Sociologies of Religion

National Traditions

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LEIDEN | BOSTON

Contents

The Sociology of Religion in Germany since 1945

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We have seen over the last two decades or so a resurgence of work in the sociology of religion in Germany. While there was not a single chair specializing in the discipline before 1990 (the sociology of religion was practiced within general sociology or practical theology as at best a minor subject), there are now over five. And, while the discipline was not represented within the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* (German Sociological Association) in the 1970s and 1980s, it has now had an independent section since 1995 and a current membership of about 200 academics publishing in the field. The discipline now also has a presence in the leading German sociological journals, and there are book series specializing in it. The discipline has broadened its thematic scope, performs classic exegesis as well as clarifying basic disciplinary concepts, carries out both empirical research and theoretical work, has connected with discussions in general sociology, and is now in contact with related disciplines, such as religious studies, political science, anthropology, history, and theology. It absorbs research results from the international context, and in particular from the sociology of religion in the English-speaking world, makes use of a considerable methodological pluralism and even maintains its own internal controversies—about, for example, the concept of religion, secularization theory, the individualization thesis, and methodological questions. The sociology of religion that is currently practiced in German is underrepresented internationally, however; this is not only due to the language barrier, but is also because the sociological market in Germany is comparatively large (larger certainly than it is in the Netherlands or in Sweden, for example), therefore making the incentive to publish in English weaker than it might otherwise be.

The resurgence of the sociology of religion since the 1990s has a number of causes. It has certainly something to do with the dominance of modernization theory in the 1960s and 1970s, which meant that interest in the issue of religion had been relatively low, not only in sociology but also in political science and history. Then came the cultural turn in the 1980s along with the related tendency to use interpretive methods, and the collapse of grand narrative, be it modernization, secularization or rationalization. Above all, though, the reason for the resurgence of the discipline lies in the increased attention given to the issue of religion in the public sphere. For the last two decades, and especially

since 9/11, people have become increasingly aware of the significant political role that religion plays in the conflicts of the world, the extent to which religion can be a medium for the unfolding of ethnic, economic and political conflicts, and the suitability that it has as a marker establishing social, cultural and political boundaries. In addition, public sensitivity toward the issue of religion has also increased as a result of the increasing migration of Muslims to Europe and the attendant integration issues and conflicts.

The development of the sociology of religion in Germany since 1945 can be roughly divided into three phases. The most recent phase has seen the resurgence of research activities in the sociology of religion just mentioned, and began more or less in the wake of German reunification. The first and second phases are separated by Thomas Luckmann's criticism of the narrowing of the sociology of religion to church sociology, a criticism that touched the concerns expressed in the work of Joachim Matthes and Trutz Rendtorff. The high point of this criticism came in the first half of the 1960s.

The Phase of Church Sociology: From the 1950s to the Mid-1960s

As in general sociology, the development of the sociology of religion in Germany after 1945 is characterized less by an attempt to link up with disrupted lines of continuity than by efforts to seek a fresh start. After the catastrophe of the Second World War, the awareness prevailed among academics of being not only in a radically new political and social landscape but also in a fundamentally altered mental situation, one that made it necessary to redefine the very place of sociology. The ideas of Weber, Simmel and Troeltsch seemed to be of little help when sociologists came to address the post-1945 situation, and Helmut Schelsky (1959: 84), looking back at the new beginning of German sociology after 1945, could declare: "Not only had the theories of the last few decades faded with the ideologies; the social realities themselves had entered into such changed constellations that obtaining new perspectives and experiences was really the order of the day for us."

The rebuilding of the sociology of religion after the Second World War was initially very much, though not exclusively, the work of church and theological institutions. The *Institut für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften* (Institute for Christian Social Sciences) was established at the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Münster in 1951, its first director being Joseph Höffner. Four years later, the *Institut für Christliche Gesellschaftswissenschaften* (Institute for the Christian Science of Society) was founded with the appointment of Heinz-Dietrich Wendland, also at the University of Münster, but now at

the Faculty of Protestant Theology. Further new institutes were founded in the 1950s in Catholic theology, including the *Katholisches Institut für Sozialforschung* (Catholic Institute for Social Research) in Königstein, and the *Pastoralsoziologisches Institut* (Pastoral Sociological Institute), the latter being led in its first five years by Norbert Greinacher. Finally, in 1957, the *Fachausschuss für Religionssoziologie* (Subject Committee for the Sociology of Religion) was established within the German Sociological Association, which initially also had a strong orientation toward pastoral sociology.

Due to its institutional anchoring, the field during this period was essentially church sociology. Like general sociology, church sociology made very little effort to build on the sociological classics, something that would have made sense given the strong orientation toward the sociology of religion in classic sociological works. Instead of taking up the central questions of these works, however, the early church sociology and the sociology of religion were initially concerned with catching up with the international standards of empirical social research.[1] They were interested not in the religious conditions constituting the emergence of the modern world, or in the social incompatibility of religious ideas with society, or in the "religious foundations of social behavior." Rather, in reversing the direction of gaze cast by Weber and Troeltsch, the church sociology of the postwar period was concerned above all with the "contemporary question of the social foundations of current religious behavior" (Goldschmidt 1959: 143).

In its empirical research, German sociology of religion was initially oriented mainly towards the work of Gabriel Le Bras and his school in France, as well as to work in the Netherlands of, for example, Jakob Pieter Kruijt and Walter Goddijn. Consequently, what stood at the center of attention were particularly questions of *religious practice* and its typologization (Freytag 1959; Köster 1959), as well as of the *structure and organization of the church community* (Greinacher 1955; Rendtorff 1958; Fichter 1958; Köster 1959; Schreuder 1959, 1962, 1966). In addition, though, questions of *religious and church attitudes* also came into focus (especially Wölber 1959). All these works had a clear interest in church practice. Sometimes church sociologists did not distinguish clearly in their lines of argumentation between church sociology and theology, although they were aware of the risk of introducing theological norms into their interpretations of findings (Wölber 1959: 27). Their interest in church sociology was a result of their concern for the social relevance of the church in the modern

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1 This argument is also made by Laube (2006: 59), whose excellent reconstruction of the phase of church sociology in the German sociology of religion has been very helpful here.

world, which was often defined as secularized, as increasingly socially differentiated, and as "mature" (Bonhoeffer). Confronted by the growing distancing of society from the church, church sociologists sought in their work to find ways to stabilize and strengthen the church. In the words of Justus Freytag (1959: 9), the church's "awareness of facing a missionary task is the key impetus behind the quest to build a sociology of the church community."

To grasp the social relevance of the church empirically, the studies in church sociology investigated the extent to which church communities were integrated into the modern social structure and the functions that they fulfilled in society. The *analyses of church practice and churchliness* were primarily concerned with the question of which social groups were represented in the church (Freytag 1959: 104). At the same time, besides investigating the forms of organization within church communities, the *structural analyses of the church community* were concerned with the functions that the church community performed in society, the acceptance that it had in society and the expectations that people had of it (Schreuder 1959; Freytag 1959). These studies came to the conclusion that church communities were apparently only able to incorporate a portion of society, were increasingly unable to bind to them to large sections of the population, and had "lost their static equilibrium to a considerable extent" (Köster 1959: 107; also Freytag 1959: 111, Fürstenberg 1961, Schreuder 1962: 28). Behind this conclusion was obviously the desire of the church to represent the whole of society and to present the unity of the church community (Freytag 1959: 110).[2] These analyses were also obviously influenced by American structural functionalism.

Dispensing with the interpretive demands of social theory, as was typical of the empirical studies in the church sociology of the 1950s and 1960s, corresponded to the skepticism toward historical and social-philosophical approaches then widespread in general sociology in Germany. With his call for a sociology "which is nothing but sociology," René König (1958: 1, 7) argued that sociology was "only possible as empirical research." Distancing themselves

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2 The widespread hope after 1945 for a re-Christianization of society was a way of dealing with the catastrophe of the Third Reich. As Martin Greschat (1988: 111) has argued, the church in Germany interpreted National Socialism as a result of defection from God, as the culmination of a long history of people's loss of faith, and of secularization. The argument was that, if we want to leave the wretched past behind us, we now have to return to God and base the entire life of society on Christian beliefs. As early as October 1945, the Protestant Church understood the collapse of the social order and of all ideologies, to be "a great moment for the re-Christianization of the European world" as Bishop Wurm phrased it at the second congress of the Council of the German Protestant Church in held in Stuttgart in October 1945 (Greschat 1982: 95).

critically from the Frankfurt School, Arnold Gehlen (1965) and Helmut Schelsky (1959: 18) also called for a restriction of sociology to the status of an empirical social science. Gehlen (1965: 33) saw "in the emancipation from theoretical ambitions" a "drive towards modernity." Gehlen, Schelsky and König were all agreed that sociological work should be characterized not by a cultural-critical and social-philosophical perspective of despair and redemption, but by an anti-ideological and sober outlook on reality. In contrast, Adorno (1959: 503) saw in the renunciation of a social theory grounded in social philosophy precisely the reason for the degeneration of sociology into the simple uncritical affirmation of what is the case, and for the exaltation of the simple reconstruction of what currently exists to the status of the only achievable ideal. But, even if Schelsky, Gehlen, König and other sociologists of the postwar period sought to avoid the quasi-priestly demand for an overall interpretation of social reality, they nonetheless certainly did not speak the language of a theoretically uninformed empiricism and did bewail the theory deficit of contemporary empirical research in the social sciences (Schelsky 1959: 89, König 1958: 13). For them, empirical research should not be carried out without a theoretical framework in which it can orientate itself—which does not mean, though, that it should deliver a philosophically excessive total perspective on society. In that regard, problems were addressed that would be dealt with in the so-called positivism dispute that broke out in 1961 between Adorno and Popper and which would then be continued by Albert and Habermas.

The Criticism of Church Sociology in the 1960s

It is precisely at this point that the criticism by Thomas Luckmann and Joachim Matthes of the reductionist understanding of research in church sociology in the 1950s also began. In his highly acclaimed review of works in church sociology, Luckmann (1960: 315) diagnosed an "almost radical narrowing of the approach in comparison to the problems dealt with in the classic period of the sociology of religion in the work of Émile Durkheim and Max Weber," and he focused on three points:

Luckmann saw "the main problem of the sociology of religion today" as lying in its "insufficient anchoring in general sociological theory." Due to its orientation towards church sociology or even church-parish sociology, "problems little relevant to general sociology have come to the forefront of research" while "deeply relevant problems have virtually disappeared from the sociology of religion's field of view." The consequences are "theoretical disorientation" and a "narrowly positivistic methodology." The questions dealt with by the recent

sociology of religion were determined not by issues of social-theoretical relevance, Luckmann continued, but by "pastoral-theological and church-political interests" (1960: 316).

Finally, Luckmann criticized the fact that research in the sociology of religion was following an "implicit axiomatic," one that "equates religiosity with churchliness, and churchliness with church 'practice'" (1960: 316). This meant that the subjective meaning of religious practice and churchliness as well as the symbolically transcendent values of human existence, were being excluded from sociological analysis (1960: 320, 325).

If the sociology of religion wished to regain its status as a "central sociological discipline," Luckmann concluded, it had to overcome its narrowing to church sociology and reflect again on the issues raised by the classics in the sociology of religion. For Luckmann, one of the main problems of the present consisted in the relation of "individual lifestyle to social structures of order" (1963: 11), and both Durkheim and Weber had looked for the key to understanding this problem in religion—Durkheim in his argument that religion integrated the human being into the social order and made of the human being a moral entity, and Weber in his tracing back of the destiny of the human being in the modern world to processes of rationalization, bureaucratization and secularization (1963: 12 ff.). Should the sociology of religion be returned to its social-theoretical anchoring, Luckmann argued, it had to connect to the tradition of classic sociology. Only then could religion be "removed from its churchly 'ghettoization'" and made the "constitutive foundation of social reality" again (Laube 2006: 79).

Joachim Matthes went one step further. In his view, the narrowing of the sociology of religion to church sociology was not in opposition to the work of Durkheim or Weber; rather, "this limitedness is precisely the result of the Weberian approach" (Matthes 1969: 93). Just as Weber had limited the scope of the sociology of religion to the study of churchliness as a specific social behavior, and of the church as a specific social organization, i.e., to the study of *the remnants of secularization*, so had church sociology reduced religion to church. For Matthes, both therefore worked with a concept of religion that was limited to explicit and overt churchliness. Both set church and society in opposition to one another, and both as a result followed implicitly an agenda of secularization theory, one that they saw continually confirmed in the research process without realizing that the results of their research had already been determined in the *interpretamentum* assumed pre-theoretically (Matthes 1969: 23). Matthes argued that it was the narrowing and reification of the concept of religion in church sociology that led to the diagnosis of an "emigration" by the church from society, and that linked the modernity of society to its secularity (1964, 1967: 165). It was therefore necessary to shed light reflexively on the specif-

ically Christian character of the concept of religion, and to make the object of research the secularization thesis itself, as well as its problematical provenance (1962: 146). What Luckmann and Matthes were criticizing in the research of church sociologists were therefore the underlying premises of secularization theory that were already embedded within the concept of religion itself, premises to which such research merely gave its uncritical support and which were not questioned or defeated theoretically.

The criticism of Luckmann and Matthes of the institutionally restricted concept of religion employed by church sociology, of its theoretical flimsiness, and of the orientation of its research toward the interests of the church penetrated deep into the sociology of religion in Germany. No lesson did it learn more than this one, with two serious consequences: (a) the not insignificant expansion of the field of study in the sociology of religion and (b) the marginalization of church sociology.

Thereafter, the use of an institutionally determined concept of religion was fundamentally discredited in research in the sociology of religion. Even indicators of churchliness such as denominational affiliation or churchgoing were now tainted by the stigma of the limitedness of church sociology—even of irrelevance and superficiality. What now attracted the attention of sociologists of religion were no longer organizational structures of the church, or practices and attitudes influenced by the church, but structures of relevance of ultimate meaning for the individual and highly individualized forms of the religious—individual private Christianities and syncretisms of a subjectivized patchwork religiosity deemed as a sign of a non-traditional and new social form of the religious.

During the period after it had been criticized for narrowing its focus to church sociology, the sociology of religion also went through a process of generalization of its basic concepts, which led to religion being raised to a level where it had relevance for the whole of society and to religion being distinguished from its concrete, and historically and empirically tangible, manifestations (see also Daiber 1983: 16). Highly abstract theories were developed that, in trying to define the social place of religion in the modern world, began with its indeterminism (Matthes) and invisibility (Luckmann), or with a Christianity outside the church (Rendtorff) or an implicit Christianity (Kaufmann).

It is also the case that, since the criticisms directed by Luckmann and Matthes at the implicit assumptions of empirical research in the sociology of religion, anyone wishing to analyze religious phenomena has been forced to give an account of the epistemological perspective taken, the research interests pursued and the terminology employed. In other words, the level of methodological reflection has increased significantly.

The other consequence was the marginalization of research in church sociology and a preponderance of theoretically oriented general interpretations in the sociology of religion. Empirically oriented church sociology and the theoretically inspired sociology of religion took increasingly separate paths. Religion and church sociology, which worked empirically, did seek to connect up with complex theoretical approaches, but only managed to incorporate such approaches into its research and to apply them to empirical issues in a piecemeal manner (Lukatis 1983: 199, 216). Studies dealing with institutionalized religiosity—with church membership, church involvement, issues of church organization, and the professional activity of church officials—also predominated in the empirical work of the 1970s and 1980s (Lukatis 1983: 214). Such research, often carried out on behalf of the church and pursuing a practical aim determined by the church, was largely marginalized academically, however. There was nonetheless an awareness of its theoretical deficit, and there were attempts to narrow the gap between theory and empirical research in the sociology of religion. In the dominant theoretical works of the time, though, there is barely any trace of efforts being made to build bridges with empirical research. What was central to theory-building in the sociology of religion was instead establishing connections to general theories of society and driving the level of abstraction of its theoretical constructions to such a height that religion could no longer be treated as a marginal phenomenon—but, rather, as a component of processes in the constitution of social reality (Gabriel 1983: 184 ff.).

The Neoclassical Phase in the Sociology of Religion in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s—the Period of Grand Narratives

Given that the sociology of religion was predominantly interested in theory, it is not surprising that it should have borne the imprint of the main theoretical currents in German sociology. As well as the approach of systems theory, there is the epistemologically and phenomenologically oriented theory of symbolic interactionism; and, as well as historical sociology, there is the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. The representatives of these different sociological currents introduced in the 1970s and 1980s elaborate theoretical concepts of religion.

The Privatization Thesis of Thomas Luckmann
Among all these currents, the most influential was the privatization concept developed by Thomas Luckmann. Taking up his own criticism of the institutionally narrowed concept of religion employed by church sociology, he worked

with such a broad definition of religion that this became to some degree an anthropological constant. For Luckmann (1972: 5), religion is that "which enables humans to become human." The human being exceeds in religion the scope of its "immediate experience" (1972: 6) and becomes a social being. Religion socializes the human experience of transcendence, an experience belonging inevitably to the human condition. In Luckmann's view, experiences of transcendence arising from religion are therefore not a "subjective inner space," but created "intersubjectively" from the outset (1972: 6).[3] Luckmann (1985: 29) distinguishes between minor transcendences, which surprise people momentarily in their everyday world but which are also essentially just as accessible as the presently experienced; medium transcendences, which, like the consciousness of the other person, are in principle closed to the individual but which can be accessed indirectly; and major transcendences, which can be grasped only in reference to a different reality. The structural origin of religion therefore lies in personal experience constituted intersubjectively. If the human being is by nature religious, then, according to Luckmann (1972: 5), there can also be "no society without religion."[4] Religion and society are not in an object-relation in which one is purely internal and the other is purely external. Rather, the borders between them are fluid and open.

To describe changes undergone by religion, Luckmann (1967) drew on the distinctions between social structure, person and religion. By social structure, he understood the system of institutions that shape behavior; by religion, the transcendence-related layers in the social construction of reality, a religious cosmos; by person, the individual self constituted socially, a self in which experiences of transcendence are already embedded (Luckmann 1972: 9). It is in archaic societies that the interweaving of person, religion and society is at its greatest. In such societies, religion is fused into the very structure of society and, as a social phenomenon, is proximal to a person's biography. The sacred themes of the social construction of reality are closely intertwined with the practices

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3   Luckmann's formulations remain unclear. How is "direct experience" different from experiences of transcendence? Is not every experience a process of transcending? Problems in determining the relationship between subjectivity and sociality, which Alfred Schütz, Luckmann's teacher, could not bring into balance with each other, repeat themselves here. What is meant by the difficult formulation that the function of religion lies in the "socialization of people's dealings with transcendence" (1985: 26)? Are there dealings with transcendence that are *not* socialized? This would contradict another argument made by Luckmann—viz., that "humanity" is bestowed upon the human "by the respective social forms of religion" (1967: 108).

4   Wohlrab-Sahr (2000: 44) arrives at a different conclusion in her interpretation of Luckmann's theory.

of everyday life, from hunting to coitus. In high cultures, though, the sacred emerges in specific institutions of the social structure and obtains in them a visible social foundation. Connected to this is the fact that the sacred cosmos increasingly stands in opposition to an individual's everyday world, and that the person can discover within the self the embedded religious dimension as something subjective. In turn, industrial societies see a rupture between social institutions and the sacred themes of interpreting the world; consequently, the interpretations of the world administered monopolistically in the religious institutions lose their function of integrating meaning for the everyday actions of the individual, and the religious cosmos becomes subjectivized and privatized.

Due to the segmentation of the social structure or, as we would say, its functional differentiation, religious interpretation of the world and the individual move close together, but can no longer be mediated by the institution of the church. Critical to the subjectification of the religious creation of meaning is therefore the disentanglement of social institutions, including the churches, from the religious cosmos. As a result of this disentanglement, these institutions can no longer create meaning for the individual, but if the official model of religion—the church—is no longer able to transport religious meanings, then religion becomes a private matter. From now on, Luckmann argues, the individual selects from among the "ultimate" meanings on offer in accordance with his or her own wishes and constructs from them his or her own private system of "ultimate" meanings. Into this system can flow psychoanalysis, LSD cults, or Zen just as much as can the expansion of consciousness, sexuality, or self-realization. A "new social form of religion" begins to emerge. Content-wise, it is characterized by a sacralization of the individual; in social-structural terms, by the individual's privatization. For Luckmann, religious change in modern societies is not characterized by an individual loss of faith *en masse*, but instead by a massive loss in the relevance of the churches. The individual remains religious (1969: 172), even if the new social form of religion is only weakly institutionalized and undergoes a process in which transcendence shrinks—but not one in which "transcendence is lost fully (which would amount to a depersonalization of the person!)" (1972: 13).

By expanding the concept of religion and universalizing it anthropologically, Luckmann managed "to hunt down strategically the secularization thesis" (Tyrell 1996: 445).[5] The distinction between religion and church in particular

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5   Assigning Luckmann to the camp of critics of secularization theory is not self-explanatory. In the USA, his privatization thesis is usually added to secularization theory (Gorski 2000: 139 ff.,

served Luckmann as a means to achieve this goal. This illustrates once again what the criticism of the limitations of the view in church sociology was really about from the start. By anchoring religion as an evolutionary constant in the *conditio humana* and distinguishing it from its historical and institutional forms of realization (1963: 36, 40 ff.), Luckmann was able to accept the declines in importance suffered by the church while denying the decline in importance of religion. According to Luckmann, the "general basic form of religion" is not affected by changes to its institutionalized forms and survives these changes in the niche of the private.

Sociology of Religion as Sociology of Christianity

Such an act of dehistoricizing theory-building in the sociology of religion was precisely what the sociology of Christianity sought to avoid. On the one hand, it tried to break out of the narrow understanding of religion in church sociology and to overcome the identification of religion with church. On the other hand, though, it did not reject as an aberration from the outset the research practice of church sociology, and in comparison to the sociology of religion oriented toward a general concept of religion, it sought to specify for religion a point of reference that was socio-historically determinable (Gabriel 1983: 183). Even if religion should not be reduced to churchliness, the general content of religion, argued Rendtorff (1980: 198), can never be identified without orientation to the specific "form of religious expression and religious institutions." In Protestantism, Trutz Rendtorff and Joachim Matthes called for the sociology of religion to be practiced as a "sociology of Christianity," and Franz-Xaver Kaufmann and Karl Gabriel made the same claim in Catholicism.

As did Matthes and Rendtorff, Franz-Xaver Kaufmann (1979: 59 ff.) also observed a decoupling of the self-understanding of the church from the social environment. Since the nineteenth century, he argued, Catholicism had set itself in opposition to society and state. Kaufmann (1979: 100 ff.) traced the separation of these areas back to a churchification of Christianity in the nineteenth century, a process which strengthened and sacralized the centralistic and bureaucratic structures of organization of Catholicism and attached Christian elements of meaning to the church's institutional contexts of action. For Kaufmann, the reduction of religion to churchliness had its social basis in these processes of churchifying Christianity. The identification of the Christian with

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Goldstein 2009: 168). In fact, his evolutionary argument remains committed to the framework assumptions of differentiation and modernization theory, but its target is clearly to identify secularization as a "modern myth" and secularization theories as "faulty constructions" (Luckmann 1980 [1969], 1967: 179).

the explicitly religious, and of the religious with the established churches, corresponded to the secularization of modern society, which saw wide areas of social life emerging from the explicitly Christian sovereignty of interpretation and being decoupled from religion (Kaufmann 1979: 101). If Christianity wants to remain competitive in the future, then, on the one hand, it must recognize that it no longer offers any identification opportunities in its organizational forms, and that it must take into account community spaces of experience beyond its institutionalized forms (Kaufmann 1979: 33). On the other hand, however, Kaufmann (1979: 103 ff.) also considered "the transmissibility of such a non-church Christianity [as being] an extraordinarily improbable matter. Christianity without institutional support is historically almost impossible to imagine."

The balance maintained by Kaufmann between the concept of an institutionally anchored Christianity and the idea of a non-church Christianity was a balance that Trutz Rendtorff shifted in favor of a theory of Christianity exceeding the institutional framework. His concern was to lay bare the Christian traditions of thought buried by the churchification of Christianity and to make them fruitful for a theory of Christianity that is relevant for the challenges of the time. As did Matthes and Luckmann, Rendtorff (1966: 119) also maintained that the prediction of the imminent withering away of religion drew its persuasive power from the reduction of religion to churchliness. For Rendtorff, the certainty of faith not derivable from the church, as it was given to Christendom by the event of the Reformation, nonetheless exceeded the institution of the church (1969: 61, 1985: 570). While a church that does not have its theological focus outside of itself is in opposition to society (1975: 60 ff.), religious subjectivity emancipated from the church can go into the world "as itself" (1966: 134). According to Rendtorff, it is precisely because religious subjectivity is underivable historically, sociologically and psychologically, and because it also cannot grasp itself, that it is able to become the enabling foundation of modern society, since the latter draws "its strength from the freedom and *dignitas* of the human being" (1985: 571). The sociologically inexplicable subject—which cannot grasp itself, but which has its reality "alone in the construction and implementation, in action," and therefore experiences itself as dependent on something that it cannot bring objectively before it—is the placeholder of the absolute; or "theologically speaking: the placeholder of God" (1975: 48, 75). It is this subjectivity that is not sociologically specifiable in its absoluteness that modernity, with its foundation in the absoluteness of freedom, urgently needs.

Rendtorff used the distinction between institutionally administered religion and religious self-awareness to dismantle the secularization thesis. By shifting the center of religion to the irreducible originality of the act of faith and iden-

tifying in this originality the implied exceeding of the institution of the church as the "step from the reformation of the church to the self-awareness of modern times," he procured the conceptual instruments required to stylize religion as the "administrator of modernity" (1985: 570, 572). By reducing the endangered substance to an intangible core, he was able to nestle the rescued absoluteness into the threatening power as its enabling foundation itself. He could then show that the concern for the survival of Christianity, "this direct concern for itself," was "ultimately unfounded" (1985: 568). The price of Rendtorff's rescue operation, however, was that, despite his protestations to the contrary (1966: 130 ff.), he was no longer able to specify the social location of this general Christianity (Wagner 1986: 233). If Rendtorff saw the specificity of Christianity as lying in its sociological inexplicability, and nevertheless made this inexplicable unit the indispensable foundation of modernity, then the social dimension of this Christianity remained sociologically uncomprehended. This subjectivized general religion is as socially necessary as it is sociologically indeterminable. Rendtorff barely went beyond the weaknesses of the Luckmannian concept of religion. As in Luckmann's work, there is in Rendtorff's work, too, a separation between general and historically specific religion. Neither Luckmann's sociology of knowledge nor Rendtorff's theory of Christianity managed to escape the aporias of church sociology.[6]

The Systems Theory Approach of Niklas Luhmann

This is certainly not the case in the system-theoretical approach of Niklas Luhmann. Although he established the function of religion at the level of society as a whole (Luhmann 1977: 79), he at the same time argues that the perception of the general function of religion had become increasingly specified in the course of evolution, had been increasingly left to its own devices in role systems, organizations and systemic contexts of distribution (1977: 34 f.), and had separated itself "into the improbable, the not-self-evident, the doubtable" (1978: 350), so that the religious finally no longer had "to prove itself to its own specific form, but against this form" (1977: 45). Luhmann's sociological analysis of religion was not determined by his interest in proving the universality and necessity of religion, and in refuting the secularization thesis. He confronted his object with a more distanced conceptuality and mocked the fact that idealistic figures of

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6   We can dispense here with a closer examination of Matthes' approach. Instead of an objective concept of religion that remains true to the historical conditions of Christianity and therefore sets religion and society apart, he called for a discursive understanding of religion that would surmount this dichotomy (Matthes 2005). His approach has remained largely underdeveloped.

thought who had sought to grasp the anthropological indeterminacy of human nature "under the title, 'subject' " were still theologically imitated (1977: 30, 241). Luhmann transferred the Kantian and idealist epistemology, which treats the transcendental subject as being just as *extramundane* as the "thing in itself," into an application case for systems theory, in which the distinction between definiteness and indefiniteness, or between the accessible and the inaccessible, is embedded into the circularity of the system/environment relationship.

The specificity of the Luhmannian approach lies in the fact that it unites the premises of the systems theory of Talcott Parsons with the meaning analyses of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. As did Parsons, Luhmann saw the function of social systems to be reducing environmental complexity and to stabilize the systemic information processing capacity through the constitution of boundaries. Unlike the structural-functional theory of Parsons, though, Luhmann did not inquire into the functions that have to be fulfilled so that the state of equilibrium and therefore the condition of society could be guaranteed. Rather, his functional-structural theory prioritized the concept of function over the concept of structure, and was therefore able also to problematize structures and to inquire into the rationale of system-building (1967: 114). According to Luhmann, the problem that systems have to solve resides in the complexity of the world. World is not simply pre-given to the complexity-reducing system as a problem, however, since then it would have to be thought of as being indifferent and empty (1971: 297). And just as little do systems constitute world. Rather, system and world were treated by Luhmann as being equally fundamental (1971: 307).

It was at this point that Husserl's meaning analysis came into play, since social systems reduce the complexity of the world by not only selecting from other options, but also at the same time by referring to these options in all their selections. Meaning makes selections continuously as selections, and thereby constitutes world as that total horizon that functions in each determination as presented infinity. In the complexity-reducing meaningful selection, world is therefore not destroyed, but is retained as indefinable horizon. But if the indefinable and the inaccessible belong to the environment of systems, and the concept of environment can only be defined relative to system, then the two-sidedness of apparent and non-apparent environment is system dependent and therefore socially variable. Systems can of course shift their environmental horizon and also represent what used to be a-present and bring it into their scope of understanding. But they cannot cancel it. Each selection takes place in the context of other possibilities and remains set as definite against indefinable (1977: 30). This applies not only to the environment of systems, but also to the systems themselves. Social and personal systems themselves are also not

fully accessible and therefore come up against inner horizons. With the formulation of such a system/environment relationship that is surmountable neither outwardly nor inwardly, Luhmann substitutes the claim to ultimate principles, be it a system-independent being in itself (1977: 19) or a subject underlying the world, with an inescapable circle of differences that are neither reducible to each other nor defeasible.

For Luhmann, the reference problem of religion lies in the simultaneity of determinacy and indeterminacy posited inevitably in every meaningful selection. Religion "has the function for the social system of transforming the indefinable, i.e., interminable outwardly (environment) and inwardly (system) world into a definable world" (1977: 26), thereby making bearable "the essentially contingent selectivity of social structures and worldviews" (1972: 250). The reference problem of religion can "at any moment break out in every theme, in every disappointment or surprise" (1977: 35). It is therefore of universal relevance, even if the way it is dealt with can increasingly only still be done in a subsystem-specific, historically concrete and particularistic manner (Luhmann 1977: 8, 35 ff., 45). Religion thereby fulfills its function through enciphering—through the fact, that is, that it replaces the indeterminate with the determinate, and therefore conceals the former. While non-religious meaning selections necessarily refer to other possibilities that may criticize and negate them, religious forms of meaning absorb into themselves all attempted transgressions and thereby make invisible the contingency of all determinations of meaning and structure formations, even their own.

However, with the transformation of society from stratification to functional differentiation, which is accomplished with the development of modern society, the function of religion nonetheless comes under pressure to adapt. Although the chances of "increased selectivity, specificity and functional specialization" (1977: 247) also increase for religion with its functional act of becoming independent, so that, in functionally differentiated societies in particular, sophisticated religious answers must be found that are "not contaminated by subsidiary economic, political, familial or academic considerations" (1977: 248), processes of functional differentiation were interpreted by Luhmann, however, primarily as a socio-structural cause of secularization (1977: 228). At the *personal level*, the consequence of functional differentiation consisted for Luhmann in the privatization of religious decision-making. Faith and participation in church life can no longer be expected based on a general consensus regardless of the motivational situation (1977: 239). They become instead a matter of individual decision-making. At the *societal level*, functional differentiation results in a change to the form of social integration (1977: 242). In functionally differentiated societies, Luhmann argued, the need for, and the

possibility of, selections binding the whole of society recede (1977: 79). That is why the structures and forms of meaning of the system of religion are no longer covered by social isomorphisms and can then also no longer function as an expression of a unit of integration incorporating the whole of society (1977: 248). At the *worldview or cognitive level*, functional differentiation means finally that, due to the increase in the capacity of society to dissolve and recombine, the horizons of the ascertainable are continually widened, and the ever more improbable is included in the world horizon. Religious forms of contingency absorption produced through concealing the indeterminate can, under conditions of high world complexity and of reference structures left open, claim ever less plausibility for themselves and become increasingly inadequate in the face of complexity (1977: 253 ff.). Even if the contingencies of modern societies always produce a need for religion, the problem therefore arises of whether religion is still possible at all under modern conditions (1977: 8).

Luhmann's approach in the sociology of religion undoubtedly offered stimulating ideas for further historical and sociological analyses. The approach understood itself exclusively, though, as a contribution to sociological theory-building, even if Luhmann did draw repeatedly on empirical and historical material. But Luhmann referred to this material only selectively and for purely illustrative purposes. The absence of a systematic empirical foundation is the most obvious weakness of Luhmann's systems theory.

Religion in the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School

This weakness became even stronger in a theoretical approach that can be located in a tradition of thought that began with Hegel and Marx, and is regarded perhaps as being typically German—Critical Theory. Following from the idealistic thinking of Hegel, which, like Marx, it stood on its head, Critical Theory assigned everything ideal—art, philosophy, religion—to the dialectic of the social. As did Marx, Horkheimer and Adorno also understood religion as the expression of repressive power relations, as their manifestation, their transfiguration, their compensation, and their cement (Mörth 1983: 46). Unlike Marx, however, they considered the overcoming of alienated relationships through their revolutionizing as being no longer a realizable component of reasonable practice. The reason employed to emancipate the subject from its dependence on nature had instead turned into a principle of domination that subordinated and instrumentalized everything that opposed it (Adorno 1966: 147). The subject, starting with the aim of freeing itself from the domination of nature, had become instead the object of the domination that it had created. For Adorno, the wholeness of history was the untrue; the wholly other of history was the true, which, though, could not be realized historically. Even Critical

Theory itself had degenerated into a necessarily powerless protest against the totality of reification and alienation, and could only be thought of now as a negative dialectic.

It is not surprising that, within this gnostic devaluation of everything historical (Rohrmoser 1970: 23), religion should nonetheless be able to become still a place of utopia without history: and that is as a longing for the wholly other. It was the late Horkheimer (1970, 1971: 118–119) who opposed this longing to the "reality of the world with all its horror." For Horkheimer, though, we are not able to say what the "absolute opposed to the world" is. The belief that this world of horror "is not the final" nevertheless connects "all people who do not want to put up with the injustice of this world" and belongs "essentially to what we call human culture." Religion is again something incomprehensible, again something necessary, and the social location of this religion of longing is again indeterminable. The late Horkheimer's revaluation of religion, a revaluation resulting from the devaluation of the historical, clearly preserved the remnants of the Marxist utopia of reconciliation, a utopia that, given the extensive loss of hope, can of course appear only as an unspecifiable negation. Sociological thought about religion bears in Germany a philosophical legacy that it can barely throw off.

This is also true for the communication and action theory of Jürgen Habermas, whose picture of society was significantly brighter than that of Horkheimer and Adorno, but whose line of argument nonetheless remained committed to the issues raised by the philosophy of the subject. Going back to the philosophical thought of the Enlightenment, Habermas (1974) investigated the rational foundations of modern societies. Habermas no longer found the answer to the question of the self-grounding of modernity in the philosophy of the subject, however, but in the theory of communicative reason (Habermas 1981). "Reason grounding in the principle of subjectivity" (Habermas 1985: 70) necessarily led, according to the analyses of Horkheimer and Adorno, to the process of instrumentalization fateful in the history of mankind. The function of reason performed by modernity can therefore be taken over only by a reason that is not subject-centered, but created communicatively. Accordingly, Habermas analyzed the evolution of religion from the viewpoint of investigating the extent to which the sacred, as expressed in particularistic rituals, verbalized and universalized itself and could therefore itself become, in a generally accessible form, a resource of self-assurance for modernity (1981). Rainer Döbert (1973: 133, 140) connected with this approach in his attempt to work out the evolutionary potential within religion to transcend historical particularities, to increase human reflexivity, to emancipate people from the constraints of dominant norm systems, and to create a comprehensive consensus. As in systems

theory, though, the crucial weakness of the approach to religion of Critical Theory lay in its inadequate empirical foundation.

Empirical Sociology of Religion and Church

In the shadow of the grand theories, and without the power to influence for a sustained period the social-theoretical reflections on religion and its changes, a small circle of sociologists of church and religion in Germany dedicated themselves in the 1970s and 1980s to dealing with empirical questions. Alarmed by the sharp rise in the number of people leaving the church at the end of the 1960s, both the Catholic and the Protestant church commissioned representative studies to analyze the observable changes in their effects on the stability of the institution of the church. Gerhard Schmidtchen, for example, came to the conclusion (1972: 80 ff.) in his investigations of Catholicism that there was a separation taking place between the value system represented by the church and value preferences held by the individual. For Schmidtchen, the church stood for morality and order, for altruism and community, for stability and eternal salvation, whereas the individual was interested in a free and independent life, in the dismantling of unnecessary authorities, in advancement and pleasure, as well as in social justice. By exposing the discrepancy in values, Schmidtchen thought that he had identified a key factor in people's abandonment of the churches.

Investigations of the Protestant church diagnosed relative stability, however (Hild 1974). Despite some reservations, the majority of Protestant church members felt relatively connected to their church and still wished to have the key moments in their life accompanied by official acts of the church (Hild 1974: 59 ff.). However, church membership was switching from an ascribed to an acquired characteristic and was increasingly perceived as being something that people decided on. With its study of church membership, "How stable is the church?" which has been repeated every ten years with a similar battery of questions since first being introduced in 1972, the Protestant church in Germany has created an instrument of self-observation which is probably unique worldwide (see EKD 2014). The questions concerning church ties, membership motives, expectations held of the church, criticism of the church, the willingness to be baptized, frequencies of participation, forms of belief, etc. allow a comparison of changing religious and church attitudes and practices over what is now the past four decades.

A comparatively large number of studies have dealt with the role of the pastor in the parish, with how the pastor understands his or her profession, and with the problems that the pastor has to integrate into his or her religious, professional and political identity (Fischer 1977, Marhold et al. 1977). What

is interesting above all about the profession of pastor or priest, obviously, is the fact that it is positioned at the intersection between church institution and parish members, where the tensions between church and society are particularly evident (Lukatis 1983: 206).

It is also interesting that a few empirical projects had already investigated the phenomenon of a religiosity that transgressed the borders of the church, and had therefore attempted to understand areas of the interpretation of meaning and of the experience of transcendence independent of the church (Boos-Nünning 1972, Lukatis 1976). Although distance from the church is not always accompanied by a comprehensive areligiosity, the studies showed that religiosity, also in the general and church-independent sense, is "strongly influenced by the church" (Lukatis 1983: 210).

Current Trends in German Sociology of Religion

Already during the 1980s, there was a broadening of the themes addressed in the sociology of religion. Work to exegete the classics, and in particular Max Weber's approach to the sociology of religion, gained in importance (Schluchter 1984, 1987). As a result of Weber's work, the concept of charisma was given particular attention (Lipp 1985, Ebertz 1987). And, inspired by Robert Bellah, such a theme as civil religion, which was up to then rather arcane for the European region, also attracted attention (Kleger and Müller 1986, Lubbe 1986, Schieder 1987)—a theme drawing not only on Weber's approach, but also that of Émile Durkheim. The initial trigger for the boom in research in the sociology of religion that began in the 1990s was the sociology congress in Zurich in 1988, where, for the first time in decades, a plenary session dealt with the subject of religion (Gabriel and Reuter 2004: 30 f.).

Changes to the landscape of discussion in the sociology of religion in the last two decades are certainly due primarily to social changes that have taken place in the religious domain itself: religious pluralism, religious individualization, the politicization of the religious, its mediatization, and globalization. The question of the relationship between religion and churchliness no longer dominated the discussion, although it has still continued to play a role. Rather, there was a remarkable expansion of themes. In addition to the issues that had already been dealt with, such as church ties, non-church religiosity, the function of religion in society, and the definition of religion, new themes now emerged that addressed the public relevance of religion: religion and politics (Minkenberg and Willems 2002), religion and migration (Reuter 2009), religion and law (Koenig 2005), religion and social capital (Pickel and Glad-

kich 2011, Traunmüller 2012a), religion and media (Malik, Rüpk, and Wobbe 2007).[7] Also gaining importance were investigations of the role of religion in international contexts: religion and globalization (Tyrell 2004, Petzke 2013), new religious movements (Riesebrodt 1990, Eiben and Viehöver 1993, Kern 1997, Pollack 2000, Kippenberg 2011), and churches and religious communities in international relationships (Brocker, Behr and Hildebrandt 2003). There was also an opening to other regions, in particular in relation to the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe, open to sociological research after the fall of the Iron Curtain (Pollack, Müller and Pickel 2012, Pickel and Sammet 2012, Müller 2013). Traditional themes in the sociology of religion have also received attention, including such themes as religion in the course of people's lives (Wohlrab-Sahr 1995), religion and youth (Gensicke 2006), religious milieus (Benthaus-Apel 2006), but less so religion and social strata, religion and gender (but see Wohlrab-Sahr and Rosenstock 2000) or social forms of religion (but see Hero 2010). In addition, the exegesis of the works of the founding fathers of the sociology of religion, especially of Max Weber (Tyrell 2014), Émile Durkheim (Firsching 1994) and Georg Simmel (Krech 1998a), has continued. Noticeable also is the strong reception of approaches in the sociology of religion from non-German-speaking countries, including most importantly individualization theorists such as Grace Davie and Danièle Hervieu-Léger, post-structuralists such as José Casanova and Talal Asad, and also representatives of the American market model such as Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone.[8]

The expansion of themes and the opening up to the international context are related to a reassessment of the value of religion in modern society. While religion was often treated in the past as a dependent variable, dependent on processes of modernization, rationalization and differentiation, it is now seen as having its own dynamic power. Religion and modernity are not opposed to each other; rather, both are compatible with each other, and religion is itself even a modernizing resource. It does not withdraw into the private sphere but has acquired a new public and political effectiveness. Of course, not a few academics adhere to the central tenets of secularization theory and contradict the thesis of the return of religion. Above all, sociologists of religion who work

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7   See also the series "Religion and Media" published by Oliver Krüger, Bielefeld, by transcript since 2011.

8   At the sociology congress in Dresden in 1996, a whole session was devoted to the comparison of the religious situation in Germany and the USA, this session giving a prominent place to discussion of the new economic paradigm presented by Laurence Iannaccone. This paradigm was commented critically upon by Andrew Greeley, Wolfgang Jagodzinski, and Jürgen Kaube. (cf. Iannaccone, Finke and Stark 1997, Greeley 1997, Jagodzinski 1997.)

with standardized methods observe in Germany and beyond tendencies of decline in the significance of religion. But sociologists of religion who work with qualitative methods come mostly to the opposite conclusion: there is more religion than we might think. They accuse the quantitatively oriented sociologists of religion of paying as little attention in their analyses to the personal importance of religiosity as they do to its symbolic dimension; the results of their investigations are the product of an institutionally constricted concept of religion.

Recent discussion in the sociology of religion therefore leads to a network of closely related questions, of which a few appear to be central. These include questions as to (1) what definition of religion underlies the research, (2) the extent to which the concept of secularization is useful in identifying current religious change, (3) how justified it is to speak of processes of religious individualization, (4) the extent to which the religious landscape is pluralizing, and what consequences this has, and (5) what sociological approaches are appropriate for the area of religious phenomena.

Research in the sociology of religion has also been characterized since the 1990s by a strengthening of interdisciplinary cooperation. As in sociology, so has interest in religion grown in history, anthropology and political science, with these disciplines leaning heavily on the theorems and methods of the social sciences, while seeing their research results also being taken up increasingly by the sociology of religion (Koenig and Wolf 2013: 5). The specificity of work in the sociology of religion since the 1990s lies, however, not only in its thematic broadening, in its internationalization and the intensification of its interdisciplinary exchange, but also and above all in the fact that empirical research and theoretical considerations have moved closer together, theoretical approaches have been applied empirically and theory and empirical work are no longer separated by a deep chasm. Only a few sociologists of religion still do without an empirical foundation to their ideas and content themselves with theoretical speculations. The extent to which the sociology of religion in Germany has become an established sociological sub-discipline can also be seen in the fact that it maintains its subject-internal standards through introductory works and textbooks (Krech 1999, Knoblauch 1999, Pickel 2011).

The widening of themes corresponds to the expansion of the institutional infrastructure. Research in the sociology of religion takes place in Germany today not only at the university chairs bearing that title. Rather, there are now a number of centers of excellence, graduate schools, research groups, Max-Planck institutes, and Leibniz institutes where research in the sociology of religion is also carried out. GESIS, the service institution for the social sciences, archives sets of data, creates bibliographies and provides consultancy

services for the implementation of studies in the social sciences. And of course many scholars of religion, historians and theologians research in the area of the sociology of religion without this necessarily being their primary interest. It is worth noting that today there are hardly any church-supported institutes with their research focus on the sociology of religion or church, the most striking exception being the Social Science Institute of the Protestant Church in Germany, which is located in Hannover. But both the Catholic and the Protestant church each have a statistics department that operates professionally. We can name the following research bodies as being important with regard to the research being conducted in the sociology of religion:

– Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics in Pre-Modern and Modern Cultures" at the University of Münster.
– Cluster of Excellence "The Formation of Normative Orders" at the Goethe-University Frankfurt-am-Main.
– Center for Religious Studies (CERES) at the Ruhr-University Bochum.
– Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity at the University of Göttingen.
– Max-Weber College, Erfurt.
– Center of the Interdisciplinary Research on Religion and Society (CIRRuS), University of Bielefeld.
– Academy of World Religions at the University of Hamburg.
– Center for Turkish Studies and Integration Research at the University of Duisburg-Essen.
– Religion Monitor of the Bertelsmann Foundation, Gütersloh.
– Graduate College "Christian Churches and the Challenge of 'Europe'" at the Leibniz Institute for European History in Mainz.
– Graduate College "Interpretive Power: Religion and Belief Systems in Conflicts of Interpretation" at the University of Rostock.

Given the diversity and breadth of research in the sociology of religion over the past two decades, it is impossible to provide an exhaustive overview. Instead, I shall refer to some of the main points of the discussion, where I shall also refer back to the five key questions listed above.

The Problem of Defining Religion

Recent work in the sociology of religion is still concerned with the question of which concept of religion should be used as the basis of research. A suggestion recently made that has received widespread approval is to understand religion primarily as communication (Tyrell, Knoblauch and Krech 1998). While one

tradition of thought, emanating from Schleiermacher, passing through William James, and reaching the phenomenological approach of Thomas Luckmann, sees the core of the religious in feeling and experience, this suggestion understands religion primarily as socially constituted (Tyrell 1996: 4 35). The social does not attach itself secondarily to the individual religious experience, but is constitutive of this experience from the very beginning, and even gives it in the first place its sense identifiable as religious. The core of the religious does not distinguish itself through the fact that it is ineffable; rather, religion is a communicative construct. The advantage of this theoretical understanding of religion in terms of communication is that it can solve the theoretical problems of constitution in the relationship between direct experience and experience of transcendence, between subjectivity and sociality, that burdened the Luckmannian understanding of religion. One weakness, though, can be seen in the fact that religion does not emerge only in communication, but also knows practices virtually free of communication and discourse, as well as religious beliefs, ideas and experiences that are not communicated at all.

Research in the sociology of religion is still also occupied with the question of whether a substantive or a functional or a polythetic definition of religion is preferable. The substantial method specifies a substantive feature (for example, "belief in God") to define religion. Such a definition is usually too narrow, because belief in God does not characterize all religions. The functional method identifies religion through the statement of social or personal effects by attributing to it, for example, the solution to problems of integration or legitimation or contingency. In doing so, it is also able to open revealing cross perspectives on the subject, which often do not arise from religious self-understanding. What remains questionable, though, is the way in which it determines the reference problem of religion. In addition, functional definitions of religion are always too broad, since, to solve the problem of what religion refers to, it is always possible to find functional equivalents that also deal with the problem identified, but do so in a non-religious manner. Polythetic definitions of religion, which create a list of possible but not absolutely necessary attributes, have the advantage of being able to make smooth transitions between the religious and the non-religious. But they are not able to specify exactly how many of the attributes there must be in each case to distinguish religion from non-religion.

The suggestion by Franz-Xaver Kaufmann (1989: 84 ff.) not only to identify different functions of religion (affective bonds, action guidance, processing contingency, integration, meaning, protest), but also to tie the "specifically religious quality" of interpretive patterns and practices to the "simultaneous fulfillment of several such functions" (1989: 87) is anything but convincing.

A phenomenon is not all the more religious, the more religious functions it fulfills. At the level of functional analysis, the difference between religious and non-religious phenomena appears elusive. The proposal made elsewhere by Kaufmann (2003: 35) that we ascribe definiteness to the concept of religion if and inasmuch as various world religions recognize each other as "religion" means making the definition of religion dependent on the self-understanding of those belonging to a religion and forfeiting the analytical advantages of a functional approach. A combination of functional analyses and substantive arguments might possibly help us further here (Pollack 2003: 46 ff.).

Finally, what have been discussed for several years now are the discursive conditions inevitably implied in each concept of religion used, conditions that absorb not only cultural influences but also power effects. Here the whole range of instruments of Foucauldian discourse analysis come into play. In this cultural-studies approach, religion is understood less as a content-specified entity than as a discourse category whose meaning is disputed and negotiated in social struggles (Bergunder 2011: 35 ff.; see also Matthes 1992: 129). Bergunder (2011: 38, 44) therefore calls for researchers to open up genealogically the social deposits accumulated in the concept of religion, thereby casting light on the discourse of religion in its continuity and discontinuity.

The Usefulness of the Secularization Theorem

Closely intertwined with the debate on the concept of religion is the question of the extent to which the concept of secularization is appropriate to capture the changes that religion is currently undergoing. Since the critical objections raised within secularization theory by Luckmann, Matthes and Rendtorff, the reservations concerning secularization theory have increased rather than decreased. These reservations no longer refer only to the reductionist concept of religion which the theory assumes, but also to the deterministic, unilinear and teleological character of secularization theory, to the Eurocentrism that accompanies it, to its treatment of religion as a dependent variable, to its assertion of a relationship of tension between religion and modernity and of a rupture between modernity and tradition, as well as generally to the theoretical foundations of the secularization theorem, which stresses modernization and differentiation. Sometimes the rejection of secularization theory takes on almost apodictic traits. The novelty of the theoretical debate concerning secularization since the 1990s is that, with a few exceptions, to which of course some of the sharpest critics of the secularization thesis belong (Joas 2012, Beck 2008), it has been carried out on an empirical basis.

This applies already to the seminal works of Karl Gabriel (1992), Michael N. Ebertz (1997), and Karl-Fritz Daiber (1995). While Gabriel and Ebertz follow a

theoretical paradigm that stresses individualization, Daiber represents a theoretical approach that stresses modernization and differentiation. In his seminal work, Gabriel traced on the basis of a broad empirical data base the radical change which began in Germany in the 1960s from a church-led Christianity to a religious landscape marked by individualization, de-institutionalization and pluralization, and placed this change in the dissolution of traditional areas of industrial society, the melting of denominational milieus, the destandardization of traditional patterns of family, work and life cycle, and the delimitation of predetermined structures. In the wake of these changes, the access of the institution to actions performed by the individual loosen, and individuals are increasingly challenged to choose their religiosity themselves. In the postmodern period, the social relevance of religion does not recede; rather, the surplus of contingencies generated systematically in the risk society creates "a new need for religion" (Gabriel 1992: 43–68, 121–158). Instead, Daiber (1995: 175), following Luhmann, emphasized the reduction in the function of the system of religion resulting from the process of functional differentiation. Due to the high number of people leaving the church, the organizational character of the churches in Germany has become stronger, and their character as institutions for the whole of society has weakened. Churchliness is no longer culturally prescribed, but is now a highly subjective life design. Nevertheless, a Christian mood remains present for those tied to the church as well as for those not organized religiously, albeit in a highly generalized form (cf. Daiber 1995: 183).

The recent objections to secularization theory bear the signs of an attempted paradigm shift. In turning away from the theoretical assumptions of modernization made by secularization theory, critics of the theory emphasize the compatibility of religion and modernity (Graf 2004: 55 ff.). In place of the causal-analytical assumptions of modernization theory, which are criticized for being deterministic and teleological, there is now the thesis of the contingency of modernity (Knöbl 2007). No longer of interest is the dependence of religion on social conditions, but the dynamic potential within religion, a potential that is able to form and to change these conditions. Work has emerged on the religious roots of the welfare state (Manow 2008), the religious formation of nationalism (Spohn 2008), the religious origins of human rights (Joas 2011). Theses on the impact of rationalization, differentiation and modernization on religion are rejected as master narratives, however. Talk is now not of differentiation but de-differentiation, not of secularization but sacralization, not of the decline of the social relevance of religion but its return.

But there are nevertheless in the German sociology of religion still a considerable number of representatives of secularization theory. They are mainly found in the camp of social scientists working with quantitative methods (Wolf

2008, Meulemann 2009, Pollack 2003, 2009; Wolf and Roßteutscher 2013). In their analyses, they test the applicability of secularization theory, often by comparing it to other models in the sociology of religion (Pickel 2010; Pollack, Müller and Pickel 2012). In doing so, they come to the conclusion that the theory has a significant explanatory power both within Germany and internationally. But some of the qualitatively oriented sociologists of religion have also joined the camp of the secularization theorists. Ulrich Oevermann (1995), for example, has argued that the discrepancy between the infinity of hypothetical possibilities and the limitedness of human life always create a need for religion and for forms of ethical affirmation relevant to how people live their lives, a need which, due to the increased demands today on people's capacity to perform, has perhaps become even stronger. However, the traditional myths of affirmation provided by religion have in the meantime become largely obsolete. The approach developed by Oevermann has given rise to a large number of empirical studies (Wohlrab-Sahr 1998, Gärtner and Sammet 2003).

Religious Individualization

In attempting to overcome the alleged fixation of the sociology of religion on a concept of religion defined in terms of the church, many sociologists of religion have gone in "search of the invisible religion"—of forms of religiosity outside the church (Knoblauch 1991a: 24 ff.). They have presented work on the "small life world of bodybuilders" (Honer 1985), on the "world of the diviners and dowsers" (Knoblauch 1991b), on the "New Age" of Fritjof Capra (Knoblauch 1993), on the social construction of occult reality (Stenger 1993), on the "religious from the counselor corner" (Brüggen 2005), on agnostic spirituality (Wohlrab-Sahr, Karstein and Schaumburg 2005), all of which seek to give empirical underpinning to Luckmann's thesis of the emergence of a new social form of religion, and to demonstrate the untenability of the theory of secularization. Once again, we can see how strongly empirical research depends on the concept of religion assumed in each case. The questioning of the claims made by secularization theory is carried out in Germany, and indeed in Europe as a whole, less by reference to the economic market model, whose applicability to Europe, where there is limited religious competition, is generally viewed skeptically. Rather, by pointing to the fact that there is a broad current of popular, alternative and subjective religion independent and outside of the churches, whose decline is not disputed, critics of secularization theory in Germany and Europe have turned more to the individualization thesis as an alternative theory.

For example, Hubert Knoblauch, a student of Luckmann (Gabriel 1992: 43–68, 121–141, 142–157), links the upswing in religion which he sees as occurring

not only worldwide but also in Germany and Europe to the increasing impor-
tance of spirituality, belief in reincarnation, occultism, esotericism, magic, but
also to the blooming of charismatic and Pentecostal movements (Knoblauch
2009). All these forms of alternative religiosity are anti-institutional, based
on experience, anti-intellectualistic, and holistic (Knoblauch 2002: 298, 303).
They build "on the importance of the subjective, unmediated access of experi-
ence to transcendent values," thereby disempowering the religious experts and
established religious institutions, and often settling beyond them (2002: 302).
As such, they are part of a process of cultural de-differentiation in which the
boundaries are dissolved between the sacred and the profane, the public and
the private, and in which religious communication emigrates from the sphere
of religion and can now be found in the rituals of sports fans as much as in tele-
vised weddings, in rituals of confession conducted by the mass media, and in
punk (2008: 5). For Knoblauch and the other representatives of the individual-
ization thesis, the new social form of the religious is therefore characterized by
the release from traditional, institutional and dogmatic regulations, by a high
degree of authority on the part of the individual to make his or her own deci-
sions, and by a religious syncretism (often referred to as a bricolage or patch-
work religiosity) into which religious forms that at first glance do not appear to
be at all religious flow.

There are two questions in particular that are aimed critically at individu-
alization theory. First, to what extent are the forms of alternative religiosity
really so widespread that we can reject secularization theory? The argument
that the gains made in the field of alternative spirituality can compensate the
losses incurred by the churches is often questioned. It is interesting here that
there have been for some time now studies on the phenomenon of alternative
spirituality that use methods that are not only qualitative, but also quantitative
(Siegers 2012). This should allow us to estimate better than before the social rel-
evance of religiosity not linked to the church and changes to its religiosity. The
question is also raised about the kind of relationship that the highly individu-
alized forms of alternative religiosity and spirituality have to institutionalized
churchliness, the extent to which there are crossovers and interdependencies,
and the degree to which the individualized alternative forms of religion fol-
low communicative and institutionally or socially prescribed patterns. Pollack
(2009: 143 ff.) has observed positive correlations between individualized and
institutionally bound religiosity. Krech (1998b) has worked out the social basis
of symbol systems and interpretative patterns in subjectively and emotionally
colored accounts of conversion. Hero (2010) has examined the institutionalized
social forms of individualized religion. Benthaus-Apel (2006) has identified
different milieus of communalizing experience under the conditions of far-

advanced individualization, and Wohlrab-Sahr (1997) has understood individualization, besides its importance as a particularity and variance determinable in social-structural terms, quite generally as a culturally influenced mode of ascription. Even individualization theorists have discovered recently invisible religion within the visible (Bochinger, Engelbrecht and Gebhardt 2009), and inquire into the connection between the two. It has become clear that sociologists should counteract sociologically the disappearance of the religious into the darkness of subjective relevancies (Laube 2014).

The Pluralization of the Religious

Increasing religious pluralization in Germany and other European countries is indisputable. At the same time, though, the limits of religious diversity in Europe are also seen (Daiber 1995: 172 ff.). What is debated here is (a) how pronounced religious pluralism is, and how it can be measured empirically, (b) the political and legal conditions influencing the processes of religious pluralization and, in particular, of immigration, (c) the consequences that the formation of religious competition has on the vitality of the religious landscape, and (d) how the coexistence of different religions is perceived and dealt with socially, politically and religiously.

Many projects are devoted to the numerical investigation of religious communities and organizations in selected regions and municipalities of Germany, and they attest to a colorful mosaic of the most diverse religious groupings. Absorbing the criticism made by Voas, Olson and Crockett (2002) of the Herfindahl index, Wolf (2012) has discussed different concepts and problems in measuring religious plurality. If the conceptually central question is considered of how likely it is for the individual to belong to different religious groups, then the degree of identifiable religious pluralism decreases significantly.

Work on the political and legal conditions that affect the processes of religious pluralization deal with models of state regulation of the religious landscape, with types of state/church relationships, with immigration policies, and with the dynamics of the politics of religion both at the state level and in international comparison (Traunmüller 2012b). In this work, ideas from the elaborate studies of the American sociology of religion are widely discussed.

In dealing with the assumptions of the economic market model, some studies in the sociology of religion investigate the extent to which increasing religious pluralization contributes to raising the level of religiosity. In general, such effects cannot be proven in the European countries or in Germany (Hero and Krech 2011).

Finally, as regards the treatment of increasing religious plurality, there is a multifaceted and rich field of research that is also politically charged and

enjoys a high level of public attention. What is at stake here is above all the issue of migration. Diehl and Koenig (2013) have shown in their study of Turkish and Polish immigrants that religious participation declines immediately after migration and then increases again. They make the lack of structures of opportunity responsible for the declines, and for the increases, they point not only to theoretical arguments of assimilation, but also to the dynamics of symbolic boundary-marking. Pollack et al. (2014) have pointed to the clear limits to the willingness of the majority population in Germany to tolerate members of non-Christian religious communities, especially Muslims, living in Germany. They see an important factor to explain this fact as lying in the relatively low frequency of inter-religious contact.

Methodological Problems

Although the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches is repeatedly called for in social research, there are only a few studies in German sociology of religion that meet this requirement. Overall, though, the methodological level of the sociology of religion in Germany has increased significantly. Following the multi-dimensional model of Charles Glock, Kecskes and Wolf (1995) have refined the quantitative measuring instruments to capture Christian religiosity. A further differentiation of Glock's model came about with the introduction of the so-called centrality index, developed by Stefan Huber (2003). Accordingly, religiosity will no longer be investigated only in terms of its substantive dimensions, but also with regard to the importance that it has in the mental space of the individual. By doing so, we can distinguish, for example, between the substantive forms of notions of transcendence and the intensity of belief in these notions. This means of measurement was widely used for the first time on an international basis in the Religion Monitor of 2008 (Bertelsmann Foundation 2009). It is also noteworthy that, since 2002, there has been available a comprehensive battery of items to measure non-church religiosity, which was in ALLBUS in 2002 and 2012. The assertion that survey research cannot measure non-church religiosity (Gabriel 1983: 194), an assertion claiming the status of a dogma, has now been undermined permanently by the refinement of the measuring instruments.

Great progress has also been made in qualitative research on religion. In terms of sample selection, interview methods and the requirements of a transparent and intersubjectively comprehensible interpretation of the interviews, standards have improved significantly. There are now several textbooks on the use of qualitative research methods that contribute to the canonization of qualitative approaches and provide guidelines for their use (Knoblauch 2003, Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008). The progress made in the method-

ological foundation of research in the sociology of religion suggests that it is managing increasingly to offload the burden of its philosophical-historical heritage.

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