

YOUTH AND RELIGION IN GERMANY

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Introduction

I would like to take this opportunity today to present some of the findings from my research project on «Youth and Religion». Although this was carried out in Western Germany, I would like to say here that I am not sure how far our own situation differs from that of other highly-developed countries. Actually my own feeling is that these findings are fairly typical for industrially developed nations. I should also point out that I am only talking about what we call the old *Bundesländer*. The situation regarding the religious mentality in the former GDR is so fundamentally different to that in West Germany, that it should be viewed separately.

Before I present some of the major findings from my study on «Youth and Religion», I would like to start off with some background information.

First of all one can establish that there is virtually nothing of note on the subject of «Youth and Religion» in Germany, at least when it comes to comprehensive empirical research. Since the last assessment performed by Hans-Otto Wölber, which appeared in 1959 under the title «Religion without decisions», this topic constitutes a blind spot in the research field. For thirty years now, neither the sociology of religion nor youth research have examined this question in any depth. Admittedly there have been a number of investigations into the problems surrounding the church convention, the so-called «youth sects», and, in recent times, occultism among adolescents. But this fixation on these rather exotic phenomena which has diverted people's eyes from broad, less eye-catching majority of young people. Evidently there was always a tacit assumption that they were still oriented, in one way or another, to Christianity. Since I consider this assumption to be

highly problematic, I would like to take a look now at precisely these average young people. Here I shall not be looking at the more exotic forms of religious or para-religious practise, however fascinating they might be. Nor shall I look at the challenges posed by Islam, or the fundamentalist Christian groups, which have lots of members among the hundreds of thousands of refugees who have streamed to Germany in recent years.

I should now like to give some idea of the ungracious way my topic has been treated by the research in Germany up till now. The comprehensive Shell Youth Study of 1984, for instance, contained no more than 3 closed questions on religion, concerning: attendance at church services, prayer and «belief in life after death». Generally the large compilations on youth research do not even have an entry for religion. Kruger's «Handbook for youth research» from 1988, for example, completely ignores the question of religion. It will only first have an article on «youth and religion» in the new edition which will appear at the end of this year. The sociology of religion has divided itself into an elaborate theoretical exegesis of the classical writers (Weber, Durkheim, Luckmann and so on), and an empirical sector restricted to church sociology. This means that the available data is limited to just a few parameters within the dimensions of ideology and ritualism. As such, then, the stick figure on the cover of the first volume, who is trying to find his way through a difficult landscape of world views with just a divining rod, does not merely represent the young person of today. This figure equally represents the state of the present-day researcher when he asks about «youth and religion», for he is forced to set foot in virgin territory without any reliable guide to the problems.

That concludes my comments on the present state of the research, and brings me to a few key dates regarding the design of my research. The study was commissioned by the «Protestant Youth Working Group of Germany» (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der evangelischen Jugend in Deutschland, AEJ for short) and funded by the Ministry for Women and Youth (BMFJ). At the time the study was being planned and applications were being made, Honnecker's words that the wall would still be standing in a hundred years time still rang true. But in a flash, things turned out quite differently – much to Honnecker's surprise, as we know – and so the former GDR was brought into the research. But given that the GDR had a completely different denominational structure and a much smaller church membership, as well as the fact that the protestant churches played a central role in the political opposition, we realized that the GDR youth could not be simply «appended» with the wave of a hand. Thus I shall restrict myself today to the old *Bundesländer*, as I have said.

But to return to the «technical data» regarding the investigation: we were actually given the flag to start in Autumn 1990, and the field research in the West was carried out during the months of February, March and April 1991. The first two volumes have been on the market now since April of this year. Volume 1 is a resumé of the outgoing state of the research, and volume 2 contains the results for West-

ern Germany. The data base for this was provided by 62 in-depth explorations with adolescents and young adults. They were all aged between 12 and 24, and came from various regions of Western Germany. Beside the usual quota criteria, such as age, sex, urbanity, level of education and type of schooling, the sample was also selected according to proximity to the church. Somewhat simplified, we distinguished three groups: the first group consisted of those who are close to the church, defined here by an active involvement in young people's church work. The second group was made up of those who are distant to the church, shown by the fact that they keep away from the programme it offers. And finally the third group, which consisted of young people who have active knowledge of techniques and teachings which are generally considered to belong to occultism or new age philosophy. Drawing on Peter L. Berger's thesis on the «heretical imperative», this last group was labelled «heretics» for the sake of simplicity.

Without going into the entire complex of fundamental considerations that went into creating the «topic guide», which provided the framework for the approximately three hour interviews, I would like to at least give you a quick outline of the problems regarding the concept of religion. First of all Max Weber's refusal to define religion in any way still strikes me as quite remarkable. But despite the importance of this warning finger, it does not help the empirical researcher with his problems, for one way or another, he must operationalise his research topic. On the other hand, it was also clear that this necessary operationalisation should not lead to the substantial concept of religion. This was clear from the very fact that one of the main aims of the study was to record the religion of «the non-believing youth». In other words, to find out in particular what has taken the place of the traditional Christian religion in contemporary life worlds. Along with important impulses from Durkheim and Eliade, or, for instance, Georg Schmid's study «Interesting and Sacred», we also considered the thoughts of the American sociologist of religion, Charles Yinger Glock, to be of great practical importance for our research. Already in 1962, Glock distinguished 5 dimensions of religiousness. These were:

1. The ideological dimension, relating to religious convictions.
2. The ritualistic dimension, involving participation in church services, the practise of prayer, offertory, penance etc.
3. The experiential dimension, which concerns the feelings imparted by religion, such as fear, or trust and assurance.
4. The intellectual dimension, which concerns knowledge of religious topics.
5. The consequential dimension, which involves the social consequences of religious orientation.

As I scarcely need to add, over the last couple of decades, the empirical sociology of religion has generally reduced its subject to just the first two dimensions. Nor do I think that one must emphasize that the new ground we were breaking in this study contains just as many opportunities as risks. But now I should like to turn to the actual results. First I should like to give you

some of the findings on religion, in the close sense of the word, and then some of the major findings on «belief after the end of belief.»

Starting off with those findings one could group under the heading of «Christian convictions in everyday life»,

I shall look at:

1. The subjective meaning of religion in everyday life;
2. The changes in the image of God;
3. The significance of Jesus Christ;
4. Religious symbols;
5. The shift in the belief in immortality;
6. The way the church is perceived.

1. On the subjective meaning of religion in everyday life

Religion hardly plays a role in the day-to-day lives of young people who are distant to the church. The tendency here is to give it the cold shoulder, rather than wear oneself out by clashing with it. Here – quite in keeping with the critiques of religion from such names as Comte, Feuerbach, Marx or Freud – religion is seen as the «opium of the people», a «fairy-tale-world» which immature people have created for themselves. According to this stand-point, the sick, the poor, the weak and the outsiders turn to religion for support, security and shelter. People who are unable to master their own lives and «need something they can cling to» dedicate themselves to a religion. However, present-day youth, which is enlightened and able to think and act on its own, is proud that it does not need this. The extent to which religion is synonymous with backwardness and outside influence is brought home to them by such phenomena as Islamic fundamentalism – here I need only mention the Gulf War and Betty Mahmoody's best-seller «Not without my daughter». But the dark chapters in the history of the Christian religion are also pointed to.

Against this, religion is held in high regard by the «heretics». Although they view religion as a self-created aid in life too, they do not draw the conclusion that religion should be done away with. They go a step further, in the sense of a radical constructivism, and turn the projection theory voiced by the critics of religion into something positive: since man is always the creator of this own reality, the supposed abolition of religion is likewise a fiction. This understanding of people's debt to myth tends to lead them to a new, personally created religion.

Thus while religion *still* has a more or less unquestioned, day-to-day influence on the mental preserves of those who are close to the church, and is rejected by those who are distant to it, we find it *reappearing* among the heretics.

2. *The changes in the image of God*

The number of young people in the representative surveys who cross «yes» to the question «do you believe in God?» is continuing to drop in Western Germany. However, latest figures show that over half of the youth in Western Germany admit they believe in God, and this despite the theodicy problems, which are particularly weighty among young people. However, what I find more exciting is the fact that the traditional Christian image of God is disappearing. As far as God is still conceivable these days, he is pictured as immanent and not transcendent: it is not thought that God is «the absolute other», but rather that «God is in all things.» God is no longer one's personal vis-à-vis, but more one's partner in inner dialogue. He is compared with an energy field, and people stress: «I am part of God.» Another basic characteristic of this altered image of God is the rejection of dualism between good and evil. In its place comes a notion of complementariness, as expressed in the following quote from an 18 year-old female «heretic»:

«If God is a higher being, he must contain both good and evil. If he has created us – and we are always good and evil at the same time – then he must also be good and evil himself.»

The new image of God can be summed up as monistic, immanent and technomorphic – as opposed to dualistic, transcendent and anthropomorphic.

3. *The significance of Jesus Christ*

A personal relationship to Jesus Christ can only still be found among those close to the church. Although the rest of Western Germany youth scarcely contests the historical existence of the *person* called Jesus of Nazareth, the belief that he was the son of God, or even that he has redeemed us from our sins, has almost disappeared. One finds admiration for his special talents, abilities and achievements, and there is no shortage of respect for him as a humanitarian model. But this respect tends to get damaged by the church's exaltation and dogmatic glorification of him. Thus, nowadays, his impact as a charismatic social revolutionary is interpreted in social psychological terms, and not eschatological ones. «Although I believe that he was crucified, I don't believe that he rose again» – this quote hits the general attitude to Jesus Christ on the head. To this one might add that, as a result, such terms as «grace», «redemption» or «revelation» now only lead to complete misunderstanding.

4. *Religious symbols*

Gives the dramatic break with the traditional tenets of faith, it is hardly surprising that the realm of religious symbols has also been deeply eroded. With that, the

central symbol of Christian church has been clearly affected. With the exception, once again, of those close to the church, it is mainly perceived either with emotional distance as a mere identification sign for Christians, or as a grisly implement of torture: one hears comments like: «the cross in those days was the same as the electric chair now,» or even «how can one hang this murderous instrument above one's bad? Its original meaning – as a symbol of forgiveness of sins, redemption and resurrection – now only plays a marginal role – almost exclusively among those close to the church.

Against this, the Yin-Yang symbol seems well suited to expressing the present authentic feeling for life. It enjoys very broad favour and was often mentioned spontaneously by our respondent as a means for characterising their deepest convictions. As a symbol of change, of polarity and the unity of opposites, it clearly reveals a deep longing for a holistic universe.

The strong influence of Eastern spiritual traditions which is manifested here, is also shown in a further important characteristic of young people's present belief worlds.

Namely:

5. The shift in the belief in immortality

We know from representative surveys that the «belief in life after death» is very widespread among young people.

Interesting here is the fact that young people tend to believe more in an afterlife than adults. Moreover, the percentage of those who believe in this constitutes the one exception to the overall decline in beliefs. Thus in 1984, 49% believed in an afterlife, whereas according to the 1991 Shell youth survey, which is not yet published, the figure has risen to roughly 55%. But from my own investigation there can be no two minds about the fact that this is not the result of some Renaissance in the Christian belief in resurrection. Rather we encounter here with somewhat diffuse notions that «it must all carry on somehow.» Or even quite explicit beliefs in the Eastern notion of reincarnation. For these people, reports of «out-of-the-body» experiences or personal feelings of déjà-vu provide the necessary backing for their arguments.

6. The way the church is perceived

The way religious beliefs have been «disconnected» from the Christian tradition, as comes across in these findings, also has consequences for the relationship young people have to the church: it is assigned almost no more importance as a guardian and impartor of meaning in life. Rather, the most common attitude towards the church is one of distance and disinterest: «I've nothing against them so

long as they leave me in peace,» said one adolescent, putting the opinion of many in a nutshell. Credit is given solely to the diversity of its welfare activities, while at the same time it is hoped that one will never have need of them oneself. The only moments of contact with the church which they choose themselves are the rites de passage. Here we find that material incentives («bags of money») are of central importance for confirmation. On the other hand «weddings in white» are preferred to the registry office because of their ceremonial atmosphere. However, the question as to whether this is seen more in its service aspect, as a sort of «spiritual party service», or whether the important thing here is a popular magical belief which has endured, requires a further, detailed investigation.

Beyond this, the image of the church as an institutional organ of power – comparable with the major political parties, the state and the tax office – is particularly strong. The church is seen as entangled in struggles for power, hierarchical and patriarchal structures, profit seeking and corruption, and clearly rejected. It stands to reason that the church's critics are strongest among the «heretics». But I must also draw attention to the fact that noticeably polemical voices are also being raised against the rigid administrative machinery by those close to the church.

That concludes my brief sketch of the topic «Christianity on the test bench», and brings me to my Second Main Section.

7. Some remarks on the «invisible religion»

With all due brevity, I shall attempt to indicate some of the possible answers to what I consider to be the most important questions in the sociology of religion. Questions which Thomas Luckmann already posed some thirty years ago. In his famous book «Invisible Religion», he asks: «Which norms determine the actual priorities in the day-to-day life of the average member of society? Which subjective systems of relevance have paramount importance for assimilating meaning into present day life?... How far is the traditional model of religion still internalized, and what relationship does it bear to the prevailing system of “ultimate” meaning?» With respect to the last question about the everyday relevance of Christian teachings, Luckmann conjectured that they might already have become a «system of pure rhetoric which nobody takes seriously any more.» I think that the findings I have just presented give an impressive endorsement to Luckmann's conjecture.

But Luckmann also attempted to give answers to the other questions about the «actual priorities in day-to-day life», and the «subjective systems of relevance which have paramount importance for assimilating meaning». Admittedly, answers which, at best, could only be supported by «scattered, limited and, basically speaking, weak proofs» taken from the American research of the time. But answers which speak for Luckmann's outstanding sociological intuition. Thus his

«provisional outline of the most salient topics in the modern sacred cosmos» reads almost as if he were anticipating my empirical findings. Luckmann suspected that the dominant topics in the «warehouse» of ultimate values would be as follows:

- *Autonomy*, being a new definition of personal identity in terms of the person's «inwardness»;
- *Self-realization and self-presentation*, being the most important way of realizing this autonomy, and simultaneously as a field containing an enormous need for advice and services;
- *Mobility ethos* (social climbing), being a form of self-realization achieved by status improvement;
- *Sexuality*, being a specifically modern form of self-realization and self-presentation, once sexuality has been released from its traditional societal function as the basis of the kinship system;
- *Familism*, being the most important possibility for self-transcendence beside sexuality, which «potentially, at least, is more stable – and allows one to set up a microcosm which can be of «ultimate» importance for the duration of an entire lifetime.

Keeping Thomas Luckmann's «provisional» speculation in mind, I would now like to turn to the findings from my study. When it come to the «the meaning of life», one can note first of all that the orientation to higher, generally binding meaning perspectives has largely disappeared. More and more, the personal meaning given to life is found in inner, secular well-being. Enjoying life and self-realization – that's «what it's all about.» And one can name certain preconditions for a fulfilled life of this sort. The following major subjective pillars for happiness were identified among the younger generation:

1. Proven friendship, friends one can count on and with whom one can discuss everything;
2. Warmth and security experienced in the relationship with one's partner or in one's family;
3. A raised standard of living which becomes increasingly linked with demands for luxury and exclusiveness;
4. Satisfaction in one's career, which is dependent on both good pay and «having fun in one's work».

And finally:

5. Striving for freedom and self-congruence, for self-realization and intensity of experience.

I would now like to do a quick comparison between Luckmann's theoretical extrapolations and my findings. An initial difference can be seen in the great importance our sample places on friends, friendship and peers. In all probability, at least part of this is a specific characteristic of their life stage. But it is likely that Luckmann's scenario will have to undergo a more fundamental modification in the light of the large continuing importance given to the desire for love. While Luckmann had expected that partner relationships would develop from «the no-

tions of romantic love to – putting it loosely – sexual polytheisms», nowadays we observe more of an upward trend in the demands for fidelity and desires for warmth and security also within just such partnerships. For all the ever-changing role-patterns, both the steady relationship and the institution of marriage seem quite able to hold their own as institutions without any real alternative. Although sexual satisfaction also came out on top of the scale of subjective preferences, in comparison with the need for closeness, support and warmth and security, it would seem to be of more secondary importance. But apart from this one must admire Luckmann, for his prognoses have generally hit the mark. I would like to remind you once again of the social climbing ethos and of the great importance of the family. An the agreement with Luckmann becomes particularly clear in the central importance given to personal aspirations to happiness. We can see these aspirations in my study of the «dream careers» that the people aim at. Their wishes can be described somewhat coarsely as «being self-employed, rich and famous.» Or even in the role models, where altruistic values, such as the selflessness embodied by Mother Teresa or Albert Schweitzer, are now only rarely seen as desirable. Of considerably more importance here are the values embodied by the successful young-urban-professional, the yuppie, such as: an attractive appearance, a self-composed air, the ability to communicate, and success and fame. Similarly, those personalities who stand for self-realization also receive admiration, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, as well as for instance the pop star Madonna. What impresses the young people here is their autonomy, independence and steadfastness, their self-control and their urge towards self-perfection. It's time I slowly came to an end. But I'd like you to allow to make one last point, to make sure there have not been any misunderstandings. One might think that I've been saying that the Christian cosmos of meanings is being replaced by a new, binding «sacred canopy.» To avoid any such misunderstandings, I would like to look at one last concept, namely the concept of «religious patchwork-making.» This captures very nicely the polymorphous religiosity one finds in my study – especially among the «heretics». People pick and choose from the inventories of diverse traditions, taking whatever they need to find, realize and assert themselves. Quite regardless whether it comes from Indian, Red Indian or oriental regions, or from the occult undercurrent in our own Western culture. And regardless whether it comes from exotic shamanic traditions, or pre-Christian, Celtic or Germanic myths and mantic techniques. But one thing becomes quite clear here: the Christian religion has lost its monopoly. Or at least there is no wish for ready-made edifices of meanings in the «hot core» of the present religious ferment. Rather one tinkers away at one's own custom-made motor home, complete with four-wheel drive.

But the heretic's new joy in experimenting with religions should not make us forget that, by and large, so-called «normal» youth shares little interest in religion. For this is also a major finding from my research project: nowadays the criticisms of religion made by Feuerbach, Marx or Freud, and belief in science, colour the

thinking of the average young person to an extent we have never seen before. Feasibility, and the possibility of being verified, as in a scientific experiment, are central coordinates of their reality-oriented world picture – one that offers a lot of resistance to metaphysical and theological speculations. And this applies equally to both the established religion system as well as the outgrowths from the new spiritual scene. Disinterest, pity and ridicule seem to be common reactions to them and their likes. Evidently people have heard about the following little insight – one which Erich Maria Remarque put so charmingly:

«There seems to be a lot of similarity between truth and the meaning of life, and hair tonics – every firm praises its own product as the only one that will give salvation, but Georg Knoll, who has tried them all, still has a bald head, as he should have realized right from the start. If there was a hair tonic which really made hair grow, it would be the only one because all the rest would have gone bust long ago.»

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