



Archives de sciences sociales des religions

167 | juillet-septembre 2014
Postérités Allemandes

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Societal Norms, Attitudes and Identities, Arenas of Conflict

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Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Tom Kaden



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/assr/26145>

DOI: 10.4000/assr.26145

ISSN: 1777-5825

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 20 October 2014

Number of pages: 105-125

ISBN: 978-2-7132-2433-1

ISSN: 0335-5985

Electronic reference

Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Tom Kaden, « Exploring the Non-Religious », *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* [Online], 167 | juillet-septembre 2014, Online since 20 October 2017, connection on 02 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/assr/26145> ; DOI : 10.4000/assr.26145

Monika Wohlrab-Sahr
Tom Kaden

Exploring the Non-Religious Societal Norms, Attitudes and Identities, Arenas of Conflict¹

Since Colin Campbell's 1971 seminal study *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, atheism, confessional non-affiliation, and religious indifference have occasionally been the subject matter of empirical research. This research, however, has not been systematically integrated into a sociology of the non-religious to date. It is only recently that scholars in the interdisciplinary "Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network" (J. Quack, 2013; L. Lee, 2012) are entering new territory. With reference to this research, we develop the outline for a sociological study of the non-religious. With the exception of India, we restrict ourselves to the western Christian or post-Christian context.

While sociology has constantly found new ways to differentiate various forms of implicit or invisible religion, the study of the non-religious has remained subcomplex². This lack of attention has been supported by the fact that the expectations of growing non-religiosity aroused by secularisation theory have hardly come to fruition beyond Europe. Furthermore, the feeble sociological interest in non-religiosity also had its roots in the diffuseness of the phenomenon itself. After all, it is problematic to analytically determine an object that is primarily characterised by what it is *not*. In surveys, this subject matter mostly comes to the fore in terms of *less* religiosity or the *lack* of religious faith, religious belonging and ritual practice. The question that is generally left unanswered is whether the non-religious can be positively identified by means of certain features, and whether this identity goes along with a negative reference to religious attitudes and their accompanying morals and values. It is these prospects of a relational access to non-religiosity that we would like to sound out in the following.

1. An earlier, extended version of this article was published in German (M. Wohlrab-Sahr, T. Kaden, 2013).

2. As an early reminder see R. Caporale, A. Grumelli, 1971.

We base our efforts on existing research that is instructive for this type of relational access (C. Campbell, 1971; L. Lee, 2012; J. Quack, 2013; and others), including our own research on secularity and atheism³.

In this paper, we will first discuss the interest of a relational analysis of non-religiosity. Then we present three levels of this relational approach: social norms, personal attitudes and arenas of conflict. The third part analyses the case of East Germany, where non-religiosity appears as the standard case and as a societal norm. Afterwards, we present the counterpoint of United States, where non-religiosity stands more as an exception and a societal non-conformism. Although these two national cases appear as opposite in terms of social acceptance, they will allow to disclose the central place of scientific references in non-religious identities.

Towards a relational analysis of non-religiosity

In the previously dominant research on the sociology of religion, the relation between religiosity and non-religiosity has been in focus primarily as a statistical relation. Two theoretical settings have become relevant. On the one hand, secularisation theory saw the rise in non-religiosity as an indication of processes of modernisation. For the religious economy approach, on the other hand, a high degree of non-religiosity was an indication of a poorly developed religious market. The pivotal perspective of both approaches was the search for the reasons for more or less religiosity. We could add a third perspective where religiosity is identified with human socialisation as such (T. Luckmann, 1991). Consequently, the only thing that comes into view is a metamorphosis of the religious. This excludes non-religiosity *a priori*. In all of these approaches the non-religious is simply seen as an indicator of something else.

Franz-Xaver Kaufmann (1989) is one of the few German sociologists who have delved into the phenomenon of “religious indifferentism” in greater detail. In analogy to the concept of religion, he has differentiated stages that range from indifference to the church, through indifference towards Christian beliefs, down to indifference towards collective hierarchies of meaning (in particular of a moral character) and finally indifference towards commitment of all kinds (*ibid.*:

3. They are the following projects: 1. *Generational views on the religious and ideological transformation: the case of East Germany*, 2009, M. Wohlrab-Sahr, U. Karstein, T. Schmidt-Lux, Leipzig 2003-2006, funded by DFG. 2. *Multiple Secularities*, 2012, M. Wohlrab-Sahr, M. Burchardt, Leipzig 2010-2012, funded by SMWK. 3. *A study on the discourse between creationists and anti-creationists in the United States*, DFG Research Training Center “Religious Nonconformism and Cultural Dynamics”. 4. *The IVth Church Membership Study*, 2006, W. Huber, J. Friedrich, P. Steinacker, 2002-2006, financed by the Protestant Church in Germany. 5. *The 2008 Religion Monitor*, 2009, Bertelsmann Foundation, to which Monika Wohlrab-Sahr contributed an interpretation of the findings on non-religion.

158-160). On the one hand, this goes beyond simply providing a measure of dwindling religious practice and devotion since it also considers the *function* of religiosity as an equivalent to hierarchies of meaning. On the other hand, however, this determination of the non-religious again is basically negative, as it is defined by a *reduction* in the commitment to schemes of value. In contrast, positive contextual contours emerge in Inglehart's studies on value change (R. Inglehart, 1997) to the extent that the decline in religious commitment is linked to *other* – in Inglehart's vernacular: post-traditional and post-modern – value attributes.

The IVth church membership study of the Protestant Church in Germany (W. Huber, J. Friedrich, P. Steinacker, 2006) not only surveyed Protestants, but also persons without religious affiliation. The analysis of worldviews of both groups identifies a positive profile of the non-affiliated (and frequently also non-religious) with reference to a) their concept of an *order* of the world, b) their relation to *transcendence* and c) their *scheme of attribution* (of events and experiences) with reference to internal or external factors.

Colin Campbell (1971) continues to point the way for a relational perspective on non-religion. He developed his approach to a sociology of the irreligious at the same time as the initial papers of Pierre Bourdieu (2007 [1971]) on the theory of the religious field. He comprehends the irreligious as a *response to religion* and argues for researching the relationship between certain religious settings and the irreligious reference to them. Johannes Quack (2013) recently stood up for a relational approach to studying non-religion while referring to Bourdieu's concept of the religious field. He argues for a positive definition of the non-religious and a comparative perspective on religious and religion-related fields.

Other studies can also be read as contributions to determining the relationship of the religious and non-religious. They include, for instance, the collection of studies edited by Christian Smith (2003) that investigate the secularisation of public life in the United States in the period between 1870 and 1939. One of the editor's fundamental theses is that the secularisation of the public sphere was a struggle between cultural elites for positions and interpretive supremacy. This power struggle brings the relation between non-religious and religious protagonists into view linked to the struggle for a limitation of religious influence on other social domains.

Furthermore, contributions to a relational understanding of the non-religious have also arisen from recent research on the secularisation process in East Germany. For instance, Schmidt-Lux (2008) demonstrates how the governmental representatives of the ideology of "scientific atheism" in the GDR delegitimised religious knowledge by setting up a systematic antithesis between the "scientific world view" and religion. Simultaneously, the author points out, that

institutions of mass education such as *URANIA*⁴ played a major role in this process. This institution not only disseminated antireligious propaganda but natural science as well, and thereby initiated a process of “disenchantment” (Max Weber) whose after-effects still linger today.

Similarly, Uta Karstein (2013) explicitly continued Bourdieu’s approach by arguing that the religious field in the GDR was expanded into a “religious-ideological field” where religious and atheist protagonists competed for interpretive supremacy (*ibid.*: 116). This analysis underscores what we have captured as “*secularisation as conflict*” (M. Wohlrab-Sahr *et al.*, 2008). In this conflictive process of secularisation the reference to science had a pivotal function in delegitimising religious beliefs in the framework of the “scientific world view”. This indicates that non-religious positions in this arena of conflict not only convey a *negative anti-religious*, but also a *positive identity*: the reference to rationality and science. In the GDR, however, this conflict did not “automatically” emerge from border skirmishes between the fields of science and religion in the process of functional differentiation. Instead, it was politically pushed onto centre stage by means of systematic conflict communication.

Some recent developments in the United States have also sparked new research on non-religion. Most prominent in this regard are surveys that indicate that in the United States the proportion of persons answering the question of their religious preference with *no religion* has almost doubled to about 14 percent between 1991 and 1998 (M. Hout, C. Fischer, 2002: 165). Hout and Fischer interpret this increase primarily as a reaction to the politicization of the religious camp in the United States. This again brings the *relation* between the religious and non-religious positioning into focus. There have also been several new studies on atheism that reveal, on the one hand, how atheists are discriminated in the United States (C. Foust, 2009; R. Cragun *et al.*, 2012), and, on the other hand, attempt to disprove the concurrent assumptions of the dysfunctionality of atheism and non-religiosity (P. Zuckerman, 2009).

More interesting for our approach, however, are studies that consider the *relation* between the irreligious on the one hand and the religious on the other hand and analyse the moral demarcations and constructions of cultural belonging they involve. For instance, P. Edgell *et al.* (2006) use survey data to show that atheists represent the antithesis of what in the United States is looked upon as the indispensable prerequisite for trustworthiness and cultural membership: “Americans construct the atheist as the symbolic representation of one who

4. This will be discussed later. *URANIA*, established in 1888 in Berlin, was an organization devoted to educating the general public in scientific questions. It was re-established in 1954 in the German Democratic Republic, where it spread to other towns, included members from a variety of academic institutions, and offered lectures on a variety of topics in order to bring people the “light of science”.

rejects the basis for moral solidarity and cultural membership in American society altogether” (*ibid.*: 230).

Jesse M. Smith (2011) has published a study on the biographies of atheists where he also argues in a decidedly relational fashion. The outstanding impact that theism has in the United States is closely linked to the identities of those who reject it (*ibid.*: 216). Smith reconstructs a stage model of turning towards atheism that indicates that the “rejective identity” of atheists is gradually transformed into a positive identity where the reference to science and reason are key factors: “These atheists found an effective, institutionally grounded meaning structure which provided a framework for self-understanding; a secular worldview within which they could situate themselves and find a sense of direction, purpose, and legitimation of their viewpoint by appealing to science, reason, and a secular value system” (J. M. Smith, 2011: 234).

In contrast, Johannes Quack (2012) argues with regard to India that it was less the reference to science that was the primary aspect for Indian atheism than problems of injustice and social change. Beyond this, however, the multifarious documents quoted by Quack illustrate the great extent to which references to the scientific temper, the disproving of supposedly supernatural forces, the fight against the practice of religious healing and the public demystification of miracles are elements of the way atheist groups portray themselves (*ibid.*: 69-72). This indicates that even in India these groups find their identity as *non-religious groups* in their recourse to the scientific approach, an identity that could not be obtained solely through references to social reform.

In any event, the Indian case shows that science is not the only potential positive point of reference for non-religious protagonists. Other references show up in pleas of a non-religious *morality* (i.e., humanism) (R. Cimino, C. Smith, 2007), in references to *freedom and autonomy* (while propagating the separation of church and state), and in the human rights inspired struggle against *discriminating* against non-religious attitudes. We would however suggest that the reference to science has a special significance of bestowing a positive identity on the non-religious attitude while distinguishing it from religion. The history of how religion and science were juxtaposed by evolutionist thinkers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had a role to play in that as well as historical and current struggles for the autonomy and the limits of functional systems.

Levels of study: social norms, personal attitudes and arenas of conflict

We distinguish three levels of study with the relational approach proposed here. In the first place, we deal with the level of social norms and values that provide a framework for non-religious attitudes. Then we analyse the attitudes

and identities of persons and groups that essentially define themselves through their negative relation to religion. Finally we consider the arenas of conflict in which struggles for the location, extent, and limitation of the religious are fought between non-religious and religious protagonists.

Religious and non-religious attitudes do not emerge in a vacuum. Instead, they are framed by societal norms that give them a positive or negative slant. Ideal-typically, we distinguish four different social settings, depending on whether the non-religious is considered as a kind of non-conformism, or a social standard, or whether the religious and the non-religious coexist in a state of stabilised tension, or whether there is a tendency towards a more or less peaceful plurality.

In some national contexts, non-religiosity appears as the standard case. The GDR is iconic for this since having no confession was the standard case and – at least on the political level – atheism was made the propagated norm. It was therefore not unusual that persons identified as religious were comprehensively – politically and socially – treated as non-conformists. This basic structure is still being felt after the demise of the GDR, even if the norm of non-religiosity has been deprived of its political foundation.

Non-religiosity can be an exception and in addition be considered as a societal non-conformism. We encounter this case in a whole series of countries, although the implications for publicly articulating non-religious positions differ widely. The United States is one of the few countries in the Western World where the separation of church and state as well as the freedom of religion and freedom of speech are unmistakably set forth in the Constitution and where – at the same time – religiosity is a substantial social standard while atheism is not only a case of departure from this standard, but also a severe violation of the norm. Simultaneously, there are highly active secularist and atheist groups in civil society that have a decisively formative impact on the image of the non-religious and – as its counterpart – of the religious as well.

In other contexts we observe a stabilised tension between the religious and non-religious. France is primarily iconic for this case in the European context because it historically lines up laicism and Catholicism (as well as other religions) opposite one another (J. Baubérot, 1999), although the situation became more complex since the end of the eighties with the growing visibility of Islam. Historically, the non-religious took the form of anticlericalism, whereas nowadays it combines with (non-religious) indifference and (anti-religious) fear of Islam. This is repeatedly documented in social conflicts where a substantial laicistic position confronts forms of public religious expression, stimulating increasing solidarity on the religious side as a countermove. In this context, the religious element is a kind of non-conformism as soon as it violates the standard (founded in the republican idea) of restricting religion to the private sphere.

Finally there is a whole series of Western European countries that fall within the case of pluralism of worldviews, such as the United Kingdom. Here, anti-religious currents are a component of a competitive range of worldviews and therefore can no longer be looked upon as non-conformist. Their concerns are represented by a wide range of political parties and they leave their impact on a series of political decisions.

Of course, these ideal-typical differentiations are not supposed to cover up the fact that there are intense struggles over each of these constellations. Beyond this, it is always difficult to conveniently fit empirical relationships into one of the theoretical categories. On top, there are always conflicting attitudes among protagonists in the arenas of conflict over religion, some of which are critically referenced to the dominant framework. In the two national contexts analysed later in this paper, we will restrict ourselves, for space reasons, on the first two types non-religiosity (non-religiosity as standard case and as exception), but they nevertheless allow for a clear discussion of the two extreme cases of relations between religion and non-religion.

Another relevant level of analysis is the focus on the attitudes and identities of non-religious protagonists. Here, we distinguish three different *forms of a non-religious reference to religion*: first an *antireligious* position that is antagonistic towards religion, but nevertheless needs it in order to stress its dissociation from it; then a position that is basically *a-religious*⁵ (although *not indifferent*) and pluralistic in its basic approach, where religion is partly and selectively relevant, for example, where strong religious validity claims attempt to constrain the liberal functioning of society; and finally an *indifferent* attitude that no longer positions itself either positively or negatively in relation to religion. These analytical differentiations do not necessarily coincide with the way persons describe themselves and others in the world. That means that anytime someone designates him- or herself as an atheist, this might be paired both with an antireligious and a-religious attitude.

While the latter position of indifference towards religion may definitely be interesting in terms of certain sociological questions (value change, voting behaviour, etc.), it is less relevant to the relational perspective we are interested in here. It neither links up to a determined attitude towards religion, nor to any practice related to religion and often not even with any knowledge of religion. In contrast, the first two attitudes are of interest since they *explicitly determine a relationship to religion*. This is where we can also join up with Max Weber's sociology because the non-religiosity of both of these cases is *meaningfully attuned* to the behaviour of other persons, in this case to the (imagined or actual) behaviour of religious authorities. Whenever these authorities react to these

5. For slightly different sub-divisions see C. Campbell (1971) and J. Quack (2013).

actions, this may develop into a “social relationship”, i.e. alternately taking account of each other and being oriented towards the other’s actions (refer to M. Weber, 1968: 26). We will discuss this later with reference to the example of American creationism and of secularist associations in the GDR.

A third domain of the analysis are arenas of conflict where the relation between religious and non-religious protagonists and their positions are set forth. On the one hand, these conflicts apply to the range of the religious and its impact on other functional systems (such as education, science, politics and law, etc.) that are often carried out in the name of the autonomy of these systems. On the other hand, however, these clashes may also be of fundamental nature and thereby, from the perspective of non-religious actors, they may not primarily be an issue of securing borders, but instead of supremacy. Furthermore, the reference to science (as a seminal formula for the identity of non-religious positions) can be integrated into both forms of these clashes. On the one hand, it is a question of the *autonomy of science* while on the other hand it is a question of a supposedly superior *politically propagated scientism* that is regarded as superior to religion. The dominant social frameworks in some cases clearly support one or the other position, even though they do not determine them. That means that in a specific conflict arena with various groups of protagonists we may find both positions towards religion.

East Germany: non-religiosity as the standard case

In East Germany (*cf.* T. Schmidt-Lux, 2008; M. Wohlrab-Sahr, 2008; M. Wohlrab-Sahr *et al.*, 2008, 2009; U. Karstein, 2013) “scientific atheism” was introduced as a central political concept, and non-religion (with regard to beliefs and affiliation) became the standard case among the general population over time. This is documented to the present day not only in people’s attitudes but also in everyday life. The practice of burial which correlates strongly with the extent of subjective secularisation (N. Sachmerda-Schulz, 2010) provides an exemplary illustration: these days, an anonymous (and also non-church) funeral is the widely-disseminated version of funerals at 46 percent in the area of the former GDR. This kind of non-religiosity strongly differs of the one observed in the United States, as shown in the next section.

In the GDR, between the churches and the Socialist Unity party (the communist party of the GDR) there was a considerable amount of competition for membership and loyalty. The Socialist Unity Party was particularly successful in its attempt to push back the influence that the churches and the religious affiliations had on the general population. In 1989, there were less than 30 percent left from the 90 percent of church-members at the time of the foundation of the socialist republic (1949). This decline in membership continued until the present. Beyond this, the 2008 *Religion Monitor* has shown that 63% of the

eastern Germans could be unequivocally classified as non-religious (compared to only 19% of western Germans; M. Wohlrab-Sahr, 2009: 158). For the context of a relational sociology of the non-religious, it is important to discover what kind of *relationship* to churches and religiosity corresponded to this reversal of devotion, and how it shaped the identity of the non-religious.

In any event, it is apparent that a state that has taken up the cause of “scientific atheism” and put secular rituals such as the East German youth initiation ceremony (*Jugendweihe*; see M. Chauliac, 2003) in the place of church rituals did *not* leave religious bonding to the free decision of the individual in spite of formal freedom of religion. The substantial correspondence between ushering in the East German youth initiation ceremony at the beginning of the 1950s and the decline in confirmation numbers and church membership indicates that this was not just a competition on the market of worldviews. It rather created exclusive loyalties. “*Sag mir wo du stehst*” (Tell Me What you Believe) – the title of a well-known song of the East German Young Pioneers – precisely states the attitude that the regime attempted to inculcate. Even if certainly not everybody adopted this attitude, the political pressure generated a constraint to take sides. And even if most people made compromises instead of unequivocal declarations of loyalty to the state, leaving the church for many people was a manifest component of these compromises. The fact that there is a high level of correspondence between non-church membership and non-religiosity in the present eastern part of Germany, also indicates that religiosity outside the Churches could not be established on a significant level. To a great extent, people in East Germany lost contact with the church and became non-religious in a state that systematically communicated conflicting loyalties while emphasising it with discrimination and repression. We see it as a major contribution to this conflict that this incompatibility was not solely limited to the decision between the loyalty to the Party or the Church. It was also the incompatibility of religion and science itself that was successfully communicated (see M. Wohlrab-Sahr *et al.*, 2008). The latter could be detached from the political framework under which it emerged and be advanced as an enlightened attitude.

The conflict of loyalties between the church and the state reflected the systematic delegitimation of religious knowledge and religious perspectives where the government identified its own position as the “scientific worldview” (*wissenschaftliche Weltanschauung*). This terminology alone reveals the fact that what we find in the GDR this is not a *conflict on the borders of science and religion*. Instead, it was *politics interfering with the realm of religion* where the *reference to science was a component of the political ideology*. One key to success was also the way how the scientific world view was disseminated. In the GDR, it was a component of a comprehensive programme of national education within which both the insights of natural science *and* an ideological scientific worldview were disseminated.

One of the pivotal organisations in this context was URANIA, an institution of mass education. The description of URANIA's mission formulated the strategy of using science for propagating this worldview in clear terms: "The spread of scientific knowledge must contribute to the formation of the scientific and materialist worldview of our population. Lectures have to point out that nature proceeds according to natural laws and dialectically, that there are no miracles, that the world can be comprehended and changed by us, and that we do not depend on 'higher beings.' [...] Lectures in natural sciences therefore have to be consciously used as instruments to fight superstition, non-scientific ideas, and mysticism. Disseminating insights from natural science has to be a major component of forming the scientifically materialistic view of our people by driving home the message in our speeches that nature follows a set dialectic pattern, that there are no miracles in the world and that we can recognise and change the world. In other words, we are not dependent upon any 'higher beings'. [...] This is the reason why our speeches on natural science should be consciously utilised to combat superstition, unscientific ideas and mysticism." ⁶ The analyses of Schmidt-Lux (2008) on URANIA back up the thesis that scientism in East Germany had a crucial function as the driving force behind secularisation. The numerous newly built observatories and classes in natural sciences in schools were also meshed with this perspective.

The interviews that were conducted in the project on "Generational Views on religious and ideological change: the case of East Germany" (M. Wohlrab-Sahr *et al.*, 2009) show that the antithesis of science and religion was not only relevant on the level of political ideology, but also in the lives of the interviewees – above all with the older generations. It influences their habits until today. The schools were most successful at propagating a "realistic image of mankind" and thus making religious ideas appear ridiculous. Furthermore, it is apparent how difficult it is to present religious perspectives as a legitimate alternative to scientific attitudes. This is pre-eminently the case where they can no longer fall back on experience and a religious community and instead attempt to compete with science on the level of *explanations*, for instance by involving phenomena of the "inexplicable". Since this perspective remains within the language of science, it has little to counter the obvious objection that the supposedly inexplicable phenomenon will be subject to scientific explanation in the long run.

More than 20 years after the end of the GDR, the findings of surveys underline how wide-spread this development was and how sustainable it still is. In certain respects we still find lasting differences between eastern and western

6. "URANIA annual plan 1955" (Meeting of the Urania-secretariat, Dec. 21, 1954, SAPMO-BArch, DY 11/146, found in the Central Archives of the East German political parties and mass organizations, located in Berlin as a part of the Federal Archives, cited from T. Schmidt-Lux (2008: 63).

Germany. For instance, in ALLBUS⁷ 2002, 55 percent of eastern Germans (compared to 32 percent of western Germans) agreed “totally and completely” with the statement that “[Human] life is only a part of what happens in nature”, and the ratio was still 50 percent to 32 percent in 2012. Even if this cannot be interpreted as a statement simply supporting the antagonism between religion and science, the remarkable East-West-difference at least supports the interpretation of a certain continuity between this natural science rationalism and the former science-religion-antagonism.

The opposite case of the United States: non-religiosity as an exception and as non-conformism

In order to encompass the wide range of western non-religious attitudes, the case of the United States, where atheists are considered as non-conformist, appears as the most relevant counterpoint to the GDR.

The United States is one of the few Western countries where the separation of church and state is set forth in the Constitution, while there is a constantly high level of individual religiosity and a decidedly (civil) religious interpretation of the nation’s history that has developed historically (*cf.* R. Bellah, 1967). There are constant clashes within this constellation over the extent to which general references to God are legitimate in the sphere of the state and whether they should be treated differently than those of specific religious congregations (*cf.* M. Cloud, 2004). At the same time, the United States is a country where there is a standard expectation that every citizen should consider him- or herself at least in a general sense religious. The rejection of this normative expectation spells out social discrimination, which applied (and continues to apply to a certain extent) especially to the holders of governmental offices. Unequal treatment sanctioned by law has been eradicated by Supreme Court decisions at least on the national level. Still, there continues to be consensus in the United States that religious faith and personal trustworthiness are closely allied with one another and that any decline in one’s faith would also undermine the stability of the nation (P. Edgell *et al.*, 2006: 213; Farkas *et al.*, 2001 and others). Atheists continue to be suspicious in the United States and are excluded from the cultural consensus on what it means to be American (*cf.* P. Edgell *et al.*, 2006: 230). In other words, atheists are to a great extent non-conformists in the way the term has been defined by Lamnek: in contrast to just deviating from the standard, they “also challenge the validity of the violated rule” (S. Lamnek, 2007: 310; translation by the authors).

American associations of atheists or secularists of various gradations try to find ways to counter this negative image on the institutional as well as on the

7. General population questionnaire of the social sciences.

individual level. For instance, some groups attempt to question the contrast between patriotism and atheism by offensively calling themselves patriots or explicitly linking up to “American values” by relating their battle to the American idea of freedom. Protagonists position themselves decidedly within the American canon of values by taking recourse to the perspective of human rights, thus paralleling the fight homosexuals have had for recognition. One could argue that this strategy just as decidedly places its trust in pluralism as a key concept of American beliefs and attempts to position the non-religious as one group among others in the spectrum of worldviews in the United States. The fact that New York City Mayor Bloomberg invited the New York City Atheists to an Interfaith Breakfast in 2010 together with the various religious congregations, as well as the fact that President Obama explicitly named non-believers after various religious congregations in his first inaugural speech also points in this direction.

One representative of New York City Atheists, Ken Bronstein, put it this way in a blog: “Oh, we have faith [...]. Just not in God⁸.” Here, “faith” is disengaged from faith in God and generally linked up to a belief in the common good. Since this is obviously a strategic move, one might call it “faith mimicry”. Needless to say that including atheists in the group of persons who have “faith” is highly controversial both among non-religious protagonists and religious representatives who stand up for *interfaith*. Therefore we interpret it as a strategy of disengaging the non-religious from the connotation of the anti-religious in order to make it presentable in the framework of American pluralism.

Merging atheism and scientism, however, is more dominant for the attempt to give the non-religious a *specific profile*. In his 2011 study “Becoming an Atheist in America”, Jesse Smith describes “the genesis of atheist attitudes” as gradually questioning one’s own religious convictions which often takes place in the process of grappling with the subjects of natural science. Religion is defined as something that competes with scientific perspectives and whose plausibility can be questioned by science. Apparently, religion is not considered an “autonomous sphere of value” (M. Weber, 1972 [1920]) in this context. Rather, it is attributed to the same sphere as science; it gives an insufficient “explanation of the world” and as such should be replaced by scientific explanation.

Smith states that the reference to science is essential not only for the *genesis* of the non-religious attitude, but also for the later “affirmation” of an atheist identity. In the same breath, constructing an atheist identity generates an identity of the irrational religious in contrast with it. However, this delineating construction is not independent of a concept of religion disseminated in the United States that gains its profile by contrasting with science and in the debate with science.

8. <http://scienceblogs.com/evolutionblog/2010/01/05/atheists-invited-to-interfaith/> (access: December 15, 2012).

Consequently, what we find in the United States, are not (only) autonomous spheres of religion and science. Instead, we find an in-between zone where the reference to science becomes the currency in the struggle for symbolic power.

As we have pointed out earlier, the normative framing in the United States not only relates to the expectation to be religious, but is also often associated with religious positions that are in conflict or in competition with scientific knowledge. This primarily (although not exclusively) concerns the applicability of the theory of biological evolution (M. Berkman, E. Plutzer, 2010) which certain parts of American evangelicalism and other denominations reject as incongruent with their religious convictions that rest on the principle of the literal correctness of the Biblical text (R. Numbers, 2006). In many cases, the findings of modern geology, astronomy and anthropology are also questioned on religious grounds. In the meantime, leading anti-creationist organisations speak of *science denialism* (D. Morrison, 2011) while questionnaires have been verifying since the 1980's that rejecting or restricting the theory of evolution on religious grounds has become a majority position in the United States (F. Newport, 2010).

For the potential of science to function as an element of atheist identity formation under these conditions, it is important that many religious protagonists do not simply *reject* scientific positions in the United States. Instead, there has also been religiously motivated *science mimicry* since the 1960's in the form of professional creationism.

Not only a professional American anti-creationism developed in a fashion similar to science, but also a professional American anti-creationism that attempted to be religiously neutral (H. J. Park 1997). Furthermore, an explicit atheism that is based upon science has increasingly emerged as a major opponent of professional creationism. It offers two noteworthy functions for the anti-religious. On the one hand, it crafts the image of a community of scientifically enlightened atheists and forecasts their emancipation from attributes of social non-conformism similar to the coming-out of homosexuals (R. Dawkins, 2006: 4). On the other hand, the representatives of the New Atheism devise an implicit counter-version of a group of "believers" who are characterised as irrational and dogmatic. This position is contrary to the strategy of integrating atheism into a plural landscape of worldviews that subordinates itself to the socio-religious normative framing by adopting the label of "faith".

A science-based critique of religion is an atheist motif that has been widespread in the United States since the 19th century (J. Draper, 2009 [1874]). The formulation of this critique takes shape in relation to disseminating positions within the religious sphere that are incompatible with scientific insights. We can identify two waves of creationism in the United States in the course of recent decades: *scientific creationism* in the 1970's and early 1980's and the *intelligent design* movement since the early 1990's. Both hide their religious motives to a greater extent than the Biblical creationism of the 1960's and assert that they are supplying scientifically valid theories to the materialistic theory of evolution.

Their idea that one can make out divine planning in the order of nature has prompted Richard Dawkins since the mid-80's to proceed more vehemently against this *argument from design* that has been proposed for centuries (R. Dawkins, 1986: 4).

Because of his naturalist critique of religion (S. Meyer, 2009: 389, M. Behe, 2006: 249), Dawkins comes forth as a witness in the leading works on intelligent design for the attitude (also propounded by creationists) that the Darwinian theory of evolution and the Christian belief in the Creation are incompatible in the context of the development of intelligent design⁹. The theorems of intelligent design were increasingly recognised in the public sphere to about 2005. Some leading advocates even have a high level of scientific credit while some are rooted in academic institutions so that they have experienced support from other sciences and from the media. The public impact of intelligent design prompted Dawkins and other advocates of what is known as the New Atheism to unequivocally specify the underlying atheist premises of their conception of science and therefore the categorical difference to intelligent design (R. Dawkins, 2006: 120; C. Hitchens, 2007: 85). An indirect dialogue has evolved between the advocates of intelligent design and the atheist critics with many of these arguments so that we might speak of a reciprocally relational relationship between the new atheism and advocates of intelligent design.

Mediating positions have always criticised this conflict situation between two exclusivist concepts of truth. Even Darwin's contemporary Asa Gray added a teleological element to the theory of evolution, thus opening up an avenue for seeing the evolutionary process as being in conformity with the Will of God. Beyond this, these approaches have been reinforced in recent times. For instance, the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (CTNS) in Berkeley is attempting to formulate a "theistic evolutionism" while the BioLogos Foundation is an independent organisation that has been driven by the same agenda since 2007.

There is sufficient reason to apply Bourdieu's theory of social fields and their extensions here (within certain limits) considering these mutually competing and reciprocally stimulating positions in the debate on creationism and the teachings of the theory of evolution, faith and science. However, whether we can speak of a joint *illusio* and an internal *nomos*, as Bourdieu concept of social fields would imply, seems to be at least questionable to us. If this is the case, said *nomos* could be seen in the idea of *scientific demonstrability* so that in the final analysis the religious positions would have subordinated themselves to the scientific logic. Another difficulty arises with regard to the joint *illusio* within a Bourdieusian field. For concepts like a "religion-related field" (J. Quack, 2013) or a "religious-ideological field" (*cf.* U. Karstein, 2013) to be considered Bourdieusian, the

9. Notably with his book *The God Delusion* (2006), translated into more than 30 languages (in French, 2008, *Pour en finir avec Dieu*).

actors involved would not only need to have a belief in the value of the game they play in the various fields they come from (like the fields of science, politics, education, etc.). Distinct from that, these actors would also need to believe in the value of their religion-related utterances and actions as such. The intimate connection between the value that people like Richard Dawkins ascribe to their science-related utterances and the value they ascribe to their religion-related assertions makes us question the view that the actors involved in a religion-related field could indeed share a common *illusio* and hence make up a “field” in the Bourdieusian sense.



When comparing the two constellations, the spheres of conflict that we have worked out for the GDR and for the United States are different – due to the different *normative framings* in both societies. The references to science, however, are quite similar. In the GDR we can speak of a scientistic struggle for the delegitimation of the religious which has gained the status of a *societal norm*. The scientism that existed in the GDR bears a resemblance to early evolutionist thinkers because it debased religion and created a marked anti-religious reference to religion. However, this was *not a struggle at the borders of different social systems*. Its relationship to science did not attempt to prevent the religious from infringing on the realm of science. It was also not a clash between religion and science as such. Instead, it was a conflict between politics and religion that made strategic use of science.

Of course, this does not change anything about the fact that *non-religious and atheist attitudes* were able to give themselves a positive identity in the GDR through their reference to science. Also the fields of science referred to, such as evolution or astronomy did not differ substantially from those that atheists refer to in the United States today. To this extent, even if the sphere of conflict in the GDR is very different from the one we have worked out for the United States, the non-religious identities that emerge in the two contexts are quite similar to one another. In view of the fact that rationalistic perspectives are being constantly prioritised, there are compelling reasons to believe that even if the former conflict communication is falling into oblivion, assumptions of an incompatibility of religious and scientific perspectives remain viable in East Germany.

We have shown that a reference to science is central in the *identity of the non-religious*, although in various modalities. References to science were used by anti-religious protagonists who characterised religion as irrational thus justifying the fight against it. However, we found references to science also among a-religious protagonists who enter into selective political alliances with religious representatives. As a countermove, generating an identity of the non-religious with reference to science creates an image of religion and of the religious that

is contrary to science. However, it also finds a variation of the religious in certain contexts such as demonstrated in the example of the United States that positions itself in just this fashion.

We have discussed two different *arenas of conflict* where religion and science are contrasted against one another. In the GDR what was at stake were not struggles on the margins of functional systems, but a fundamental political devaluation of the religious taking recourse to science. This merger of worldview and politics produced a decidedly anti-religious form of non-religiosity, where all types of social values betrayed its connection to the anti-religious attitude. In the United States, the debate on creationism primarily takes place on the margins of the scientific and religious subsystems. This is where creationist protagonists compete with anti-creationists over positions in the scientific field and in the general public. They attempt to feed their perspective into it while increasingly approximating its language. In contrast, anti-creationist and atheist protagonists in the United States attempt to seal off the border of the field of science to the creationist intruders and position themselves more as a-religious than as antireligious. Finally, certain trends come close to antireligious scientism that is not solely concerned with demarcation, but with the superiority of the non-religious attitude.

This positioning and counter-positioning creates an arena of conflicts on the relationship between religion and science that is nourished by references, counter-references and struggles over positioning. Various actors circumvent the antagonistic positioning between “antiscientific religion” and “anti-religious scientific atheism”. One of them is the pragmatic position within the non-religious camp that does not perceive the identity of the religious in terms of its content, but politically. This implies a pluralistic orientation that concedes the religious its own intrinsic value. The antagonism is also circumvented in the attempt to use the weapons of the opposite camp against it. We have designated this on the one hand as “science mimicry” and on the other hand as “faith mimicry”. Creationism uses science mimicry in order to escape the juxtaposition with science and link up to the respect it enjoys. Atheists use faith mimicry to link up to the respect faith enjoys in the United States and thereby establish themselves as a non-specific faith in the spectrum of worldviews. Finally, a third position that circumvents this antagonism is the attempt by theology to reconcile theism and evolutionism.

Altogether, the debate in the United States may be interpreted as a sign of an intermediate zone forming between the spheres of religion and science with a struggle for positioning, recognition and symbolic power. However, this presupposes the differentiation between spheres of value such as between scientific and religious truth. It is only against this background that we can comprehend the ongoing struggles where one position denies the other access by calling it non-scientific, while the second one tries to prove its scientific plausibility.

Once again, what is only one position in a pluralistic sphere in the United States was made the premise for social norms in East Germany. In this context, Karstein (2013) speaks of a “religious-ideological field”. This refers to a process of politically guided dedifferentiation where science is used as an ideological weapon against religion. Still, the reference to rationality and the scientific nature of the world continue to be seminal for identifying the position of antireligious protagonists. This comes to the fore here as a generated and “believed” dichotomy with consequences that are probably no less severe than they would be under the condition of a fundamental epistemological dichotomy between science and religion (*cf.* J. Evans, M. Evans, 2008).

Monika WOHLRAB-SAHR

Institut d'études culturelles

Université de Leipzig, Allemagne

wohlab@uni-leipzig.de

Tom KADEN

Institut de recherche sur la science et la technologie

Université d'York, Toronto, Canada

t.kaden@uni-leipzig.de

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Exploring the Non-Religious: Societal Norms, Attitudes and Identities, Arenas of Conflict

There are good reasons for the German sociology of religion to deal with the non-religious, both from a theoretical and an empirical point of view. Important theoretical points of departure are Weber's analysis of competing spheres of value as well as his sociology of religion that has become the basis for Pierre Bourdieu's work on the religious field. One pressing motivation in empirical terms is the large proportion of non-religious population especially in the eastern part of Germany. It is in this context that this essay sets forth the markers of a sociological study of the non-religious. The authors propose to analytically define the non-religious through its relation to the religious while empirically studying arenas of conflict where relations are established between both of them. Two contrary constellations, i.e. the normative framing of scientific atheism in the GDR¹⁰ and the enduring societal norm to be religious in the United States, are used to demonstrate how an arena of conflict takes shape in the debate on religion where various religious and non-religious positions compete for interpretive supremacy. In both of these cases, the non-religious position assigns itself a positive identity through its relation to science, partially in an attempt to maintain the borders of the scientific domain, and partially by asserting a basic hierarchy that denies the religious all legitimacy.

Key words: non-religion, United-States, Germany, science, atheism.

Explorer le non-religieux: normes sociétales, attitudes et identités, arènes de conflit

Il y a de bonnes raisons pour que la sociologie allemande des religions traite du non-religieux, tant du point de vue théorique que du point de vue empirique. Les points théoriques de départ importants sont l'analyse de Weber sur les sphères de valeurs en compétition ainsi que sa sociologie des religions, qui est devenue la base du travail de Pierre Bourdieu sur le champ religieux. Une raison essentielle en termes empiriques est la grande proportion de population non-religieuse en particulier en Allemagne de

10. GDR = "German Democratic Republic". This was the official title for East Germany under the Communist Regime.

l'Est. C'est dans ce contexte que cet article énonce les marqueurs d'une étude sociologique du non-religieux. Les auteurs proposent de définir analytiquement le non-religieux par son rapport au religieux tout en étudiant empiriquement les arènes de conflit où les relations sont établies entre l'un et l'autre. Deux constellations contraires, c.-à-d. l'encadrement normatif de l'athéisme scientifique en RDA¹¹ et la persistante norme sociale d'être religieux aux États-Unis, sont utilisées pour démontrer comment une arène de conflit prend forme dans le débat sur la religion où diverses positions, religieuses et non-religieuses concourent pour une suprématie interprétative. Dans ces deux cas, la position non-religieuse s'attribue une identité positive par son rapport à la science, en partie pour tenter de maintenir les frontières du domaine scientifique, et en partie en affirmant une hiérarchie de base qui nie toute légitimité au religieux.

Mots clés: non-religion, États-Unis, Allemagne, science, athéisme.

Explorando los no-religiosos: normas sociales, actitudes e identidades, escenarios de conflicto

Desde el punto de vista teórico y empírico, la sociología de la religión alemana tiene buenas razones para abordar a los no-religiosos. Los análisis de Weber de las esferas de actividad en competencia, así como su sociología de la religión que fueron las bases del trabajo de Pierre Bourdieu en el campo religioso son importantes puntos de partida. Una acuciante motivación en términos empíricos es la amplia proporción de poblaciones no religiosas, especialmente en la parte este de Alemania. En este contexto este ensayo describe los marcadores para un estudio sociológico de los no-religiosos. Los autores proponen definir analíticamente a los no-religiosos a través de su relación con los religiosos a través del estudio de los escenarios de conflicto donde se establecen relaciones entre ellos. Recurriremos a dos constelaciones contrarias, el marco normativo del ateísmo científico en la RDA, República Democrática Alemana – y las persistentes normas sociales relativas a lo religioso en los Estados Unidos, para demostrar cómo un escenario de conflicto toma forma en el debate sobre la religión en el cual varias posiciones religiosas y no religiosas se atribuyen a sí mismas una identidad positiva a partir de su relación con la ciencia, en un intento parcial de mantener los límites del dominio científico, y en parte afirmando una jerarquía básica que niega o toda legitimación religiosa.

Palabras clave: no-religiosos, Estados Unidos, Alemania, ciencia, ateísmo.

11. RDA = “République démocratique allemande”, ceci était le titre officiel de l'Allemagne de l'Est sous le régime communiste.

