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The “religiosity” of younger Germans on the way to the “Veralltäglichung” (Weber)¹ of an autonomous conduct of life.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I summarize some results of a set of case studies on the life-concepts of Germans born after the Second World War and reflect on them in the light of current debates in the sociology of religion. I argue that the analytical equipment provided by two very influential positions (Luckmann’s theory and similar approaches and the “theory of religious economies” by Stark et al.) is of little use in analyzing these cases, because they share a restricted notion of autonomy. Some case studies were undertaken by myself, some by Ulrich Oevermann and other colleagues at Goethe-University in Frankfurt. In our analysis of the interviews, we use a “sequential analysis,” a step-by-step analysis of text material. This approach is part of the methodological framework provided by Objective Hermeneutics which was developed by Oevermann (cf. Oevermann et al., 1987)¹. Few of the case studies to which I will refer have been published (see e.g. Oevermann and Franzmann, 2006), and fewer still in English. So I will have to ask for the reader’s goodwill because he or she cannot easily turn to these case studies in order to trace the results presented here, of the analysis of particular interviews.

These case studies have brought to my attention a development in succeeding generations in Germany that one can term, following Max Weber’s terminology, the *routinization of an autonomous “conduct of life”*.² As far as I can see, this development parallels that in other Western industrial nations to some degree, and it therefore seems desirable to make these results available to colleagues in other countries. This development was preceded by the so-called “Generation of 1968”: born between 1945 and 1952, in the 1960s they were

¹ Usually this expression of Weber is translated with “routinisation”. In this paper I adopt this translation for the sake of comprehensibility instead of using the original German expression. A *literal* translation of “Veralltäglichung” would be “everydaying”.

adolescents. This generation challenged traditionality and taken-for-granted authority in principle, and thereby helped bring about a breakthrough which reverberates today. Autonomy was established as an ideal for the conduct of life and this brought about for almost everyone the problem of how to live it out. To fulfill this ideal has been difficult because it demands a high degree of “Ich-Leistung” (“ego-achievement”, Sigmund Freud). To follow tradition and authority provided a good deal of psychological relief. The “Generation of 1968” could for a long time confine itself to the negation of the old, to challenging traditionality and authority without having to face the problem of positively fulfilling its ambitious rhetoric. Succeeding generations, however, could no longer evade this problem, because society increasingly took for granted that individuals must live an autonomous life. This idea, at an early stage, was new and untested. This went along with a naiveté in trying to live up to it—much “nonsense” was tried out because it was considered unique and therefore “autonomous.” Later generations, and young adults today in particular, have become more accustomed to the challenges of an autonomy-oriented way of life, and the ability to deal with them has grown bit by bit. What I will suggest in this paper is that this development has today resulted in a near routinization of an autonomy-oriented conduct of life.

2. The difficulty of autonomous life-conduct

Before I discuss some facts so as to highlight this process of routinization, I will try to describe the challenges to an autonomy-oriented conduct of life. Its main problem consists in conducting one’s own life without adopting “systems of ultimate meaning” (Luckmann) from others, e.g. systems offered by religious-pastoral agencies. Life has to be lived without such recourse, in a truly autonomous way, and with a high degree of “Ich-Leistung” (Freud). However, this does not imply that an autonomous answer to the question about the sense of one’s life can be arbitrary: it has to be justifiable and coherent—as had formerly been true of traditional “religious” beliefs. Further, the question as to the “meaning of one’s life” cannot remain unanswered—as the Bible observes, “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Deuteronomy 8.3, Matthew 4.4, Luke 4.4) It would therefore be inappropriate and reductionistic to consider religious facts to be “soft”, in contrast with the “hard” facts of, say, economics. Yet in the current sociology of religion this sort of polarisation is quite common. But one cannot avoid the pressing problem of coming up with an answer to the question of meaning, and for material reproduction.

Both challenges are inescapable. The necessity of material reproduction is obvious. The necessity for an answer to the question as to the meaning of one’s life results from the general structure of life praxis. In his structuralist-pragmatist model of religiosity, Oevermann has shown that there exists a logical necessity to come up with such an answer within the structure of life-praxis (Oevermann, 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2003). It results from the *dualism* between the *world of hypothetical possibilities* (past and future), on the one hand, and the *here and now of the present world*, on the other hand. This dualism emerges with the human transition from nature to culture and with the simultaneous formation of language, and it brings about a *consciousness of the finiteness of life*. And this consciousness, in turn, calls for a *belief* that provides hope by making sense of the finiteness of human life within its infinite context, the ongoing process of life. Without such a belief there exists no basic motivational thrust; and a life which exhausts itself in mere self-reproduction and self-referentiality, would be *spiritually dead*, and, in many cases, shortly afterwards physically dead as well.

Now, our case studies show that in order for it to work, an answer to the “question of a meaning of one’s life” has to be coherent in various ways: 1.) It has to be coherent with itself, 2.) it has to be in line with one’s own biography, and 3.) it must be consonant with the forms and levels of rationality and knowledge prevailing in the relevant culture. (These forms of rationality, of course, will be informed by the state of empirical science there.) This answer, furthermore, the individual will have to develop him- or herself—as an autonomous achievement. This does not preclude support from friends or family—on the contrary. As a matter of course, those who share their lives with one another will also support each other with respect to the conduct of life. This does not impede the individual’s autonomy, and should the task of figuring out one’s life concept be too difficult, there remains the possibility of resorting to psychotherapy. In the latter case, individuals, despite their partially reduced and damaged autonomy, will nevertheless maintain it *in principle*. In this case, psychotherapy is part of an autonomous process of developing an individuated life-concept. The structure of psychotherapy, therefore, differs from the structure of (traditional) *pastoral care*. This distinction is frequently overlooked or levelled in current debate among sociologists of religion. In psychotherapy, the individual’s autonomy is the norm against which the need for psychotherapy appears as an exception—a perhaps very common exception, but nevertheless an exception; in contrast, pastoral care structurally presupposes *every* individual to be in need of spiritual guidance and orientation and to not treat the individual as an autonomous one. For a religious person, it is quite normal to seek spiritual guidance from a pastor, and those who

seek this guidance are not considered to be “ill”. Psychotherapy, on the other hand, aims at the restitution of an ill patient’s autonomy.

Now, in the case of a felicitous autonomous life-conduct, the individual manages to successfully develop the meaning of his or her life in a biographically coherent and contemporary way. Such a life is automatically dedicated to the public interest, because it is meaningful only if it contributes to the ongoing life of its community and of humankind. In order to succeed, the individual has to continuously review his or her biography with impartiality and an aesthetic view—much like a text that needs to be continued in both a coherent and adaptive way, i.e. open to unforeseen opportunities or developments which may contradict previous decisions and call for revisions and adjustments. To summarize, the crucial point is that the individual autonomously develops a life-concept according to *aesthetic criteria* such as clarity and coherence (Oevermann, 1995: 102).

3. Whereby could the process of routinization of the autonomous life-conduct be recognized?

The routinization of such an outlook on life, of a routinization of an autonomy-oriented conduct of life, is evidenced by the earnestness with which young German adults usually face its challenges.³ In this respect they differ from previous generations: for the “generation of 1968” (born between 1945 and 1952) and those born between 1952 and 1960 (a different generation), Marxist ideologies of emancipation provided a dominant belief—of course with many exceptions and variations. These secularist surrogates for traditional religions naturally did not yet represent an individuated belief and contained many illusions.

However, speaking typologically, those born between 1960 and 1967 (the “existentialist” or “quest for meaning generation”) abandoned such an ideological-collectivist orientation, in favour of an individual quest for meaning. The mainstream of this generation tends to pursue this search for meaning outside normal life—in artificial experiences aimed at self-awareness. Characteristically, it sought such meaning by assembling bits and pieces from a variety of traditions (particularly eastern traditions of meditation, esotericism and psycho-cults) into a syncretistic collage. But such a “self”, which searches for itself and for a meaning for its life outside the normal, substantial praxis with its authentic challenges, remains an abstraction, and, in the long run, such a self-awareness will implode. And the syncretistic collage lacks basic coherence and credibility. It represents a type of autonomy which is limited to selecting

from existing ultimate meanings and which is restricted to gluing together the selected pieces, instead of autonomously creating a coherent whole.

The following generation (born between 1967 and 1975) finally gave up their predecessors' collectivist program of general emancipation, to which the individual quest for meaning in the “Existentialist Generation” paradoxically still belonged. Instead, this generation developed a culture of downright avoidance of any collectivist orientation and idealism—in this sense, its orientation was negative. The term “Generation X” which was coined by the American writer Douglas Coupland⁴ and which was adopted and used by German intellectuals for a while expressed this attempt to evade identification and particular predicates, but, paradoxically, it became a positive label.⁵ The negation of collective idealism and an ostentatious restriction to the pursuit of private interests (frequently tied to a permanent, compulsive irony, smartness, and the syndrome of “fun-society”) undoubtedly advanced the idea of a more autonomous conduct of life, in particular because it advanced the idea of material self-reliance, of standing on one's own feet. At the same time, however, it also restricted the idea of autonomy to self-reproduction. An autonomous answer to the question as to the meaning of one's life was therefore not provided. This “last” step is taken more and more by the youngest adult generation so that the autonomous life conduct really begins to turn into a day-to-day routine. Unlike their predecessors, this generation does not, in an artificial way, look for a meaning to their lives outside the real problems they face, nor does it try to avoid idealism by focusing on their own private interests. It dedicates itself earnestly to the everyday business of reviewing their individual concepts for a meaningful life, seeking to adjust these ideas in response to their experience in the authentic praxis. This is tied to a personal idealism and a strong dedication to authenticity. It is this attitude's inconspicuousness which is striking, and which indicates that a dedication to an autonomy-oriented conduct of life has become a matter of fact—something normal.⁶

4. Conclusions in regard to contemporary approaches in the sociology of religion

On the basis of the findings which I have tried to outline, several conclusions can be drawn. One is that the analytical equipment provided by two influential positions in the sociology of religion are of little use in analyzing the succession of recent generations in Germany in general and the generation of contemporary young adults in particular: Thomas Luckmann's theory is perhaps the most prominent approach among those stressing a “deinstitutionalization” and “individualization” of religion; and Rodney Stark and Roger

Finke (Stark and Finke, 2000) as well as Laurence Iannacone (1991) and their approach of a “theory of religious economies” has been of particular relevance in the U.S.

Luckmann’s approach is of little help because it uses a restricted notion of autonomy, and because in the end it primarily *paraphrases* the really existing phenomenon of a quest for meaning, as it has become typical for the “Existentialist generation”, in sociological language, without substantially *analyzing* it. In some sense the theory is too closely linked with its subject. In this view, autonomy is likened and limited to that of a consumer selecting a product in a market and of assembling pieces of meaning. This theoretical framework provides no room for a unique and consistent conception of life, which, in our analyses of interviews with young German adults, proved to be a necessary theoretical assumption. Further, this approach has the somewhat absurd consequence of excluding questions about the coherence, clarity, and credibility of the contents of particular beliefs from the sociology of religion. As any believer will attest, however, these are crucial issues, and they cannot, therefore, be ignored in the social sciences either. As a consequence, this approach tends to overlook important processes of religious transformation that are not induced from outside but from within, through problems concerning coherence, clarity, and credibility.

The notion of autonomy underlying the “theory of religious economies” is surprisingly similar to Luckmann’s. It, too, excludes questions of the coherence, clarity, and credibility of particular beliefs. The believer’s autonomy is considered in the terms of a market and of a consumer who selects a suitable “product.” The possibility of a strictly autonomous creation of a consistent life-concept is ruled out from the start. In contrast to the Luckmann tradition, the “consumer of ultimate meanings” is not seen as putting selected pieces together to make a private belief-system, but as someone who chooses seriously just one belief, and in so doing joins the respective religious community. What this approach ignores is that to join a religious community which adheres to a particular belief will lessen one’s autonomy as a result of compromising one’s individuation. This theoretical model seems almost like a paraphrase of a pluralism which emerged from a peculiar American heritage of protestant sects and their secular successors. Theories designed to explain economic phenomena are used as models for sociological theories of religious ones. In this sense, the “theory of religious economies” seems reductionist. However, this reductionism has not been confined to the sociology of religion: since the 1960s and 1970s, and the Marxist interpretation then in vogue, it has been prominent in the social sciences in general. As our research into the development of particular successive generations in Germany suggests, and unlike implicit suggestions by Stark and

Finke, the traditional American pattern of a pluralism of sectarian religiosity (in Weber’s use of the term) does not constitute the “end of history”.

Methodologically, the inadequacies of these two theoretical approaches are instructive. Among other things, they can be attributed to the lack of a “reconstructive” approach like Oevermann’s Objective Hermeneutics, to the lack of appropriate tools for analyzing source material. Instead of deducing basic theoretical notions from a detailed and thorough reconstruction of notions implicit in representative sources (such as interviews), conclusions are frequently reached by a paraphrase, not an analysis, of specific forms of religiosity. In the case of the “theory of religious economies”, the basic theory has been additionally generated through the procedure of imposing the theoretical framework of another discipline (economics) on one’s own discipline (sociology of religion).⁷ Such problematic procedures call for a social research which centres the analysis of representative cases in order to gain appropriate basic notions. Grounded Theory does not deliver such a methodological model, because, in its coding procedures, it cannot abandon a “logic of subsumption” (Adorno) and does not really aim at “reconstructing” the structures of meaning in text material and data. In our own work, we have made use of a “sequential analysis” (i.e. a minute, step-by-step interpretation) of selected material, an approach which has become known in Germany as Objective Hermeneutics. This has allowed us to identify and trace in our interview material issues of coherence, clarity, and credibility of particular religious beliefs.

As a result of our analyses of young German adults, I have been able to confirm Weber’s theory of secularization, which he described as a process of “disenchantment.” In Weber’s view, this process appeared not merely as a *formal* transformation of *religious* beliefs into *secular* ones. This would be a rather limited and formalistic notion of secularization. Instead, he analyzed *materially* “what” becomes disenchanting, and he suggested that the process of disenchantment and rationalization covers all areas of life and all kinds of objects. On the level of religious beliefs, which guide life as a whole, secularization culminates, as becomes clear in Weber’s material analyses, in a progressive “autonomization”, that radically unfolds in occidental history with its tremendous rationalization dynamic. The contemporary process of routinization of an autonomy-oriented conduct of life confirms this development. Therefore, a century after Weber’s famous essay about Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism, the evidence for a process of secularization, a progressive disenchantment and realization of the potential for autonomy, has grown strongly.

The Jewish-Christian myth of creation, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden (Genesis 2,4-3,24), already described a potential for autonomy in mythical form (cf. Hegel, 1986: 75ff., Oevermann, 1995: 67-87). The expulsion from paradise is depicted as an expulsion from a state of paradisiacal carelessness and animal-like unconsciousness by virtue of the first autonomous decision by Adam and Eve: they decide not to blindly follow the divine commandment but instead their own reason. They become convinced by the snake’s impressive arguments. Their decision is followed by their transfer to a state in which they are able to tell good from bad. This indicates that experience begins with autonomous decisions. This new ability, however, of making decisions and experiences, goes along with the elimination of a prior carelessness—and it brings about the disquieting awareness of the finiteness of life, of one’s own mortality. A culture with such a creation-myth already has pursued the course of the progressive, ever more systematic accumulation of experiences, for which the development of sedentariness and of written language represents a *sine qua non*.

With the French revolution the secularization process, which had been initiated by a centuries-long transformation, came into its manifest phase, since this revolution realized the autonomy-potential at the fundamental level of the principles of political rule and the constitution of political community in the transition from divine right to the sovereignty of the people. The consequent restructuring of the societal institutions in conformity with the autonomy of the citizens extends over the whole nineteenth century and beyond. After the Second World War, the secularization process reached the level of the everyday life-conduct of the individual. In Germany the breakthrough came with the generation of the 1960s. Now, the process gradually seems to reach the youngest generation of adults, with a widespread routinization of the autonomy-oriented conduct of life. But further radical autonomization steps can already be seen on the horizon, above all the introduction of an unconditional and sufficient basic income for all citizens (see www.basicincome.org), which would enormously extend the scope of autonomy for the individual and blow apart the “iron cage” of economic coercion that Weber accentuated in regard to the developed, secularized capitalism of his time—an economic coercion which is artificially prolonged in current “workfare” regimes in western industrial nations (Franzmann, 2007).

5. Concluding remarks

To summarize, I have tried to suggest that the process of secularization consists mainly in the ever more elaborate and disenchanting *articulation* and representation of the autonomy-

potential in the myths and beliefs that guide life-conduct and thereby in the successive “realization” of this potential. In this process, the search for answers to the three universal mythical questions, “Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?”, is given over to the autonomous life praxis: to the autonomous people, autonomous organizations, autonomous professions, the autonomous Individual etc. Trusting in God and his earthly “representatives”, who were considered as delivering these answers, is replaced by trusting oneself, one’s own autonomy-potential. One can therefore designate the secularization process also as a process of “finding oneself” (of mankind) and of the abolition of self-alienation, as already Hegel understood the universal-historical development.

On the surface, this theory of secularization may seem similar to Mark Chaves’ formula of a “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority” (Chaves, 1994). A closer look, however, will reveal significant differences. Chaves’ formula grasps only what to Thomas Luckmann is a theoretical starting point: the “deinstitutionalization” or “privatization” of religiosity. But Luckmann abandoned secularization theory. As I have tried to argue, the process of secularization is not confined to institutional changes such as declining church attendance and participation. Beyond the dissolution of religious authority it consists in the transformation of the type of answers to the mythical questions mentioned above, answers which are no longer *religious* in content, but more and more disenchanted, i.e. *secular*. This is not to argue that aspects of authority and institution are irrelevant, but it needs to be complemented by those dimensions stressed in this paper if it is to avoid reductionism. A theory of secularization will have to be able to explain why both aspects go hand in hand, and it seems to me that the extension of a Weberian theory which I have tried to outline in this paper does provide such an explanation.

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¹ A detailed bibliography is available online: <http://www.objektivehermeneutik.de>.

² By “conduct of life” or “life-conduct” I refer to Weber’s expression “Lebensführung”.

³ Cf Jugendwerk der Deutschen Shell, 2006.

⁴ Coupland, 1991.

⁵ Cf. Rosen, 2001.

⁶ For a more detailed sketch of the succession of generations in Germany see Franzmann, 2005.

⁷ Luhmann’s “System Theory” seems to have been generated by adopting biological ideas and frameworks for sociological problems.