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**YAYINA HAZIRLAYAN
Doç. Dr. Ali İsra GÜNGÖR**

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MULTIPLE RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES BETWEEN SECULARISM AND RESURGENCE – A COMPARATIVE VIEW

Paper presented at the IAHR Special Conference:
Secularism and Religious Resurgence in Prospect and Retrospect
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Prof. Dr. Christoph Boehinger
University of Bayreuth/Germany

At first, I would like to express my thanks to the organizers, especially Ali Güngör, and also to the IAHR-functionaries, especially Tim Jensen, for inviting me to this conference and giving me the opportunity to share with you my ideas about religious identity in a comparative perspective.

My paper includes three parts. First, I will briefly discuss some aspects of religious identity in the framework of secularization and religious resurgence in a globalized culture. After that, I will present some results of a research project on religious identity concepts of catholic and protestant church members, which I carried out in my own region in Germany. At last I draw some more general conclusions and formulate some questions for further debates. Therefore, the “comparative perspective” of the prepared title of my paper is more a matter of tentative perspectives than of fixed insights.

1. Religious identity in a globalized culture. Introductory remarks

As we have already heard in the previous presentations, there is a complex relation between modernization processes, secularization and social change. In German discourses, we have had an ongoing debate about the relation between secularization and individualization, strongly influenced by discussions about Thomas Luckmann’s ideas of “invisible religion”. first formulated in the 1960s. Luckmann questioned the basic hypothesis of secularization theories of the classical type. He argued that religion in modern societies does not disappear but rather changes its character, becoming “invisible” in the sense that classical methods of empirical sociology of religion such as counting service attendance or prayer frequency are no useful means to explore those emerging types of religiousness, which are coined by individual needs and means. Therefore, following Luckmann, there is no resurgence of religion, because religion never disappeared. Religious institutions may vanish, but religion, taken in the individual sense of the word, is a basic and constant factor of human condition. This hypothesis has been very influential and fruitful especially for research in non-traditional fields of religious studies such as New Age studies. Simultaneously, it was heavily criticised from different sides. To take just one

recent example: the German Sociologist Detlef Pollack argues that secularization in Germany and also in other European countries is the dominant process, not at all compensated by booming fields of alternative spiritualities. In contrary, it seems that the general secularization process is accelerated by these alternative developments, which themselves are an effect of secularization and not a countermovement.

It is not possible to go deeper into the implications of this debate here. I just mention a view points:

Firstly, it has to be stated that both sides of the debate – as most approaches in Western Sociology of Religion – are strongly focused on Western Christian religion, arguing against – or defending – a certain type of empirical church sociology. Therefore, it has to be asked, how far it is possible to apply this ideas to other types of religion – and also other types of society and individual identity.

- *Secondly*, the question of secularization and resurgence has to be rethought in the light of the new public presence of religion caused by global developments in recent years – just to name 9/11 as a starting point for a new debate on religion in the political field. Although these developments have quite obvious effects in every day live all over the world, the question still is whether religious resurgence is only a matter of media perception and public representation. In Germany for instance, there is a seemingly contradictory process of increasing public presence of church leaders like the protestant Bishop Huber on the one hand and the still ongoing, even accelerating decline of church membership and church attendance, closeness of church members to central Christian doctrines and so on. Therefore, we should not reduce secularization and resurgence of religion to the side of institutions and the media.

- *Thirdly*, there has been a vivid discussion about Europe as the “exceptional case”, which holds the European secularization process to be somehow unique in the world. This again is a somehow reductionist approach, reducing “Europe” to certain countries and certain developments. If you are aware that Turkey belongs to Europe as well as Poland, Ireland or Russia, modern European history of religions has to be re-written at that point. Therefore, the sketched ambiguous developments in Germany are perhaps not so exceptional.

It seems more promising to look at the worldwide challenges caused by the increasing interference of economies, cultures and also religions, usually called globalization, which are mirrored in every day life of many people. I would like to argue that the ‘clash of civilizations’, if it exists anyhow, is not a geographical matter, but it is taking place inside cultural and religious traditions and even inside the individuals, questioning their identities. This is an important observation for instance in the present approaches to teach Islam in German schools for migrant children from Islamic countries. Hansjörg Schmid, Harun Behr, Mathias Rohe and I organized several experimental conferences about this in Stuttgart, inviting teachers of different experimental school teaching models in several parts of Germany (Cemal Tosun was also part of these conferences, both of us chairing a workshop). It was very interesting to learn that independently from educational, theological and legal models, there is a growing ambiguity between the specific needs of young Muslims in Germany and the traditional way of dealing with

these needs, supplied by the mosques, the hocas, but also the school teachers – independently from their personal convictions. There are many stories and narratives, some of them very funny and interesting, about problems of identity making in the context of migration experience. I am sure that these experiences are not at all unique, not even restricted to the context of migration, but they express a new type of dealing with the ‘human condition’ (in the sense of phenomenologists like Luckmann) under globalized circumstances.

Looking at secularization and resurgence from this side, the question should not be reduced to examining religious institutions, but there has to be a strong focus on the individual side of the coin. Most interestingly, individuals tend to draw their own conclusions according to their own needs and interest far away from the expectations of religious institutions and related theories, deciding to engage in religious activities or not, wearing scarves or not, creating their own worldviews, combining elements of different origin, at the same time rejecting some and enacting other parts of their own religious backgrounds. As this is not only a matter of migrants, I developed a research project looking at the religiousness of adult church members in Germany together with several colleagues at the University of Bayreuth, Winfried Gebhardt from Sociology and Wolfgang Schoberth and Ottmar Fuchs from Protestant and Catholic Theology. With the means of qualitative research, especially interviews and group discussions, we tried to find out, how church members in our own region cope with the situation of secularization and resurgence, and also with the pluralization of the religious or spiritual marketplace.

2. The “spiritual wanderer” – Results of a research project in Germany

As a theoretical approach, we started with Thomas Luckmann’s notion of the “invisible religion” – but unlike most Luckmannian followers, we focussed not on some spectacular religious groups, but on church members to find out, whether there is something “invisible religion” inside “visible religion” of the religious institutions. We started in our own region, which is situated in the North of Bavaria and called Upper Franconia. Later on, we also included people in bigger cities in other parts of Germany, including parts of the former GDR, where church affiliation is significantly lower than in Western Germany. Methodologically, we drew from methods of qualitative social research, especially the reconstructive tradition of Fritz Schütze and Ralf Bohnsack, two leading German representatives. Making use of these techniques, we tried to find out whether our interview partners share any version of alternative spiritualities - “alternative” in a sense that it is not part of the catechisms of the respective religious institutions. Therefore, we looked for spiritual elements such as meditative practices or elements of worldview, stemming from non-christian religious origins, esotericism and New Age, or from one or the other section of religious and secular fields, such as psychotherapy, political and ecological movements, feminism and others. We did not prepare a questionnaire, but carried out intensive interviews, always starting with a narrative part.

Our own region is quite conservative in religious terms, most inhabitants are either Catholics or Protestants, and there is still a considerable degree of confessional identification on both sides. For instance, the rate of intermarriages of Catholics and Protestants was rather low until recent times. In some villages, people even identify their confession with their dialect: people

of the neighbouring village are said to have a "Catholic dialect" – and vice versa. Therefore, the interconnection of religious and cultural elements is considerably high, both being important parts of the personal identity of our interview partners. Nevertheless, some of them proved to include nearly everything into their own spiritualities on a personal level. Therefore, our list of "alternative spiritualities" became larger and larger, and at the end we had nearly the same variety of spiritual orientations as you would probably find in big German Cities like Berlin or Munich.

It was very interesting to observe, how our interview partners combined their interest in alternative spiritualities with traditional religiosity. For most of them, this seemed not to be problematic on a personal level, even if they told us ugly stories about local church functionaries, trying to prevent them from turning towards paganism or non-Christian religions. Most of them made a clear distinction between being a church member on the one hand and engaging in any spiritual practice on the other. For them, church membership has to do with cultural identity, local sociality and passage ceremonies in family life, whereas spiritual activities seem to be quite independent from those spheres.

Nevertheless, some of the interview partners even confused elements of different origin in their personal constructions. For instance, a lady, who still is a protestant church member, was very critical against Protestant and also Catholic Theology, which she accused to be intolerant, static and violent. She also accused Islam for similar reasons. In contrary, she told us that she is very fond of the Buddha and his teaching, because different from other religious leaders, the Buddha accepted Jesus as another prophet. (I don't have to explain the nature of the confusion at this conference). Another lady, who was a follower of the Osho-movement in her youth and extensively travelled through different alternative spiritualities, after marriage turned back to the village of her family, the house of her parents and also to the Protestant Church. She argued to have found out that the "energy" of Jesus is more pure than any other she had experienced before. ("Energy" is a central term of the Osho worldview, which she still uses).

We also interviewed pastors and other church functionaries, who try to include some or other elements of non-Christian origin, for instance elements of Zen Buddhist meditation, into their pastoral work. It was very interesting to learn, that for many of our interview partners it did not make a difference, whether this specific element was part of a church framework or not. If it seemed useful for their personal needs, they were ready to integrate it. If the church functionaries opposed against it, the lay interview partners just shifted over to another place, where they were able to make use of it. It is important to notice, that different from earlier alternative religious movements in Germany during the 70s and 80s, there is no principal opposition against the respective church or its teachings. The only criterion is the question, whether it is helpful for the individual purposes or not.

Connected with these findings, another important aspect of our research should be presented here, which contradicts some of the common implications of quantitative church membership analyses at least in Germany: In many of these analyses, church affiliation is thought to be the same as identification with dogmatic teachings of the churches. Therefore, in many questionnaires, the quality of church affiliation is examined by questioning the personal convictions about central theological doctrines of the respective church like redemption, death and resurrection of Christ for mankind's sake and the like. As we found out, many of our interview partners either had a

quite distanced opinion about those dogmatic questions, while at the same time stressing their close affiliation with the church; some others cordially identified with traditional dogmatics while at the same time criticising their respective church as being hierarchical and out-dated.

In both cases, the basis of the daily spiritual choices of our interview partners has little or nothing to do with preferences and decisions, coined by religious traditions. This is my central criticism against The decisive point is that they do not follow any personal authority outside themselves, which guides their decisions. The criterion is internal: What is useful for my personal spiritual path? They even refuse to accept a specific aim of their religious efforts. In contrary, we very often heard the notion: "Der Weg ist das Ziel" (the path is the aim), so the most important aspect of their orientation is to be 'on the journey'. We therefore called them "spiritual wanderers". Some of our interview partners were very clear at this point, refusing every traditional dogmatic or institutional help. But even conservative church members, who only accidentally took part in some alternative spiritual events, seem to include elements of this type of orientation into their daily life. For us, the "spiritual wanderer" is therefore a significant model for present day religious orientations.

3. Conclusions and questions

First, coming back to my initial questions, it has to be asked: Is this type of orientation in contemporary German church membership comparable with other religious orientations, or is it restricted to a certain religious tradition, e.g. Western Christianity? Are there also "spiritual wanderers" in other traditions? Is this a general aspect of secularization and resurgence, or of globalization of religion? Or is it somehow specific, caused by the peculiarities of Western Christianity or the German church system? In fact, some aspects of our approach and of course, our findings also, quite clearly refer to the specific conditions of Western Christianity: Only under these conditions, it is useful to extrapolate "church membership" and "alternative religious orientation" as two conflicting items. If there is no "church" in this sense, the results are of course not comparable. Religious affiliation – and contrary processes of distancing from leading institutions have to be defined in a different way. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe, that similar phenomena exist in other religious traditions as well. Somehow, the conditions of globalized societies seem to force human beings to create new types of individual responsibility in religious questions. Therefore, I would very much like to cooperate with some partners for instance in Turkey to get comparable material out of a Muslim context. Just a small example from the German migration context: ...

Secondly:

The paper will discuss some of the common theories to explain what they are doing, such as world ethos theories, conversion theories, 'patchwork' theories or the concept of "believing without belonging". As a further step, it develops – on the basis of data from a qualitative empirical research project in Germany – an alternative way of explaining this type of religiousness, introducing the category of the "spiritual wanderer". In a third step, the paper discusses the applicability of the results in a comparative perspective, focusing on different religious and cultural contexts, especially Muslims in Western Europe.