SECULARIZATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF RELIGION IN THE UNITED STATES AND GERMANY AFTER 1945

Conference at the GHI Washington, March 17-19, 2011. Conveners: Uta Andrea Balbier (GHI Washington / King’s College London), Wilhelm Damberg (Ruhr University), Lucian Hoelscher (Ruhr University), Mark Ruff (St. Louis University). Participants: Steward Anderson (Binghamton University); Amandine Barb (Sciences Po, Paris); John D. Boy (CUNY, New York); Daniel Gerster (European University Institute, Florence); Sven-Daniel Gettys (Ruhr University); Nicolai Hannig (LMU Munich); Claudia Haupt (George Washington University); Andreas Henkelmann (Ruhr University); Janet Jakobsen (Barnard College); Amy Koehler (University of Florida, Tallahassee); Felix Kraemer (Münster University); Isabel Richter (Ruhr University); Annette Lippold (University at Albany); Thomas Mittmann (Ruhr University); John Torpey (CUNY, New York); Peter van Dam (University of Amsterdam); Joseph Williams (Rutgers University)

This international, interdisciplinary conference set out to bridge the Atlantic divide in the field of religious history. Instead of focusing on the differences between the two religious landscapes on either side of the Atlantic, the conference intended to highlight similar transformation processes in the religious history of both states that relate to broader social changes such as democratization and the rise of the media after 1945. The leading question was whether assumptions about how secularization proceeds have obstructed our view of deeper transformation processes in the field of religion and spirituality, as well as in the relationship between religion and politics.

In her opening lecture entitled “Sex and the Secular,” Janet Jakobsen set out to sensitize the participants not just to the theoretical issues involved when one deals with the concepts of secularization, secularisms, or the secular, but even more to the topic’s political implications. Building on her research on the use of religious rhetoric by secular institutions to define social and sexual norms, she showed how such practices have constantly challenged and blurred the boundaries between religion and politics in the United States and between the religious and the secular realms. Jakobsen did not treat the sacred and the secular as opposing poles, but highlighted the interplay between the two as the central focus of study.
The first panel sought to explain the defining characteristics of our understanding of secularization and looked at attempts to separate the religious and the secular. Employing a legal historical perspective, Claudia Haupt analyzed the different constitutional definitions of the relationship between state and religion in Germany and the United States. The following papers by John Torpey and Sven-Daniel Gettys explored the different meanings of secularization on either side of the Atlantic. While Torpey introduced the history of the sociological secularization theory, Gettys examined the use of the term in theological discourse in Germany and the United States with a special focus on semantics. An additional paper by Amandine Barb focused on “non-believers” as important actors in the religious landscape of the United States and highlighted the reasons behind their growth, as well as the relationship between their history and the process of secularization. The panel profited from its broad interdisciplinary scope and underlined the important social dynamics generated by ongoing debates about secularization in both countries.

The second panel delved into particular facets of the interplay of religion and the media in Germany and the United States. Nicolai Hannig analyzed the role of religion in the public in Germany after 1945. He not only showed that churches felt increasingly under pressure to communicate with the public, but that, conversely, journalists turned into leading authorities for interpreting and communicating religion after 1945. Steward Anderson made a similar point in his work on religion and television fiction in 1950s and 1960s Germany. He observed a reinvention of religious morality in the German Fernsehspiele that were full of religious symbols and rhetoric. Both papers emphasized the transformations in the relationship between religion and the secular media—and particularly the persistence of religion in the latter—in the second half of the twentieth century, which challenge traditional assumptions about the state of secularization in Germany. Felix Krämer’s paper added the American perspective by investigating the media’s role in shaping and creating the political figure of moral leadership that Ronald Reagan perfectly embodied. Like the other two papers, Krämer’s highlighted the close interplay among religious rhetoric, politics, and the media.

The third panel introduced three different religious actors and delineated their role in the process of secularization and the transformation of religion. In the first paper, Daniel Gerster characterized the transformation of Catholic peace protests in both countries during
the Cold War as an example of the gradual re-codification of Catholic identity. He showed how closely intertwined religion and politics were when it came to questions of war, peace, and protest. The theoretical analysis of the interaction of religion and politics continued in a paper by Amy Koehlinger. She used her study of the involvement of Catholic sisters in the war on poverty to highlight the fluidity of definitions such as the secular and the religious. Isabel Richter’s paper on the self-narratives of young German and American travelers to India in the 1960s then broke the dominant focus on Protestantism and Catholicism. She advocated including the search for new spiritual experiences, as well as the belief in the supernatural and in magic, in religious historiographical narratives. All these papers illuminated the important ways that a perspective on religious actors can help researchers challenge and overcome theoretical assumptions about the meaning of the sacred and the secular and, in particular, about the relationship between religion and politics.

The fourth panel focused on transformations of religious social engagement or religious cultural practices. Andreas Henkelmann analyzed transformations in the social engagement of the German branch of Caritas, a leading Catholic charity, in the 1960s and 1970s, linking these to broader changes in German Catholicism related to the Second Vatican Council and the fragmentation of the Catholic milieu. In her paper, Annette Lippold interpreted Christian Marriage Counseling in Germany and the United States after 1945 as yet another form of religious social engagement. She once again emphasized that defining moral and explicitly sexual norms involves a multi-faceted interaction of religious, secular, and political impulses. Moving from engagement to religious practices, Joseph Williams highlighted the persistence of religious forms of healing in the United States in the context of secularization and modernization trends. Using the concept of the “off-modern,” he argued that holistic healing is not attractive because of its traditionalism, but because it is in itself a modern reinvention of tradition. All the papers of this panel maintained that transformations in religious engagement and practices result from their interaction with secularization and modernization processes.

The fifth panel concentrated on the religious dynamics released in these processes of transformation. John D. Boy investigated the “Church Planters” in the German urban public to pursue broader questions about the spatial practices of deterritorialized religion. He began by observing that the declining church memberships in
Germany are somewhat offset by increasing membership in Free and especially Pentecostal churches. In his paper, Peter van Dam challenged the traditional view that religious structures in Germany and the Netherlands after 1945 were weakening, proposing instead that new, "lighter" religious communities based on modern assumptions of individuality and the functioning of civil societies had formed. Finally, Thomas Mittmann offered a narrative of the "self-modernization" of churches "to describe the transformative processes that occurred in German Protestant and Catholic Churches in the 1960s." He held that the overall democratization of society influenced the founding of religious academies and the organization of broad lay meetings. These three papers foiled one-dimensional, traditional linear narratives with observations of new dynamics in the process of secularization in Europe.

The conference successfully highlighted the dynamics that processes of modernization such as individualization or democratization set in motion in the religious landscapes on both sides of the Atlantic. Changing meanings of community and of civil society interactions forced religion to adapt. The conference especially illuminated the complex interplay of the sacred and the secular, of politics and religion, and of modernity and secularization. Although it bridged the gap in terms of German and American religious scholars coming together, the differences in the religious developments on either side of the Atlantic prevailed. Transformation processes in both religious landscapes may have been triggered by similar social changes, but the strong differences in media structure or community formation in Germany and the United States led to clearly different outcomes. The comparative perspective, however, will surely stimulate further research on the question of secularization and the modernization of religion after 1945 in the United States and Germany.

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