When you throw it away, and it doesn't come back, then it wasn't one.

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