

Religion

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Abstract: This essay discusses recent trends in the German-language sociology of religion. It traces how strong theoretical roots and intensive empirical scrutiny of East-West differences after German reunification have produced distinctive contributions to the international debate about secularization theory and its long-held assumptions about religious decline, privatization, and differentiation. Their result has been a deliberate move towards middle-range theories that analyze contextually situated processes of religious transformation across a wide range of modern societies. The essay also reviews novel trends in empirical research emerging from dialogue and competition with neighboring disciplinary fields (e.g., migration studies) and discusses novel attempts to theorize cultural processes of sacralization and discursive formations of religion that, jointly, have pushed the field even more beyond the secularization debate. In conclusion, the essay suggests some directions in which the sociology of religion might be moving – in Germany and elsewhere.

Keywords: Church, migration, religion, sociology of religion, secularization

1 Introduction

As elsewhere in Europe, the sociology of religion in German-speaking countries has gone through several phases since the postwar period (see Koenig and Wolf, 2013; Pollack, 2015). In the first phase (the 1950s and 1960s), scholarship was largely conducted within Catholic or Protestant research institutions and prioritized empirical research on determinants of religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices in industrial society. Famously criticized for its narrow focus on “church sociology” (*Kirchensoziologie*) and its practical-theological interests, it was superseded by a second, “neo-classical” phase (the 1970s and 1980s). Sociologists of Christianity situated church sociology’s empirical findings within broader cultural histories of Protestantism (Joachim Matthes, Trutz Rendtorff) and Catholicism (Karl Gabriel, Franz-Xaver Kaufmann). A thriving exegetical literature explored the founding figures of the German sociology of religion, the historical-critical edition of Max Weber’s monumental sociology of religion being its primary achievement. Social theorists, in turn, interpreted the fate of religion in modernity through secularization narratives, with these being conceived in terms of communicative rationalization (Jürgen Habermas) or functional differentiation (Niklas Luhmann). In the third phase (from the 1990s onward), the quasi-paradigmatic status that secularization theory enjoyed within the field has come under attack in light of vigorous public controversies over a putative resurgence of religion, rising fundamentalism, and the challenges of religious diversity. The secularization debate has entailed intense conceptual battles over substantial versus

functional definitions of religion that undergird different accounts of religious transformation in modernity. At the same time, it has also raised the standards of empirical evidence in quantitative as well as qualitative research that is invoked to bolster theories of religious transformation. Indeed, long a rather marginal subfield, the sociology of religion has become thoroughly institutionalized and professionalized in this third phase. Universities have established specialized chairs and have created collaborative research centers for the sociology of religion, while scholars have pursued diversified research agendas within their own section of the German Sociological Association (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie, DGS) and have consolidated their knowledge by compiling major handbooks (e.g., Pollack et al., 2018). The field has entered into closer dialogue—and into new competition—with neighboring disciplines from anthropology to history and political science, where religion has gained renewed attention as an object of study as well, and it has become thoroughly internationalized in terms of collaborative networks and publication strategies.

This essay discusses recent trends in the German-language sociology of religion by reviewing major publications since 2005.¹ It starts by identifying some distinctive contributions to the secularization debate before exploring novel trends in empirical research (e.g., migration and religion) and theory building (e.g., Hans Joas or Wolfgang Eßbach) that jointly have pushed the field beyond that debate. In conclusion, the essay suggests some directions in which the sociology of religion might be moving after its third phase.

2 Distinctive Contributions to the Secularization Debate

The secularization debate in the international sociology of religion has critically scrutinized long-held assumptions that modernity would inevitably lead to the decline of religious beliefs, to the privatization of religious practices, and to an increased functional differentiation of religion from politics and other social systems (Casanova, 1994). German-language sociology of religion has discussed these three assumptions from distinctive perspectives, given its strong theoretical roots and its intense empirical engagement with East–West differences after German unification in 1990.

First, when criticizing the assumption of *religious decline*, German-speaking sociologists of religion have drawn less on the new religious economics, so prominent in

¹ This essay covers only monographs and journal articles while excluding edited volumes and book chapters. Given its purpose of providing an international audience with insight into trends in the German-language sociology of religion, it predominantly focuses on monographs and articles published in the German language—except for those authors who, while being institutionally based in Austria, Germany, or Switzerland, publish almost exclusively in English. The essay selectively draws upon and considerably updates Koenig and Wolf (2013). The author thanks Ines Michalowski and the editors of this special issue for helpful comments and suggestions.

North America (for an exception, see Kern and Pruisken, 2018), and more on Luckmann's phenomenological theory of "invisible religion." According to that theory, modernity entails not only the decline of institutional religion but also the rise of highly individualized religiosity that selectively draws from a mass-cultural storehouse of meaning. To detect traces of invisible religion in contemporary culture, sociologists of religion have studied biographies, communicative genres, and media discourses by using advanced methods of qualitative or interpretative social research. The most prominent proponent of this line of research, Hubert Knoblauch (2009), has advanced a non-binary, processual concept of transcendence to discern the rise of (modern) popular religion. Facilitated by educational expansion and new technologies of communication, he argues, popular religion comprises various phenomena—New Age beliefs, esotericism, occultism, pilgrimage, Pentecostalism, and so forth—that all share a subjectivist spirituality and blur the boundaries between religion and non-religion, the private and the public.

By contrast, quantitative researchers have tended to defend secularization theory's assumption about modernity's inherent incompatibility with religious beliefs (e.g., Pollack, 2009: 19–149; Pickel, 2010; Meulemann, 2015; 2019). Cross-national and national surveys, including some unique datasets such as the church membership surveys regularly conducted by the Protestant Church in Germany (*Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung [KMU]*, since 1972) or, more recently, the Bertelsmann Foundation's cross-national population surveys (*Religionsmonitor*, since 2007), have indeed consistently documented decreasing church affiliation, beliefs, and practices alongside increasing religious indifference, thus indicating a massive decline of institutional religion. Moreover, these surveys have allowed researchers to assess the theory of invisible religion by including some—albeit arguably rather crude—measures of subjective spirituality and diffuse religiosity (see, notably, Siegers, 2012). While observable at moderate levels, subjectivist spirituality and diffuse religiosity do not seem to compensate for the decline of institutional religion as posited by individualization theorists; if anything, or so these scholars argue, they prevail among the institutionally affiliated (Pollack, 2009). Incidentally, proponents of the secularization thesis have found even less evidence for the North American market model and its prediction of supply-side-driven religious vitality. Comparisons across various Western and Eastern European countries do not indicate any strong positive effects of religious plurality and religious deregulation on rates of religious participation (Pickel, 2010).

Interestingly, critics and proponents of the assumption of religious decline have tended to agree in their description of persistent religious differences between East and West Germany. Unlike in the West, where three-quarters of the population are still nominally Christian, less than one-third of East Germans have any religious affiliation. Crucially, unlike in other post-communist societies (e.g., Poland, Russia), there have been no signs of religious revitalization in the former German Democratic Republic since the fall of the Iron Curtain. Some studies attribute East Germany's unusually rapid and sustained religious decline to a combination of socio-structural modernization, political suppression, and socialization patterns observable across cohorts

and over time (Pollack, 2009: 253; Lois, 2011; Müller, 2013). Others highlight cultural repertoires of secularity generated by the socialist state in its sustained conflict with the churches over membership, worldviews, and moral education. For instance, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and her collaborators, drawing on intergenerational biographical interviews, have documented how secularity, initially enforced by the state and party apparatus, has become deeply entrenched in ordinary people's subjective structures of meaning (Wohlrab-Sahr et al., 2009; see also Schmidt-Lux, 2008; Karstein, 2013). What the literature on secularization in East and West Germany illustrates is that sociologists of religion disagree less on the description of religious decline than on the underlying analytical frameworks of its interpretation and explanation.

Second, when critically scrutinizing secularization theory's assumption about the *privatization* of religious (and spiritual) practices, German-speaking sociologists of religion have been less interested in religious influences upon social movements, party politics, or media debates as compared to the international literature on public religion. Instead, they have contributed to mapping meso-level transformations of religion beyond the private sphere. In refining the classical typology of church, sect, and mystic as formulated by Weber and Troeltsch and drawing on recent institutionalist theories in organizational sociology, Volkhard Krech and others have detected novel social forms of religious communication emerging inside as well as outside the Christian churches (Krech et al., 2013). They argue, for instance, that the Protestant Church in Germany, in times of neoliberal governmentality, has sought to counter declining membership and shrinking finances by streamlining parishes and establishing urban churches tailored to rather disparate consumer demands (Schlammelcher, 2013). They also show that new spiritualities, initially pursued in small countercultural communities, have become re-embedded in formal membership organizations and markets (Hero, 2010). Turning beyond the European context, scholars have also studied the organizational structures and interactive patterns that underlie the rise of growth-oriented megachurches in the United States (Kern and Schimank, 2013). Taken together, these studies attest to the variability of modern religions' social forms as well as to their adaptability to rapidly changing social environments.

Third, when discussing the thesis of *functional differentiation* between religion and other social systems, arguably the paradigmatic core of secularization theory, German-language sociology of religion has taken some steps toward conceptual revision, albeit hesitantly. To be sure, given its theoretical legacies, notions of functional differentiation have probably enjoyed greater prominence in German-language sociology than in any other scholarly traditions (Schimank, SOCIETY, this volume). Indeed, conceptual refinements of Weber's autonomous value spheres and of Luhmann's autopoietic systems still abound (e.g., Tyrell, 2014), sometimes being creatively combined with Bourdieu's theory of social fields. Assessing the driving *forces* of functional differentiation, a leading research center on religion and politics at the University of Münster with the aim of promoting intense collaboration of sociologists and historians, has traced episodes of church–state separation from the investiture conflict through the confessional age and the revolutionary period up to

the contemporary era (e.g., Pollack, 2016). Turning to global forces of functional differentiations, authors have traced the emergence of a global system of “world religions” by studying missionary organizations, their statistical and historical knowledge production, their proselytizing activities, and the interreligious encounters prompted by the latter (Petzke, 2013). Assessing the *consequences* of functional differentiation, sociologists of religion have scrutinized the semantic adaptation of religious traditions, such as pre-Vatican II German Catholicism, to what they perceive to be increasingly autonomous “worldly” spheres (Breuer, 2012). They have also maintained that functional differentiation has intensified conflict and competition between religious and other social systems (Pollack, 2016; see also Meulemann, 2019). In their comparative study of religious transformations in Western and Eastern Europe, the US, Brazil, and South Korea, Detlef Pollack and Gergely Rosta prominently argue that differentiation necessarily leads to religions’ decreased social significance and religious vitality is limited to those modern contexts where *dedifferentiation* allows religions to fulfill other, *non-religious* functions (Pollack and Rosta, 2015).

However, engagement with historical and comparative research has led some sociologists of religion to revise the thesis of functional differentiation more thoroughly. Even defenders of secularization theory have recently called for action-theoretical explanations of how religious, political, and other actors precisely negotiate the boundaries of the religious system while acknowledging that cultural contexts considerably shape those negotiations and the resulting religious transformations (Pollack, 2016; see also Höllinger, 2007). Outspoken critics of secularization theory, in turn, have drawn on Eisenstadt’s notions of Axial Age civilizations and multiple modernities to detect how deep-seated traditions have left their imprint upon collective identities, political center formation, and macro patterns of structural differentiation (Spohn, 2008; Schwinn, 2013). A leading research center at the University of Leipzig has recently embarked on an ambitious research agenda on “multiple secularities” to study cultural meanings, pragmatic problems, and guiding ideas (e.g., freedom, tolerance, progress, rationality) that underlie different modes of distinguishing between religious and non-religious spheres both within and beyond the West (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, 2012).

In sum, German-language sociology of religion has scrutinized long-held assumptions about religious decline, privatization, and differentiation from distinctive perspectives, thus making important contributions to the international debate over secularization theory. However, after more than two decades, it seems that this debate has passed its zenith (this was pointed out early on by Krech, 2011). Its staunchest defenders have moved away from sweeping evolutionary narratives, and its fiercest critics equally refrain from sweeping diagnoses of religious revival. Instead, echoing broader trends in sociology, the field has moved towards middle-range theories that analyze contextually situated processes of religious transformation across a wide range of modern societies. Some scholars even align themselves with analytical sociology’s emphasis on causal mechanisms and formal modeling, for instance, when explaining how competition between religious and secular institutions shapes indi-

viduals' religiosity (see, notably, Stolz, 2013). While emerging directly from the field's central debate over secularization, these research agendas seem to be pushing the sociology of religion in novel directions. Yet, if secularization used to be *the* central theme of the sociology of religion (Meulemann, 2019: xix), what precisely comes after the secularization debate?

3 New Developments Beyond the Secularization Debate

Research agendas pushing German-language sociology of religion beyond the secularization debate are most evident at the field's fringes. *Empirical* research agendas emerging from dialogue and competition with neighboring disciplinary fields have unintentionally reoriented sociologists of religion towards novel themes and questions. At the same time, *theoretical* research agendas emerging from broader trends in social theory have intentionally sought to reopen the field's intellectual horizon. As the following discussion shows, both trends have accelerated the paradigmatic demise of secularization theory—without, however, any new field-organizing debate yet being in sight.

First, empirical research agendas emerging at the intersection with other disciplines have expanded the range of substantive themes and questions addressed by sociologists of religion. The most obvious case in point is the thriving literature on religion and migration (Pries, *MIGRATION*, this volume). Across European countries, public debates over religious diversity and the visibility of Islam have led migration scholars to study religious aspects of immigrant incorporation. In the German-language literature, work in this vein has predominantly focused on the sizeable Muslim populations (ranging between 6 and 7% in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland) that has resulted from guest-worker migration in the postwar period and from refugee migration in the post-Cold War period. Analyzing their incorporation into secularizing Christian majority societies from the disciplinary perspective of migration studies, scholars have relied on distinctive analytical frameworks, data, and methods. Survey-based studies among the first and second generation have drawn on classical, new, or segmented assimilation theories. They have scrutinized group-specific determinants of migrants' religious identities, beliefs, and practices (e.g., Diehl and Koenig, 2009) and have analyzed their impact upon interethnic social ties (e.g., Ohlendorf, 2015; Leszczensky, 2018) and intermarriage (Carol, 2016), upon educational achievement (e.g., Ohlendorf et al., 2017), or upon labor-market access (e.g., Koopmans, 2016). Survey-based studies on Islamophobia, antisemitism, and attitudes toward religious diversity have engaged with social-psychological identity theory to account for perceptions of cultural and economic threat among the majority population (e.g., Helbling, 2014; Pollack et al., 2014). Discourse analyses have relied on theories of symbolic boundaries or postcolonial studies to decipher public (and scholarly)

stereotypes of religious alterity and their implications for public policies, such as governmental attempts to forge a domesticized Islam in Germany (e.g., Tezcan, 2012). Institutional analyses, finally, have engaged with the burgeoning literature on citizenship and multiculturalism to understand how historical legacies, party politics, and transnational human-rights discourses affect the governance of religious diversity (Koenig, 2007; Joppke, 2013; Reuter, 2014; Carol et al., 2015). They have scrutinized, for instance, how Austria, Germany, and Switzerland have accommodated newcomer religions in their characteristic corporatist regimes of church–state cooperation while navigating Muslim claims of recognition and the opposition these claims provoke among the majority population (Dolezal et al., 2011). Recent contributions to the literature have also highlighted how public organizations (hospitals, military, prisons, schools) and urban settings modify national models of governing religious diversity (Michalowski, 2015; Nagel, 2019). As all these examples amply attest, dialogue with migration studies has pushed sociologists of religion far beyond the secularization debate to analyze reconfigurations of religious boundaries and their accompanying political contestations in contexts of increased international mobility.

Quite similar developments have occurred at the intersection of the sociology of religion with other disciplinary fields. For instance, scholars have taken inspiration from gender and sexuality studies to study, across a range of cultural contexts within and beyond Europe, how religious practices that have long shaped patriarchal gender roles have changed in conjunction with egalitarian attitudes (e.g., Winkel, 2009) or in response to new biopolitical challenges (e.g., Burchardt, 2015). They have drawn on the comparative welfare-regime literature to study how confessional traditions and socio-political cleavages have structured social policies across European countries (e.g., Manow, 2008), and they have engaged with media studies to reconstruct religious backgrounds of professional journalists (e.g., Gärtner et al., 2012). In more quantitatively oriented research fields, scholars who rely on increasingly sophisticated techniques of panel and multilevel analyses have included religiosity variables on the right-hand side of the regression equation to assess their context-specific impact upon social capital (Traunmüller, 2012), educational inequalities (Helbig and Schneider, 2014; Schneider and Dohrmann, 2015), national identifications (Schnabel and Grötsch, 2015), or moral behavior (Siegers, 2019). All these lines of empirical research, by cataloguing micro-level mechanisms that link religion with highly salient social outcomes, have not only added to the analytical toolkit of the sociology of religion but have also moved the field unintentionally beyond the secularization debate. Incidentally, they have also intensified the field's interaction with various public-policy fields where demand for expertise on contemporary challenges of religious diversity has grown considerably over the past decades.

Second, theoretical contributors who are attentive to contemporary philosophical debates over religion in a secular age have attempted to broaden intellectual horizons of the sociology of religion by intentionally moving beyond the conventional secularization debate. The most prominent example in this respect is Hans Joas' theory of religion, which synthesizes his decade-long work on pragmatism, creative action, and

value genesis while building on intense intellectual exchanges with Eisenstadt, Belah, and Taylor pursued at the Max-Weber-Kolleg in Erfurt. His theory of religion presents itself as an alternative to teleological narratives of disenchantment and secularization that he regards as widespread in the sociology of religion ever since Weber advanced his universal history of rationalization (Joas, 2017). He has therefore designed his theory to capture contingent and context-dependent processes of sacralization and their complex interplay with the formation of social power. His theory operates at two levels of analysis. At the level of formal anthropology, Joas starts from the premise that all humans have “experiences of self-transcendence,” which enthusiastically expand—or destructively violate—routinely held boundaries of the self. These experiences necessarily prompt the attribution of qualities of sacredness (Joas, 2017: 434). Such sacralization processes, however, vary by their forms of cultural articulation. Whereas pre-reflexive articulations of the sacred rely on situational elements so prominently studied by Durkheim, reflexive forms generate abstract or transcendent ideals. At the level of macro-historical narrative, Joas traces the interplay of the sacred with political power from archaic societies to the modern era. Some power configurations facilitated the pre-reflexive sacralization of particular collectivities, kings or nations, whereas others prompted a reflexive sacralization and moral universalism, notably during the Axial Age. A modern version of such reflexive sacralization is the sacralization of personhood that has underpinned the emergence of social movements and legal institutions of human rights in modernity as studied in an earlier volume of his (Joas, 2011). Fruitfully combining Durkheimian thought with theoretical insights of James, Royce, Troeltsch, and Weber, Joas has forged powerful conceptual tools for studying large-scale cultural processes of sacralization, even though his ambitious research agenda still awaits full execution through detailed historical-sociological analysis.

Discourse-theoretical approaches have gained traction in German-language sociology of religion as well, leading scholars to examine critically the European genealogy of the very category of “religion” (pointed out early on by Matthes, 2005). The most prominent contribution in this respect has been Wolfgang Eßbach’s two-volume historical sociology of religion (Eßbach, 2014; 2019). Criticizing scholars’ longstanding focus on confessional religion, their fixation on the religion/secular binary, and their reliance on evolutionary thought, he advances a discourse-analytical approach that includes all phenomena to which ego or alter attribute “religious” qualities. Treating intellectual discourses as indicative of broader cultural currents, Eßbach shows how epochal experiences induced by what he calls European modernity’s four structural elements gave rise to distinctive types of religion. First, starting in the sixteenth century, the rise of territorial states coincided with the emergence of dogmatically and ritually separated confessional religions (*Bekennnisreligion*) and resulted in devastating religious wars, whose traumatic experiences, in turn, prompted the invention of “rational religion” during the English, French, and German Enlightenment. Experiences with democratic revolutions in the second epoch produced the two rather enthusiastic types of art religion (*Kunstreligion*) and national religion (*Nationalreligion*).

Whereas the former articulated intense individual experiences of beauty as in Idealism and Romanticism, the latter sacralized the territory, history, and destiny of national collectivities. The third structural element, the unleashing of market forces, generated knowledge-based religion (*Wissenschaftsreligion*) that ranged from atheistic naturalism to positivist conceptions of science as religion and to various worldviews competing within a new religious market. The fourth structural element, the lifeworld's penetration by technologies, gave rise to various procedural religions (*Verfahrensreligion*) that promised inspiration through "primitive" cultures, imaginations of wholeness, or the orthopraxis of controlling body and soul. Eßbach's typology sensitizes us to the variety of religious discourses that reflect modernity's major epochal experiences while perceptively analyzing their cumulative layering, their mutual critique, their creative combinations, and their repercussions in contemporary debates over religion. However, his multifaceted and lavishly detailed historical narrative still awaits fuller theorization to explain how experience-based attributions of sacred qualities relate to discursive constructions of "religion." In a way, his historical sociology echoes what other social theorists such as Taylor have described as the proliferation of religious (and non-religious) options in a secular age (see Koenig, 2011).

The stark differences between Joas' pragmatist theory of religion and Eßbach's historical sociology of religion notwithstanding, both contributions capture socio-cultural processes of religious transformation other than those foregrounded in the secularization debate. Expanding the conceptual scope of the sociology of religion, they both scrutinize, albeit from very different vantage points, individual or collective experiences related to things deemed sacred and their cultural and discursive articulation. Incidentally, they both also revitalize the field's serious engagement with the history of religion, so prominently pursued by Weber and his contemporaries. While remaining somewhat detached from the array of micro-level mechanisms scrutinized in the aforementioned empirical lines of research, they enjoin the latter in pushing the sociology of religion beyond its third phase.

4 Conclusion

As this review of the German-language contribution to the secularization debate and recent empirical and theoretical developments beyond that debate has shown, the sociology of religion seems to be moving into a new phase. What are the prospects for the field in German-language academia as elsewhere?

First, sociologists of religion will profitably continue their dialogue and competition with other disciplines and further expand their range of substantive research questions beyond the secularization debate. In a global age, scholars as well as citizens and policymakers are urgently called to understand precisely how different modes of religious diversity are linked with social inequalities, political cleavages, and even violent conflict. Sociologists of religion should take up that challenge in close

collaboration with neighboring fields and do so by using the best possible quantitative and qualitative methods available in the discipline, with mixed-method approaches being a particularly prominent area of innovation.

Second, sociologists of religion will continue to benefit from the comparative research that has become more prevalent within and beyond the secularization debate. Whether capitalizing on large-scale macro-quantitative datasets or leveraging in-depth case studies, comparative research has helped specify scope conditions for theoretical propositions about religious transformations. The widening of cross-cultural comparative perspectives beyond the European or Western context has proven particularly stimulating for reconsidering explicit or implicit assumptions in the sociology of religion—as emerging research on multiple secularities has shown. Likewise, it is increasingly clear that explaining local and national transformations of religion requires one to scrutinize the global dynamics of cultural diffusion and institutionalization more thoroughly.

Third, sociologists of religion will profit from further enlarging their analytical toolkit of micro-level mechanisms and macro-level social processes of religious transformations, with some taken from the secularization debate and others from the novel empirical and theoretical contributions discussed in this article. The recent focus on middle-range theories, which avoid teleological narratives and philosophical speculation about religion's fate in modernity, resonates fully with broader international trends such as the rise of analytical sociology and critical realism. However, how to use empirically robust mechanisms and processes as building blocks for more general theories of religious transformation requires further theoretical and methodological advances.

In sum, the German-language—and indeed international—sociology of religion seems to be moving through an interregnum without any paradigmatic center yet in sight that could replace the field's prior focus on secularization. Whereas such phases are particularly germane to empirical and theoretical innovation in the short term, the question remains how the field will meet the challenge posed by its centrifugal forces in the long term.

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