# › Religious Change as a Challenge: Sociological Approaches in the Interpretation and Explanation of Religion

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to demonstrate how religious change repeatedly confronts the sociology of religion with new problems of interpretation and explanation. In the first part (I), I will take a closer look at the problem of explanation in the sociology of religion at a macro sociological level. In doing so, I will provide a brief historical outline and link this to the respective problems of interpretation and explanation. This historical development allows us to discuss the various explanatory models used in the sociology of religion. In the second part (II), I will take a different perspective and switch to the micro sociological level. I will show here how responding to the question of meaning is still possible in secular societies, where the answers handed down by religious traditions are no longer accepted as a matter of course. In this part, I will take up the problems of explanation previously outlined and trace in particular the transformation of church-based religion into subjective forms of religiosity. My paper focuses on the following questions: How are social developments and religious change interwoven? How do theories in the sociology of religion explain religious change? What does social modernization and functional differentiation mean for the individual? What effects does modernity have on religion and in particular on the religiosity of individuals?

## I. How can religious change in the modern age be explained?

### 1. The transformation of the religious landscape and how it has been interpreted

The sociology of religion has been concerned with the fate of religion in the modern age since its beginnings. For example, Auguste Comte, the co-founder of sociology, adopted a stage-model: he construed world history as following a law in which religion is succeeded by science, and he assigned religion its place in the pre-modern period. According to his well-known three-stage law, the history of human kind first goes through a "theological-fictive" stage, followed by a "metaphysical-abstract" stage, which finally ends in a "positivistic-scientific" stage. Comte may not have criticized religion directly, but, by acting as a "prophet of its elimination through scientific thought" (Tyrell 1995, 88), he remained rooted in the criticism levelled at religion in the nineteenth century, criticism that in Germany is associated mainly with the names of Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx.

It was only when the sociology of religion was institutionalized in around 1900 that criticism of religion was left behind (Tyrell 1995). The classic figures in the sociology of religion – Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Ernst Troeltsch – defined science and religion as distinct areas existing side by side. They regarded religion as a "social fact", meaning, as a socially relevant phenomenon requiring interpretation.

Max Weber's work was historically comparative and typological. He was interested in the culture-shaping and rationalizing force of religious ethics. His most well-known thesis is that of the "Protestant ethic", which postulates a causal link between ascetic Protestantism and the emergence of modern capitalism (Weber [1920] 1965). According to Weber, Protestantism also develops a dynamic with regard to the "disenchantment" of the world. The rationalizing effect of Christian and Jewish religion thus contributes significantly to the fact that diverse spheres of value (such as politics, economics, science, art) became differentiated (Weber [1916] 1956a). This means that these spheres used to be more closely interwoven with religion, but emancipated themselves from the religious sphere, and developed their own internal logic and legitimacy. In this process of autonomization, they also entered a relationship of tension with religion. Weber is still relevant because he set out a formula to characterize the dialectic of modernity: the Christian West brings forth a world that needs religious roots less and less for it to function, a world that, in claiming an autonomous justification, comes into conflict with the religious tradition (Weber [1919] 1956b; Küenzlen 2011, 170; Zachhuber 2007, 15).

The classic figures in the sociology of religion understand religion as a central dimension of society, one that nonetheless had its "grand history" behind it and that had undergone a decline in significance in modern culture. Although they pointed to

the cultural achievements of (world) religions, they also claimed that these religions changed radically due to modernization, and would perhaps become dispensable.

I will present this religious change and the explanatory models developed in the sociology of religion to account for it in three stages.

## 1.1 The beginnings of secularization theory in around 1900

I would like to discuss briefly first of all the social context in which the classic figures developed their sociology of religion (Krech and Tyrell 1995): they were confronted at around the turn of the century with experiences of modernization and the cultural wars that differed from nation to nation. On the one hand, modernization appeared to be advancing; but, on the other, social – and, even more, individual – experiences of crisis became visible. These brought forth discourses of crisis, which are combined, particularly in Germany, with "meaning" semantics – that is, with questions about the "meaning of life" or the "meaning of the world" (Graf 2004). Despite their proximity to religion, these questions no longer seemed to be questions that the Christian churches could answer adequately. I will return in detail to the problem of meaning in the modern age in the second part of my lecture.

Around 1900 the way that the German population lived their lives was determined largely by religious traditions. The majority of the population (more than 98 per cent) belonged to one of the two Christian churches: a Protestant majority and a Catholic minority.[1] Approximately one per cent of the population was Jewish, and only 0.02 per cent belonged to no religious community at all (Hölscher 1990; Liedhegener 2012). However, the religious situation is more complex than these figures may suggest (Nipperdey 1988; Krech 1995; Gabriel 2012). I wish to show four lines of development that, although not statistically perceptible, emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, spread during the century, and shifted their weight in doing so.

*First*, differentiation and pluralization took place within traditional religious communities. These processes led within churches to an increase of orientations of meaning. Religion was still the central force in providing meaning, which is shown by the Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish discourses of religion in around 1900. According to Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, these discourses responded to the first experience of crisis of the modern age, an experience that destroyed certainties and created a need for something permanent – for "unconditional meaning and metaphysical security" (2004, 174).

*Second*, because of denominational pressure, it was almost impossible to leave the church. Doing so would have amounted to social exclusion. It was only in the Weimar Republic that those who had long ceased having church ties actually left the church-

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[1] See graph 1.

es. Active churchliness had already declined, though. Church members of both denominations distanced themselves internally from the church, and there was a silent emigration from the churches. This applies in particular to intellectual, male, middle-class elites and parts of the factory workforce. The middle class did not abandon the Christian tradition entirely, and nor did they dissolve all links to church Christianity (Gabriel 2012, 434). However, new providers of meaning emerged *beyond* the Christian churches. This is linked to the slowly rising pressure of individualization, which also affected religion: every person had to find for him or herself a suitable form of religiosity. The distinctive feature of the "religiosity of the educated middle class" lay in the transformation of religion into religiosity, and led to the subjectivization of the religious ideas of the Christian tradition (Hölscher 1990; Krech 1995). This triggered a change in the importance of religion, one that would continue to prevail in the course of the twentieth century. According to Volkhard Krech (1995) it was Ernst Troeltsch who understood religious individualism as a constitutive factor in the autonomy of the individual. As we shall see, the modern ideal of autonomy would come to replace the problem of salvation, and increasingly displace the denominational culture of the church. This I will discuss in the second part of my lecture.

*Third*, new forms of non-Christian religiosity emerged, such as anthroposophy, esoteric and mystical sects, lifeform movements, body-related cults, Asian religions, but also anti-church and atheistic movements (Nipperdey 1988; Krech 1995; Graf 2004). These anti-church and neo-religious worldviews have contributed to the pluralization of the religious landscape since the beginning of the century.

However, a *fourth* development became increasingly significant during the course of the twentieth century: the secular interpretation of meaning. Through the differentiation of the spheres of value, there have arisen secular options of meaning that compete with religion, such as work and family, political conviction, but also cultural and aesthetics religions (Nipperdey 1988).

It was precisely this development that the classic figures in the sociology of religion also observed, and their sociology of religion also reflected the secularization problematic of modern societies: on the one hand, there was a gradual break with the church tradition; on the other, there emerged an awareness of general Christianity in the interpretation of the world and of existence. For this reason, the sociological discourse of modernity was inscribed from the very beginning with a *narrative structure of secularization*. Secularization theory became the master narrative in the sociology of religion. Like modernization theory, it still belongs to the core of theory-building in sociology. One premise that both theories share is that the differentiation of religious and secular spheres, and the pluralization accompanying it, will necessarily lead to the erosion of religion (Knöbl 2013): in the process of modernization, both theories argue, the importance of religious beliefs and practices declines, with religion losing its social relevance before disappearing entirely (Gabriel 2008; Gärtner 2008; Gärt-

ner, Gabriel and Pollack 2012; Koenig 2008; Pollack 2012). Due to the dominance of modernization theory in sociology, secularization theory has gained an almost paradigmatic status. It has become the most influential explanatory model in the sociology of religion, and, also like modernization theory, makes a claim for universal relevance. However, secularization theory has always had its critics, and is a theory that is contested.

### 1.2 Confirmation of secularization theory: the religious crisis of the 1960s

The religious change in the 1960s appears as a confirmation of secularization theory. The processes that began at around the beginning of the century of both dechurchification and churchification, as well as of religious pluralization and individualization, but also of secularization, barely show themselves statistically, but brought a religious transformation in the course of the twentieth century.[2] The great change began with what Hugh McLeod (2007) has called the "religious crisis of the 1960s", which had its roots in the previous decade. This decline quietly announces the erosion of the Christian-religious life world and the abandonment of tradition (Ruff 2010; Großbölting 2013). There was as a result a *decline in religious socialization*, leading to a *weakening of denominational identity* and a convergence of Protestants and Catholics, so that the traditional dividing line between the two began to dissolve.

The number of those leaving the church – beginning with the Protestant Church – has increased since the 1960s, while the dogmatic belief of the church has decreased as a whole. The initial process of dechurchification was reinforced by campaigns in the media and at universities. This process affected above all people's relationship to authorities, but also and especially the areas of sexuality and family, both of which are difficult to reconcile with the ideal of individualization that became the norm (Gärtner 2016). There was as a result a change in how people understood family and gender roles, as well as in the model of sexuality. The norms governing family, marriage and sexuality changed within a few years, and led to secular domains such as family and profession being conceded a greater weight than religion when it came to endowing life with meaning.

In the 1960s, then, the churches lost not only their social authority to interpret central moral questions, but also their power to serve identity. The majority of those still socialized in the Christian faith who had abandoned the faith of their childhood did not take up a new faith (McLeod 2010, 250). This was the turning point that ushered in decisive change: The break-up of shared self-evident facts and unquestioned certainties – which had already been the subject of discussion in around 1900 – finally became manifest in the 1970s.

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[2] See graph 2 and 3.

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These empirical findings, and especially the marked decline in religious and church practice in and from the 1960s, are seen as confirming the secularization thesis, with processes of modernization appearing to lead to a loss of importance for religion. This view also had institutional implications for the sociology of religion, which for a long time had a marginal position within German sociology.

However, the secularization thesis has also been strongly criticized since the 1960s. I want to name just two of the better known authors here: Thomas Luckmann (1963, 1980) and David Martin (1965, 1978), who describe the interpretation of religious change purely from the perspective of secularization theory as a myth, believing that it is a normative pattern of Western intellectuals.

I wish to outline this context of criticism briefly: in the immediate post-war period, it was above all questions of pastoral and church sociology that were investigated. Church sociology examined the dwindling power of the Christian churches to bind people at different levels, and shaped empirical religious research with core indicators such as "membership in the churches" and "frequency of churchgoing" (Koenig and Wolf  2013, 3). This led to a limited view of religion. Accordingly, Luckmann begins his criticism by pointing to the narrowing of interpretation practised by church sociology. He problematizes the fact that it *equates* the decline of churchliness with the decline of religion, and suggests a broader concept of religion, one that defines it according to its (societal and individual) function – namely, the transcending of the biological nature of man. In doing so, he does not question the structural secularization of society, but argues that religion is moving from the public sphere into the private sphere, and is changing its social form – it is not disappearing, but only becoming "invisible". As evidence, he points to the fact that alternative, non-church forms of religiosity had already developed in around 1900, and grew at the same time as there was a decline in the importance of the traditional churches. He also observed the emergence of the New Age movement in the US since the 1950s. He highlights people's search for meaning at an individual level, and the low degree of institutionalization of these movements. Luckmann thereby introduces two further categories of explanation, both of which are still drawn upon today alongside the secularization thesis to explain religious change: "privatization" and "individualization".

However, the functional concept of religion put forward by Luckmann has been criticized for being too broad and unspecific, in that it does not distinguish sufficiently between religious and non-religious phenomena.

David Martin criticized the theoretical fuzziness and conceptual weakness of the secularization thesis. He draws on Max Weber and favours a historical-hermeneutic perspective. For Martin, the secularization thesis neglects the *inner dynamics* of religion, which do much to shape the relationship of religion to politics and modernization. Martin argues that the path of religions during the process of differentiation in

the modern age depends on two factors: the status of a country's *Reformation* and *bourgeois revolutions* on the one hand, and the relationship between *religion* and the *Enlightenment* on the other. These factors generate a specific pattern of religion and politics, or church and state, in each case. Thus, the revolution in France led to the formation of a strict laicism; a strong anti-clericalism also spread in France through the Enlightenment. Germany, where a revolution never took place, developed a corporatist model. Martin's criticism is connected to the insight that different religious influences lead to different religious policies that continue their effect until today. He therefore develops a theory of "path dependency", which contributes above all to the differentiated explanation of religious-historical developments.

Secularization theory has got a strong competitor in the thesis of the "privatization of religion", which is based on the premise that religion also shares the consequences of social modernization, pluralization and individualization. This concept describes religious change not as a history of loss, but as a process of transformation that sees the privatization of religious decisions. Accordingly, phenomena of "religious individualization" have also been increasingly explored since the 1980s, and the "individualization thesis" raised to the status of a further explanatory model (Pollack 2009). Overall, religious research is significantly increasing again. Qualitative religious research in particular examines individualized, popular-cultural and mass-medial manifestations of the religious, without, however, calling into question the paradigm of modernization theory. Criticism of the secularization theorem also comes from the American sociology of religion, which counteracts it with a "market theory" that determines religious vitality according to the relationship between supply and demand. There has been a long debate between these explanatory models.

## 1.3 Global changes to the religious landscape: redefining the explanatory problem

Even though the secularization theorem remained the most influential model of explanation up to the end of the century, criticism of the theorem did not wane. The theoretical objections – above all to its notion that religion and modernity are incompatible – were supported by empirical developments contradicting the secularization thesis. On the one hand, we can still observe in the second half of the twentieth century processes of de-churchification that well suits the narrative of secularization theory. In addition, the number of those without a denomination rose, which was mainly a result of the anti-religious policies and the promotion of a scientific atheism in the GDR. On the other hand, we can observe processes that run counter to this development: an increasing religious individualization, but above all a new presence of religion in the medial and political public domain. In addition, the religious landscape in Germany has pluralized enormously through the increase of religions, including new religious movements and Christian communities that Luckmann had already pointed to, but also non-Christian religions that have increased through

migration. The overall religious situation in Germany therefore shows today a much higher level of diversity than was the case in the 1960s (Krech 2005; Hero and Krech 2011): about 30% of the population still belong to each of the two main Christian churches. The other religious communities together account for about 10%, and these include, alongside Jewish communities, Christian free churches and the Orthodox churches, Muslim faiths and communities of Hindus, Buddhists and new religious movements – but the latter are quantitatively relatively small. At the same time, about 30% of the population do not belong to any religion. The secularization thesis can no longer explain this development alone; at its side are explanations such as the "individualization thesis" and that of the "pluralization of religion". There has also been increasing agreement since the 1990s with a thesis that runs counter to the secularization thesis: that is, with the thesis of the "return of religions" (Graf 2004; Riesebrodt [2000] 2001).

This counter thesis was provoked above all by global religious phenomena that have been observable on the world stage since the 1980s. These are very heterogeneous phenomena: the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979; the increase in Christian fundamentalism in the US; but also the rise of the Polish trade union movement *Solidarnosc* and generally the prominent role of the Catholic Church in the political upheavals of 1989; and also the global successes of the Pentecostal movement in Latin America, Africa and Asia (Casanova 1994; Riesebrodt 2001). This development does not in general contradict the trend of secularization in Western modernized societies. It does, though, contradict the claim of the "disappearance" of religion, and relativizes the interpretation of the "privatization of religion".

It is this unexpected presence of religions in the political and medial public domain in particular that has shattered the empirical evidence for the secularization thesis. Peter Berger (2015) draws the conclusion from this that modernization could lead to both secularization and de-secularization. In contrast, José Casanova (2008), Martin Riesebrodt (2001) and Charles Taylor (2007) fundamentally criticize the secularization theorem, focusing on both its empirical and normative assumptions. Their criticism is directed above all towards its teleological and deterministic tendencies, as well as its Eurocentric implications. In the meantime, the universalizability of the secularization thesis has also been disputed. The question raised of whether differentiation processes necessarily have to go hand in hand with the decline in the importance of religion and church in modern societies.

A debate began on this basis at around the turn of the millennium. The aim was to redefine the relationship between modernity, religion and secularity. The call was made to examine more closely the range and diversity of historical models of secularization and differentiation within European and Western societies.

## 2. The problem of explaining religious change in the modern age

I have tried so far to show that religious change is not as clear and unidirectional as secularization and modernization theories have presupposed. It also cannot be satisfactorily explained by the approaches outlined above. Rather, it requires explanations that take into account the fact – that is my core argument – that modern societies are characterized by a double horizon of structural secularity and structural plurality, a horizon that does not exclude the continued existence of religious forms of life and orientations of meaning (Endreß 2011). It is therefore a matter of keeping in view both the trend of secularization of Western modernity and the actual process of secularization taking place, as well as processes of re-sacralization, religious individualization, and pluralization. Both processes characterize modern societies and are currently changing them. Since one explanation cannot be played off against another, the question that arises is: How can these contradictory and simultaneous developments be explained?

The changes described above contradict the claim of a linear development, that is, the thesis of "advancing secularization". The de-churchification of society does not have to lead to the loss of importance of the religious. Despite deep secularizing processes, religious dispositions continue to be vibrant, not only in the private, but also in the public, domain. At the same time, the world is rapidly changing through globalization and we are observing complex processes of overlapping:

• We are experiencing the simultaneity of continuity and discontinuity: what has grown historically overlaps with the new; Christian religion and secular society exist side by side; this development takes place in a context relatively free of tension.

• Different cultures meet through migration; noticeable here is above all the visibility of Islam, which triggers religious controversies; this creates new lines of tensions.

• Societies become more heterogeneous through globalization and create the desire for more homogenization: the cultural hegemony of Christianity seems threatened, even for those who are no longer tied to a denomination and no longer believe in a personal God.

• National and transnational structures overlap: this applies above all to the economy, but also to religious conflicts – through this, the world appears more unclear and less controllable.

The dialectic of these changes was expressed by Jürgen Habermas in 2001 in his Peace Prize speech after the attacks of September 11. He spoke of a "post-secular society", one that "has to adjust itself to the continued existence of religious communities in a continually secularizing environment" (Habermas 2003). In this sense, religions continue to provide a reservoir of semantics and symbols from which religious patterns of identification and interpretation can be derived. These answers are

not destroyed as such, but belief in them is no longer shared in a binding way. They must each be adapted individually and interpreted with regard to one's own life situation. For this reason, Charles Taylor speaks of a secular society in which faith remains an option, but an option that is only one among others, and an option that is "frequently not the easiest to embrace" (2007, 3). This outlines the problem of explanation that is currently being discussed in the sociology of religion. The consequence arising from the problem can be formulated as a thesis: we can only adequately analyze and explain religious developments – which take place between religious individualization and fundamentalism on the one side, and irreligion and religious indifference on the other – if we cease defining in advance at a theoretical level the tensions between religion and secularity in the modern age.

I will restrict myself in the following to some approaches discussed in Germany that consider this dialectic in a new way. They connect up with Weber's comparative sociology of religion, in which he investigated the cultural and modernizing achievements of religions (Gabriel 2008; Koenig 2008; Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchard 2011; Schwinn 2013). These approaches attempt to redefine the relationship between modernity, secularity and religion.


## 3. Explanatory approaches in the sociology of religion that redefine the relationship between modernity, secularity and religion

These approaches are based on two theoretical traditions:

*First*, on Weber's sociology of religion. He analyzed the differentiation of religion from other spheres of value, a differentiation that led ultimately to the "disenchantment of the world", as a process of rationalization inspired by religion. According to this thesis, secularization therefore means not simply the disappearance of religion. Rather, Christianity is a formative and dynamizing force in the process of modernization, and has left traces in non-religious areas such as the political and legal order. In this reading, Weber's differentiation theory opens up possibilities to redefine the relationship between religion and modernity. This theory takes into account the fact that each different sphere of value formulates its own intrinsically logical claims to interpretation and power, and can therefore find itself in competition with other spheres. Weber's *paradigm of conflict and tension* has been taken up and further developed in differentiation theory. The model takes into account the fact that the tensions and conflicts between religion and secular areas will continue to exist in the modern age. We can therefore analyze processes of constant negotiation and boundary shifting between the area of religion and those of law, politics and science, and the religious character of these processes. These tensions are also embodied at the individual level in the habitus. They are manifested, for example, in the conflicts in which Islam appears as a threat to an identity bound to secularist or Christian values. Conversely,

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Christian values continue to act in secular constructions of meaning in a transformed way – for example, when young people express the fact that they experience their being as indebted to somebody, and that they are at least emotionally aware of the conditionality and non-feasibility of a successful life (Feige and Gennerich 2008, 192). In order to be able to understand such a colloquial semantics of religion, we need both a concept of religion and a methodological approach that provide enough openness to religious communication beyond the church's dogmatic faith while reflecting at the same time the double horizon of modernity. I will take up and reflect upon this idea in the second part of my lecture.

And, *second*, on Shmuel Eisenstadt's notion of the *multiple modernity*, which in turn goes back to Weber. This approach is a fruitful extension for two reasons. On the one hand, it can demonstrate the institutional continuities and path dependencies of current conflict constellations and religious policies. On the other, it overcomes the sharp contrast between tradition and modernity, so that the relationship between religion and modernity can be reformulated in a cultural-sociological manner. Eisenstadt's approach assumes that traditions continue to have an effect in the modern age, and are reflected in their own forms of modernity ([1973] 1979). This allows us to situate religion very much *in* and not *beyond* modernity (Gabriel 2008). From this perspective, we can both interpret the phenomenon of fundamentalism as an alternative in the modern age, *and* understand modernity itself as something that produces religion.

In addition the comparative perspective of this concept allows us to investigate different models of demarcation and connection between the "religious" and the "secular" in various religions and cultures (Koenig 2008).

I will return to this in my conclusion. In the second part of my paper I will look at the consequences of modernization at the micro sociological level.

**Part II: The consequences for individuals of religious change in the modern age**

I would like to show how religious change affects the religiosity of individuals. I will first say something about the conditions in which meaning is created in modern secular societies (4). In doing so, I draw on approaches from constitution theory. On the one hand, on Charles Taylor (1995); on the other, on the theory of socialization and the *structural model of religiosity* developed by Ulrich Oevermann (1995). I will then illustrate these remarks by referring to a case study, one that investigates forms of meaning-creation among young people (5).

### 4. The question of meaning (Sinnfrage) in modernized, secularized societies

In the process of modernization autonomous spheres of value take shape that compete with one another when it comes to answering the questions of meaning. These spheres can – in functionally differentiated societies – no longer be integrated into an overarching religious worldview. According to Weber, this process is initiated and driven by the Protestant ideal that dictates that a person has to prove him or herself where he or she has been placed by God – for Protestants it was first and foremost the profession. In this way, the areas of work and family, but also the economy, politics and art, each form a basis of meaning corresponding to their own logic, which enables them to compete with religion.

These processes of differentiation lead to the breaking-up of closed religious horizons, metaphysical certainties, and shared conceptions of the good (Rosa 1998, 383). From then on, the plurality of forms of life becomes the basic fact of modern societies. This means both freedom from, and compulsion to, autonomy. On the one hand, the decline of traditional instances of control and authority produce a large number of alternatives and life plans. There is a general expansion in the chances of a self-determined life. This is the positive side. On the other hand, though, the pressure of individualization increases. Freedom therefore has a downside: in a rapidly changing world, life plans, worldviews, and points of orientation are no longer shared in a self-evident way. Rather, it is normatively expected that people form their life plans individually. This can lead to an overburdening of the individual, since each and every person must assume responsibility for the decisions that he or she takes. These decisions must also ultimately be justified by the individual, too. This is all the more true since it is no longer possible to fall back on proven religious and social interpretations.

The freedom gained is therefore accompanied by a personal problem of meaning or probation (Oevermann 1995).[3] This problem can only be solved by choosing between

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[3] The term „probation" literally means that, in the face of finitude, life is a test for human beings.

serious alternatives. But, as decisions are fundamentally open, they can succeed as well as fail. When there are no longer any binding criteria available for the "choice", then they can only be based initially on trust: one believes that the decision made will prove itself. Ultimately, however, reasons or criteria must be given in order to distinguish the correctness of the choice from "senseless arbitrariness" (Hahn 1987, 162). Modernity therefore creates an indissoluble tension: answers to the question of meaning must be *both* distinctive and individual, *and* transcend individuals themselves. In sociology, this is dealt with under the *topos* of the "loss of meaning in modernity", which means that the world is no longer experienced as a cosmos designed and predetermined by God, a cosmos ordered in an ethically meaningful way (Eisenstadt [2003] 2006, 142).

People therefore no longer live in a more or less shared, meaningful order, but with a pluralization of life plans. While this is associated with the loss of certainty, it does not necessarily lead to an overburdening or to a sense of disorientation (Rosa 1998, 387). On the one hand, because secular areas have also become valid and shared sources of meaning. On the other, because, even in the modern age, views of self and the world are also embodied in institutions and practices (Rosa 1998, 385). These views are acquired and transmitted through socialization. From this perspective, life has always been embedded purposefully in a horizon of meaning that also sets limits to the freedom of the individual (Taylor 1995, 77f.). The question of meaning therefore arises only in crises, and usually for the first time in the crisis of adolescence (Gärtner 2013, 213f.). Existential questions that concern one's identity, origin and future are posed in this phase – that is, questions about a meaningful life in the future, one with transitions, crises and boundaries. The cognitive ability to form hypothetical worlds opens up to adolescents alternatives for action that demand decisions. This basic structure of life practice becomes for adolescents the drive to search for *myths of probation*,[4] that is, to search for things that they can use to shape their lives in the way that they wish: they must find out what is important to them, and what they want as individuals to bind themselves to and to prove themselves by.

In general, individuals acquire in their socialization the collective self-images and meaning-creating myths of a society, with its chances and challenges (Mead 1962; Oevermann 1991; Elias 1997). To begin with, through socializational interaction in the family and in the milieu of origin. Then, in extended exchange with other significant persons such as teachers and relevant institutions such as school. In this way, individuals who grow up together also share a social identity. Essential for individua-

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[4] The term *myth of probation* refers to the "structural model of religiosity" that the German sociologist Ulrich Oevermann (1995), drawing on Max Weber, developed. This model separates the structure and content of religiosity, and presupposes the necessity of a *myth of probation* even for the religiously indifferent person. Those are answers to the three questions regarding meaning: Where do I come from? Who am I? Where am I going?

tion and autonomy is the phase of adolescence, when the values, norms and worldviews acquired can be questioned reflexively, so that new bonds can arise. What is necessary for a person to be able to position him or herself and to achieve self-realization is a basic trust in life. Such trust develops primarily in the parent-child relationship and is based essentially on the experience of being loved and acknowledged unconditionally. It affects the perception of existing options for action and the ability to deal with crises. It also promotes the freedom that allows people to experiment with their own creative potentials, and to try out new interpretations and values. If a person succeeds in positioning him or herself autonomously, then he or she will gain answers to questions regarding the "good life". Meaning therefore constitutes itself in the execution of practical decisions, which are based initially on a certain self-confidence, that is, on the conviction that the decisions will prove themselves.

## 5. Religious endowing life with meaning among young people

I shall now illustrate these conceptual remarks by looking at current forms of religious endowing life with meaning among young people. I will first outline the contextual conditions to which young people in Western societies have to react (5.1). Then I will pick out one possibility of meaning-creation through voluntary commitment (5.2).

### 5.1 Contexts in which young people interpret religious meaning

One contextual condition of Western societies is that cultural and political constellations of obligation have dissolved with regard to religion. Following Niklas Luhmann (2002), we can say that there are "no longer any non-religious reasons for being religious" – and this applies to young people, too. For young people, religious endowing life with meaning is still an option, but it is precisely *one* option among others. In Germany, bringing up children to be religious and an authoritarian style of parenting have been in steady decline since the 1970s.[5] Parenting goals such as diligence, obedience, the willingness to fit in, and religious orientation have decreased greatly. This corresponds to the general change in values. In the 1960s, values such as achievement, obedience, order, and discipline dominated; in the 1970s, independence, self-determination and self-realization. At the same time, the generative quality in families has increased – children are recognized much more as personalities, and they receive more attention and support than before. Parents no longer rely on punishment, but on dialogue. Complementary to this, a punitive God has given way to a loving God in the churches. Today, we find values such as equality, the rule of

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5 See Generationen-Barometer 2009: http://www.familie-stark-machen.de/files/generationenbarometer09_pressemappe.pdf [04.04.2018]

law, respect for the dignity of the person, the tabooization of private violence, and "voluntary self-commitment that draws on insight" (Nunner-Winkler 2001, 185).

The attitude of young people to the institutional church is diverse: it is characterized by distance, by indifference, but also by ambivalence and by agreement (Feige 2010). Religion as mediated by the church has little significance for most young people, but many do attend church service for special occasions such as Christmas or Easter, and continue to be interested in church rites of passage (baptism, communion, confirmation) – this applies especially for West Germany. They thereby acquire a more or less (in)active church (membership) identity. At the same time, they distance themselves from conventional religious practices and Christian dogmas. In addition to sports clubs, the churches are also the most important organization for social commitment (Streib and Gennerich 2011). Many young people also take up this offer even if they do not adopt or share the religious interpretations of the church.

A variety of religious expressions and interpretations (of meaning) have emerged to replace conventional religiosity. This is due on the one hand to the pressure that young people are under in modern societies to innovate and individualize. On the other, the adolescent phase itself is characterized by questioning and the creative handling of traditions passed down. The self-classification as religious is very much bound to church membership and attendance. This means that a standardized question of self-classification in surveys cannot grasp the religiosity of young people (Gärtner 2013).

Research in the sociology of religion must therefore be based on an understanding of religion that is not restricted to church or conventional language patterns, and that allows enough openness for the reconstitution of the religious as a recomposition of its elements.

To understand the religiosity of young people, I use two models that are more specific here: first, the *structural model of religiosity* (Oevermann 1995), which I have already mentioned; and, second, the *discursive* understanding of religion outlined by Joachim Matthes (1992). The *structural* understanding of religion is based on the claim that *religious ideas* lose their binding power through processes of secularization, but that the *structure of religiosity* remains as a question of meaning or probation. This structure requires answers that can be both religious and secular. This understanding grasps the link between a young people's religiosity and the building of identity through the factor of probation, which first presents itself as a problem to be solved in adolescence. Oevermann's model has the advantage of being able to identify what the young person believes in and what he or she identifies with as *structurally religious*, even if this does not correspond to the prescriptions of traditional religions or the Christian churches. Since the creation of religious interpretations is a reflexive and communicative act, it makes sense also to work with Matthes' understanding of religion. Matthes defines religion as a *discursive entity* that is con-

stituted in social discourse. He therefore conceives of religion as a reflexive category that is connected in each case with specific *cultural objectives*. The German term "kulturelle Programmatik" that Matthes uses is not easy to translate. It means that there is within a concrete culture a framework of agreed world views and typical attitudes or modes of social action in which the issue of *transcendence* of the human being is usually addressed. This framework should be distinguished from the set of *established* actions (such as rituals, thematically fixed routines and discourses) that are a concrete realization of what is *possible* within this frame (Feige and Gärtner 2017). This understanding of religion as a culturally shaped "space of possibility" in which new deductions and interpretations can be generated corresponds especially to the logic of adolescent religiosity (Gärtner 2013).

## 5.2 Voluntary commitment in the framework of the church as a generator of meaning

Using the example of an activity offered by the church, I will now show how voluntary commitment can generate answers to the question of meaning. The data were collected in a research project on solidarity with Eastern Europe (Gabriel et al. 2002). A Catholic youth centre organizes participation in the rebuilding of a war-torn village in Bosnia. A group of young people take up the offer as *one option among others* during their holidays. Most have acquired in their socialization a certain basic trust in life, which endows them with the ability to embrace the unknown and unexperienced. This attitude has a positive effect on their bonding capacity and on their orientation towards the common good. It is precisely the experience of having grown up in a privileged environment that is connected to the (unspoken) obligation to use this resource. The young people react to this with a willingness to give, and to take on a *commitment that takes their time*. This commitment is not an altruistic one. The young people have their own motives. They are looking for opportunities for self-development and fulfilment, as well as for important experiences relevant to identity and probation. The activities offer them the chance to experience lively what it means to be needed: they can give very concrete help to people who are dependent on receiving help. – In the group it is discussed, that they rather feel annoyed, if they are expected to help at home.

But, by helping others in Bosnia, they gain an answer to the question of the "meaning of existence". Their involvement is embedded in a moratorium because the young people are not fully responsible for the action. Nevertheless, it does enable them to generate a provisional response to the question of what constitutes a meaningful life, and is therefore relevant to probation. Three factors are constitutive for identity-building: is has to be an extraordinary situation, the orientation towards the common good, and community formation with their peers.

The common-good character of the action opens a connection to religiosity *per se*. The following comments are based on a group discussion in which the head of the youth center (who initiated the action), a young adult, and four young people (three female and one male) participated. One of the young people, *Hanna*, said that the group experience was important to her, because she could open up to others and found close friends. In addition, it also became clear to her in retrospect that she had found through the group a way to her "own religiosity". She says: "(...) and then just alongside this group experience, it just gave me also a new perspective for my own religiosity, and I found that also really exciting."

The wording "own religiosity" marks the fact that religion has become for the young people something that they acquire individually: religion has become a matter of personal decision. This perspective is not a self-evident and expectable goal of young people who are involved in the framework of the church. In the following, the examples of *Hanna* and *Sofia* will show how the relationship to religion can substantiate identity and create meaning in a different way. Common to both adolescents is the fact that, in searching for a life plan, they confront their problem of probation. They differ in how they relate to the semantics, symbolism, and interpretation of religion. In addition to the factors mentioned above, two other factors are important for the creation of meaning: on the one hand, a religious element that is involved in the action; on the other, the voluntariness of participation in church service.

*Sofia* formulates her hope of developing her "own religion". This is an additional motive for her to participate in the Bosnia action. She knows from the narratives of the youth center leader about the religious element, the so-called *morning impulses*, which are a kind of evangelical slogan or bible quote for the day. These generated in her in advance the anticipation of an authentic religious experience. She is looking for a specific experience through her participation; as she says: "How to live in ways with your (...) own religion or in faith, that is independent of church."

*Sofia* implicitly contrasts the dogmatic religion of the church into which she was socialized as a child with another form of religion that is relevant to her personal life. This shows that young people who sees themselves as religious also no longer identify themselves unquestioningly with forms of faith mediated by the church. *Sofia* is looking for a form of religiosity that is based on her own biography and that is relevant for her. She has little to do with religion at home and during the school day, and religion threatens to be completely submerged in the "mess" of everyday life. In contrast, "everyday life" in Bosnia begins with a religious impulse, which is, thanks to the support of the group, present throughout the day in different interpretations, and connects religious ideals with everyday life. In this respect, the *morning impulse*, which is carried into the day and shapes the course of the day, makes possible a "new experience". This was possible under two conditions: the situation was one

that was not everyday (but exceptional), and the group shared, strengthened and confirmed the religious communication.

Unlike *Sofia*, who is seeking to combine social commitment and authentic religious experience, *Hanna* is somewhat sceptical about the religious impulses offered. She is not one of the "super religious", she says. She even has concerns that the *morning impulses* could "annoy" her. She also fears that she may feel excluded from the group if she does not find a way to this form of religious slogan from the gospel. In order to reduce this tension, she talks about "religious experiences" primarily with those young people who seem to her to be not too religious, or who seem not to "belong to any religion at all". In such cases, she can even act as a translator because she has at least acquired basic knowledge through her religious socialization.

For *Hanna*, it is very important that no one is indoctrinated, and that participation in (daily) worship is voluntary. The openness that she experiences, and the freedom granted to her to decide for herself, contribute ultimately to the fact that she can open up to the morning religious impulses in *her* way. In retrospective reflection, *Hanna* contrasts her experience of the "stiff" Catholic Church at home with her vibrant experience in Bosnia. She says: "Religion means there simply giving concrete help in everyday life or so, or being nice to others, (…) giving someone a smile."

She can identify with this form of religion practical to life when it has the form of a lived contribution. In Matthes' terms, this means: it is in this form remembered *reflexively* by *Hanna* that she can realize herself in a practical way and in open discourse. This *space of possibilities* is offered by the activity provided in Bosnia which takes place within the framework of a *cultural objective* in form of Christian *charity* – that is: *love of neighbours.* She can take up and interpret the Christian impulses in her own way, and integrate them into her life. This enables her to be religious in her own way. The expression "giving someone a smile" is for her an act that is practical to life and *sacramental* at the same time: to give something without an end in mind, and to leave it to the other person to accept it.

**III. Conclusion**

In my conclusion, I will deal with the question of how the religiosity of young people in the modern age can be explained by the sociology of religion (1). Then I will make a few final remarks on the current state of research on religious change (2). Finally, I wish to suggest some conceptual and methodological perspectives (3).

**(1) Religiosity of young people**

The interviews with the young people show that the macro sociological processes described influence the development of religious identities. This finding has achieved consensus in research on religiosity among young people. I have highlighted an essential feature of such religiosity: the subjective appropriation of religious-cultural interpretations of meaning, to which young people seek reflexive access. According to my thesis, the (religious) elements absorbed are biographically interpreted and serve individuation. This change and transformation of religiosity cannot be adequately explained by either linear or dichotomous attempts at explanation such as "advancing secularization" or "return of religion". Rather, both processes must be taken into consideration: processes of secularization as well as the manifold interdependencies and relationships that continue to exist between religion and modernity. There are discontinuities that in the context of West Germany concern mainly the institutional and exclusive attachment to one religion, but also new references and boundaries. All in all, young people perceive the different religions as equal, and most often reject both exclusive ties and denominational boundaries. We can observe with young people that an individual faith no longer requires institutional or dogmatic legitimation, but is oriented to the yardstick of subjective authenticity and the assurance of evidence by those of the same age or the same frame of mind.

**(2) Current state of research on religious change**

As I have shown, religious change does not only repeatedly confront the sociology of religion with problems of interpretation, but also requires it to reflect constantly on its concepts and methods. We can observe in the current research a trend away from meta-theories that want to explain everything. What researchers prefer are explanatory approaches that take a closer look again *both* at the inner dynamics of religion *and* the relationship of tension between religion and modernity under the conditions of globalization.

### (3) Conceptual and methodological perspectives

The sociology of religion has been accompanied by a basic controversy about its object since its very beginnings. That religion cannot be reduced to a single definition is consensus. The two most discussed and criticized concepts of religion are the "substantive" and the "functional". Both orientate themselves to different points of reference: while the "substantive" is oriented to the symbolic and ritualistic content of religion(s), the "functional" focuses on what religion(s) can contribute to society and the individual. Both concepts have also recently been combined so as to compensate for the disadvantages of each (Pollack and Rosta 2015): while the "substantive" is not sufficiently comprehensive, the "functional" is too wide and too unspecific. A further advantage of the substantive concept of religion has been emphasized by Riesebrodt (2007): it regards religion as an autonomous sphere of value and a relatively autonomous social field.

The cultural conditions of the European concept of religion have also been reflected upon in the last two decades. Especially if we want to reflect on the cultural dependence of religion as well as on the changes that it has undergone, I want to suggest *discursive* (Matthes 1992) and *historical* concepts of religion (Eßbach 2014) because they are able to understand religion in the context of each different time period. In this sense, they are able to see what is new about religions. For it is not only religions that change, but also our understanding of what religion is. We can observe, for example, that religious change in the modern age in Europe is neither continuous nor linear: phases of religious decline and religious renewal often condition each other. Thus, as Eßbach argues, from the spirit of the Enlightenment emerged not only atheism, but also new forms of devotion and religious renewal movements. We can see today that the loss of importance experienced by the churches is not accompanied by a general disinterest in religion. But religion is – for most people – also no longer a factor that determines the whole of life.

The methodological tools have also been clearly refined in the last few years, and a methodological triangulation, that is, the combination of different methods, is increasingly being considered. In addition, research is becoming more comparative under the conditions of the global change undergone by religions. Religion and religious change are studied in an internationally comparative way and on different fields of research (Koenig and Wolf 2013).

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## 7. Appendix

Graph 1: Church Affiliation in Germany 1871-2009
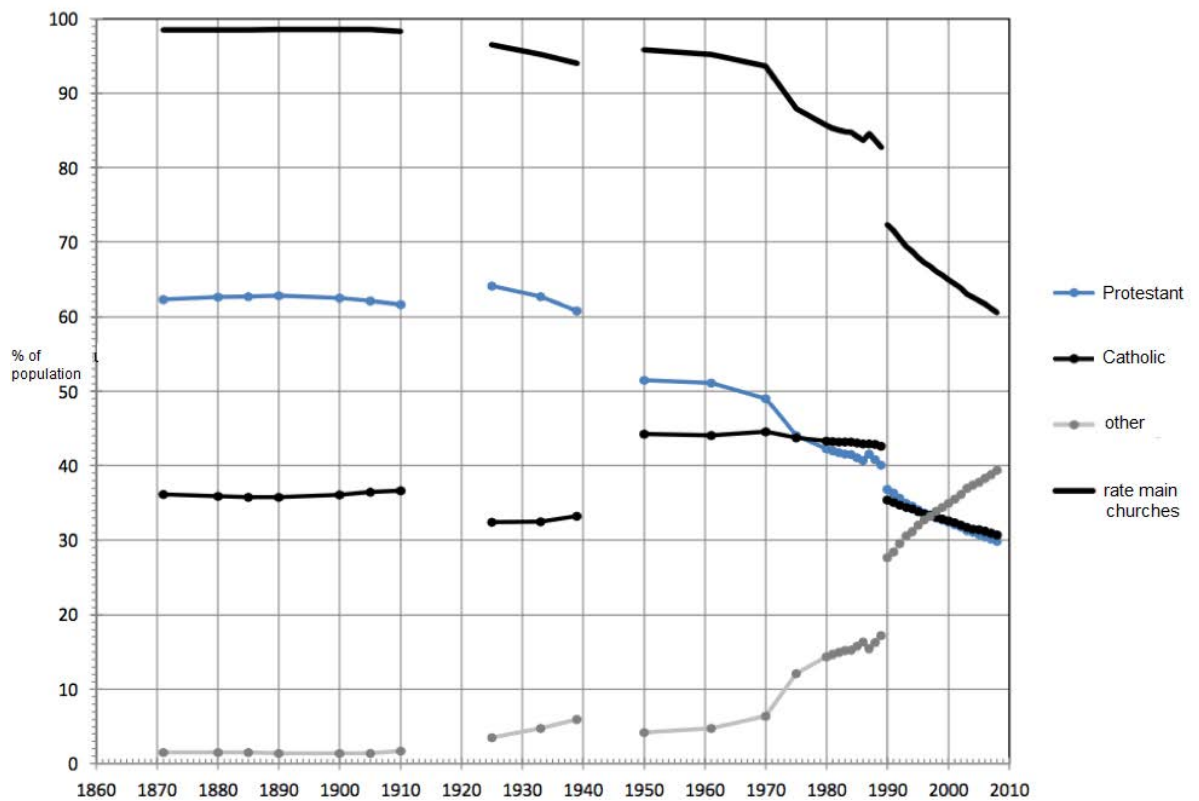


Source: Liedhegener, A. (2012): Säkularisierung als Entkirchlichung. Trends und Konjunkturen in Deutschland von der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zur Gegenwart. In: Gabriel, K./Gärtner, C./Pollack, D. (Eds.), Umstrittene Säkularisierung. Soziologische und historische Analysen zur Differenzierung von Religion und Politik. Berlin, 481-531, hier: 519.

Graph 2: Leaving the Church West Germany 1945-2007
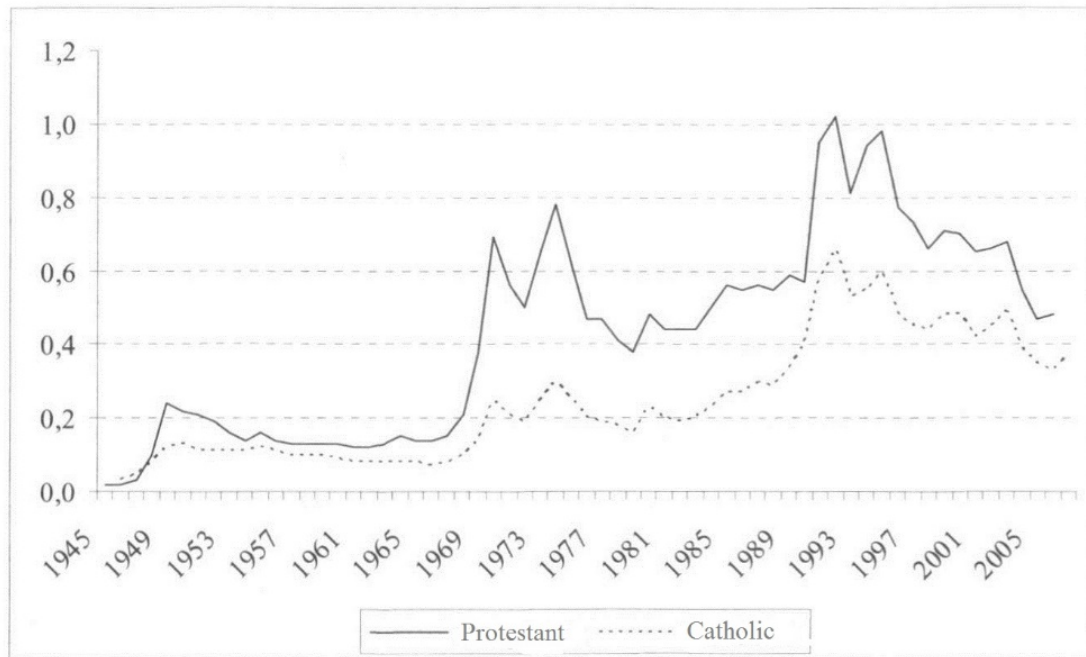


Source: Pollack, Detlef (2009): Rückkehr des Religiösen? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland und Europa II. Tübingen, 128.

Graph 3: Development of Religious Affiliations 1950-2010
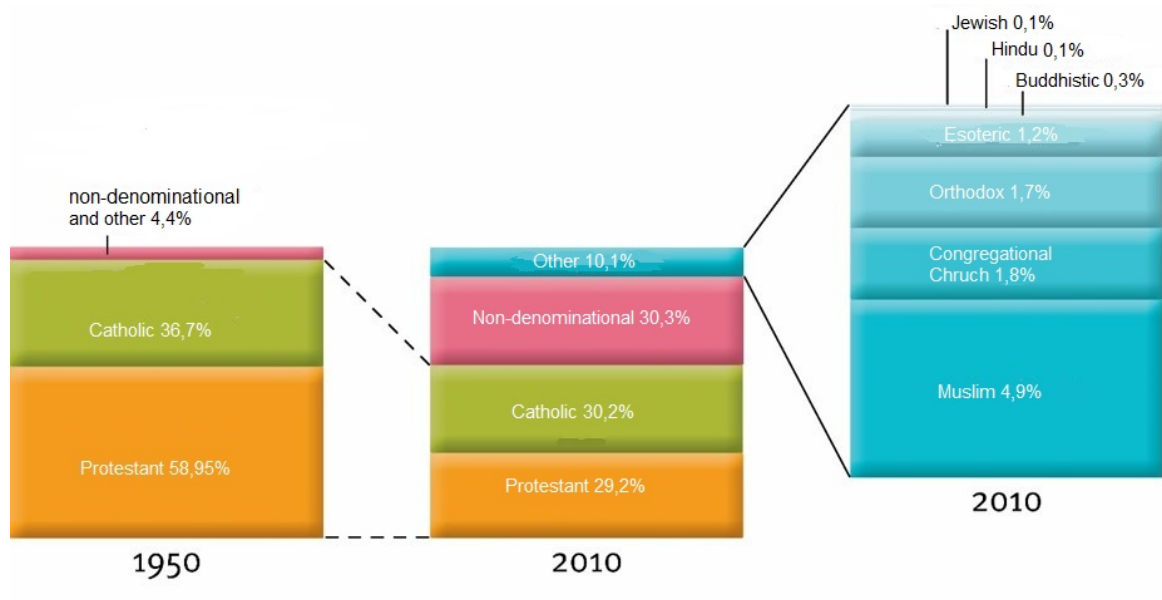


Source: REMID; Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR 1, 1955, 33.